

## The Fight

A boxing and performance project for Tate Modern by Humberto Vélez in collaboration with Southwark youth and community groups.

An analysis of the genealogy and models of participation in contemporary art

Like many other areas of the city undergoing rapid regeneration, South London is an arena of economic and social contrasts.

Sitting on the south bank of the river Thames across the City's glass skyscrapers that are home to one of the world's most powerful financial centres, Tate Modern is a landmark that attracts tourists and Londoners alike, but remains unknown territory for many among its neighbouring communities.

With his project *The Fight*, artist Humberto Vélez proposed to address the existing gap between Tate Modern and those who despite living in the environs of the museum remain untouched by its ambitious art programmes.

Vélez' intention was to propose a process-based creative activity that instead of single-handedly fulfilling the role of providing education to the community would bring young people's cultural identities to the core of Tate, so the institution would become a showcase for local talent.

The ethos of such exchange arose from Vélez' working method, which seeks to question the mechanisms of current so-called *participatory practices*: as an alternative to involving communities in the execution of the artist's own prefabricated ideas, the focus of his works is on the exposure of pre-existing cultural practices.

The process of selecting the participants for *The Fight* consisted of the creation of a number of dialogues with local groups based on the initial idea of developing a performance by young people involved in the areas of sports, social organisation and arts. The aim of this new relationship with the groups was, in the words of the artist, '*to find ways of linking emotionally and socially with people's identities*'.

Vélez had developed a number of similar projects in the past, including *The Welcoming*, commissioned for the Liverpool Biennial in 2006<sup>1</sup>. For *The Welcoming*, Vélez reversed the process of migration that had traditionally linked Liverpool with the Americas – most significantly through the slave trade – by creating a symbolic invasion of the city by groups of immigrants and asylum seekers who arrived at the Albert Docks by boat.

Another project, *Regatta Cantata* realised in Venice in 2005, also included the use of boats. So it was natural that boats featured in *The Fight*: a Thames cruiser operated by a boxer and offering a musical performance by three Ghanaian drummers brought a group of local boxers and members of the public to Tate on July 21<sup>st</sup> 2007 for the start of the event.

However, boats and boxing are not mere aesthetic choices for Vélez. He was born and raised in the inter-oceanic Central American Republic of Panama, a country whose economic stability is intrinsically linked to the canal that bridges the two oceans and where boxing champions made international names throughout history. Paying tribute to this tradition, he dedicated the project to Panama Al Brown, the first non-white Latin American boxer to fight in Europe in the 1930s. Panama Brown's mentor and friend, Jean Cocteau, wrote of him:

*'I had become attached to the fate of this boxer, because he appeared to me as a sort of poet, a mime, a wizard who carried inside the ring the immaculate success of one of human enigmas: the prestige of presence. Al was a poem in black ink, a praise of the spiritual force which overrode mere physical force'*<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Liverpool Biennial purposely focused on the relation of Liverpool's people, history and built environment with the problematic issue of regeneration through commissioned pieces by international artists.

<sup>2</sup> Cocteau, Jean, Préface, in '*Les monstres sacrés du ring*'. Georges Carpentier, 1954.

Besides poetry and cultural affinities, during our research we learned that boxing was an important social and economic activity in Southwark from the mid-nineteenth century through to the beginning of the twentieth century. The most recognisable landmark in the borough was 'The Ring', a boxing arena located near Tate Modern. Moreover, the former Surrey Chapel at Blackfriars was converted in 1910 into a famous boxing arena but was destroyed by bombing during World War II. These days, numerous active clubs in the borough are home to a thriving boxing community, among them the three selected to participate in the project: Fitzroy Lodge ABC, Fisher Downside ABC and Lynn's Athletic Club.

Despite its paradigmatic association with violence and corruption in the public imagination, boxing in South London is historically linked to union struggles, Dockland's working men and migration.

Migration is also a highly relevant issue for Vélez: Panamanian by birth and trained as a film maker in the celebrated Film School of San Antonio de los Baños in Cuba<sup>3</sup>, he migrated first to Spain and later to the UK where he currently resides.

Based on his knowledge of working with mentors and sportsmen in Manchester - where boxing is a crucial part of vocational programmes to stimulate discipline among youth - Vélez also departed from the premise that the practice of boxing, a tool for working class youth to improve themselves and to seek financial success, is also effective in preventing their fall into the spiral of intercommunity violence which is spreading in British towns. This was perceived as highly relevant this year, when the brutal murder of a number of adolescents in London streets infected the media with questions about social integration, racial divide and an increasing access to weapons.

Against this backdrop, *The Fight* intended to bring out questions about social inclusion, the use of public spaces and the function of art institutions, all orchestrated as a great *fiesta*. It also presented an opportunity to reflect on the concepts of high/low art when addressed in public art projects that include the participation of non-artist groups and their appraisal in the light of prevalent cultural policies.

The sign of the times

Neoliberal economic realities and the privatization of culture through the increasing investment of corporations in public museums place high pressure to deliver end products of aesthetic value, in detriment of establishing democratic models of participation that are perceived as unmeasurable creative exercises.

It is a fact that the existence of community projects is at risk under the individualist premises of neoliberalism, but in moments of deep crisis, such in the case of the last economic crash in Argentina<sup>4</sup>, artists turn to collective initiatives in response to socio-economic emergency. This differentiation is highly important as there is a tendency among Western critics and curators to attach a label of 60s nostalgia to collective practices based entirely on the decontextualised vision of hegemonic historical progression.

By applying aesthetic judgement to politically engaged art the institution depoliticises the work. The art world still applies aesthetic judgement to socially-engaged artistic practice as a means to determine its quality, and in this way disregards its political effect.

Curator and critic Gerardo Mosquera has analysed public art and community-based practises in the light of the demands placed by the art world. In his essay *Arte y Política*.

*Contradicciones, disyuntivas, posibilidades* he highlights the contradictions of agency and instrumentalism:

*Most art made in the streets and in the social realm is construed for the photo session or the video documentation destined to be showed in Art Forum, the web or the next Documenta.*

---

<sup>3</sup> International School of Film and Television, 'Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión' funded in 1986 and presided by Colombian writer and Nobel prize Gabriel García Márquez

<sup>4</sup> Argentina's bank crash in 2001 followed a long period of economic recession mismanaged into a crisis by US-trained economists.

*Documentation is frequently the super objective, present even at the very beginning of the project, and the work of art is just the process that leads to it. Far too often, the implications and social effectiveness of those works become secondary. In this sense, pieces tend to be judged for their artistic and conceptual excellence rather than for their real impact in the social context in which they are developed, an impact that cannot be measured beyond the anecdote. The fact is that the hyper specialised and intellectualised structure of the artistic field based in the museum, the gallery, art publications, the elite of the connoisseurs, collectors and the sumptuary market have never been radically challenged, and the passivity and hermetic attitudes of academics only contributes to it.*<sup>5</sup>

As an option, Mosquera calls for museums that show the world through actions in the world, for museums as hubs, museums that participate in public life through manifestations of life. For *The Fight*, as an addition to working with the boxing clubs, a musician and a street dance group were contacted. South London rapper *Mic Assassin* was invited to create music in response to the world of boxing. His engagement enabled him to attend training in the boxing clubs, meet boxers and exchange experiences that would nurture his live performance. Dance group *Flawless* became involved with the boxers and exchanged skills and ideas with them prior to the creation of a performance that would incorporate boxing rhythms into the dance.

Museums have always played catch-up with the evolution of artistic practice, which incessantly pushes their boundaries. For example, Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica - an artist who has achieved posthumous international acclaim in the last fifteen years - was expelled from the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro in 1965 when he invited Mangueira dancers wearing *parangolé* capes to the presentation of his works in the exhibition *Opinião 65*. In a society where race, access to education and wealth are intrinsically linked, the invasion of the museum of Modern Art by *favela* dwellers was seen as too much of a provocation. One could think that this reactionary division of society was confined to 1960s dictatorship governed Brazil. What is deeply disturbing is to read that thirty years later the prejudice against his gesture did not seem to have faded. Artist Luciano Figueredo reports that Wim Beeren, the curator of the Malevitch room in the 1994 São Paulo Biennial, shouted *Get Out!* to Mangueira dancers who entered the Pavilion wearing the same capes made by Oiticica to represent his ideas of colour in motion.<sup>6</sup>

Artist educators vs artists?

The paradox is that in the current socio political climate, and despite the fact that artistic practices branded as 'participatory' have seemingly become a new trend in western art, there persists a divide between those artists being commissioned by the museum exhibitions departments and those who in virtue of their engagement are confined to the realms of education departments as 'artist educators'. In other words, those artists are mainly expected to become instruments in interpreting the work of 'real' artists – that is, producers - to audiences.

The trouble with this division of labour is that disempowered artists are not suitable actors in the exercise of freedom.

If we look back at Joseph Beuys' paradigm of human creativity as a force for social change we should recognize the artist as an activist.

---

<sup>5</sup> Mosquera, Gerardo, *Arte y Política. Contradicciones, disyuntivas, posibilidades*.

<sup>6</sup> Figueiredo, Luciano, 'The Other Malady', n28/9, Autumn/Winter 1994, 105-116: on the posthumous reception of Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica

Artist Suzanne Lacy wrote: (there is an) *opportunity for artists to undertake the consensual production of meaning with the public.*<sup>7</sup>

This approach seems to present a more inspirational and productive role for artists, where not only interpretation and pedagogy in both the museum and the classroom provide a flexible model, but where the participators/students/collaborators are given control over images, granted trust and stimulated to develop innovative thinking about the surrounding reality. And if one of the most relevant contributions of art to society is to empower alternative thinking about reality, pedagogy and creativity are close relatives. So why underestimate the role of pedagogy and wrongly brand it a sub product of creativity? Why are we still dividing labour in ways that replicate the Modernist model of the artist as an isolated figure whose accountability for the production of meaning is transferred to the specialist groups incarnated by museum staff and critics only?

Another predicament is that of the selection of groups in artists led projects.

Faisal Abdu'Allah, a British artist whose work has evolved in the last years to encompass work made in dialogue with social groups, mentioned in a recent talk that institutions constantly approach him to work in projects involving 'disaffected' children.<sup>8</sup> The very word 'disaffected' installs a key of 'otherness', its negative shadow projecting an a priori sentence of failure over any possible exercise of creative thinking.

By reverting the term 'disaffected' into 'gifted', Faisal Abdu'Allah proposes to shift the focus from an approach that turns the artist into a social worker towards participatory models. These models are based in multiple dialogues with the participants to empower them to make decisions and take aesthetic or social action. But crucially, they spring out of acts of individual generosity, of an ethics of trustful socialisation.

The paradigm of the artist as a constructor of individual significant spaces was well elaborated by Hélio Oiticica, whose radical practice was surprisingly excluded from Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics'<sup>9</sup>. Oiticica favoured the term PARTICIPATOR over PARTICIPANT and in doing so challenged traditional Western perceptions of art in its relation to life by activating contributions from marginal sectors of society.

It seems also relevant to signal other precedents of this artistic endeavour that somehow indicate a constant drive towards participatory practice in Latin America, despite their virtual disregard by the Western historical canon.

In 1960, Argentine artist Julio Le Parc became one of the founders of the Paris collective *Groupe de la Recherche d'Art Visuel* (GRAV). The group formed by Le Parc, Sobrino, Yvaral, Morellet, Stein and García Rossi, proposed collective strategies devised to delegate the creative act to the viewer/participant advocating that art play a wider, more active role in society. Le Parc's theoretical formation in Argentina included the teachings of Lucio Fontana and the legacy of *MADI, Grupo Concreto-Invencción*, a group that blossomed in the River Plate in the 1940s producing an array of breaks in formal and conceptual conventions, ranging from the challenging of boundaries between plastic forms, to the displacement of art from the gallery space to the streets.

In 1966 GRAV produced a text on the issue of multiples of great importance for subsequent generations. It set out to test ideas of fetish value against the role of art in the social field, and to denounce the criteria imposed by academic elites. Those principles, which more broadly became some of the preoccupations of kineticism, manifested in street actions where GRAV would generate unexpected activities such as 'A Day in the Street', programmed on the 19th April 1966. The activities recorded on a hand leaflet included walks on moving tiles, walking with flash lights, distribution of balloons, spontaneous funfair style installations such as giant kaleidoscopes, and gift granting to underground commuters.

Through the 1960s, GRAV articulated a thorough theoretical corpus in the form of manifestos among which there is the seminal *No More Mystifications* written in 1961 and distributed in

---

<sup>7</sup> Lacy, Suzanne, 'Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art', Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> The artist in dialogue with Paul Dash and Larry Achiampong at 198 Gallery, 11 September 2007, on the occasion of Achiampong's exhibition 'Unnecessary Homework'.

<sup>9</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*; les Presses du Reel", Dijon, France, 2002

the form of pamphlets in the Paris Biennale that same year. The manifesto defined with great clarity the main concerns of the group:

...*"We want to develop in the spectator a powerful ability to perceive and take action. A spectator aware of his power to take action and tired of so many abuses and mystifications will himself be able to create the true 'revolution in art'. He will put into practice the slogans: It is forbidden not to participate  
forbidden not to touch  
It is forbidden not to break."*<sup>10</sup>

But whose work is it?

A crucial aspect of the type of practices described as participatory is the issue of authorship. In transferring the ownership of the work to the participant, artists find an opportunity to transcend their supposedly authoritative role and become triggers in the complex process of transforming the relationship that non artists have with art, aesthetics and cultural thinking. Artist Suzanne Lacy has categorised four models for artists' interventions in the public arena: she maps a progression that encompasses the artist as an experiencer, as a reporter (conceptualist model) as an analyst (approach close to social scientist roles) and as an activist.<sup>11</sup>

Following this model, today we are witnessing a number of variations in so called 'socially engaged practices' that evolve from the role of the artist as empathiser to the artist as an agent of social transformation.

Conclusion

*The Fight* proposed to connect the art institution with local people whose interest previously did not include Tate. It was conceived and executed as an artist's project built around workshops and dialogues with community groups. The result was a performance of stunning quality, where sports, music and dance provided a platform for the confluence of talent in the setting of the museum. Audiences and participants became involved in a celebration of achievement, pride and creativity.

Furthermore, it was organised to coincide with the exhibition of Helio Oiticica's work *The Body of Colour* as an homage to the artist's vision: Oiticica advocated the creation of experiences and open propositions, a relentless quest that Brazilian critic Mario Pedrosa named *the experimental exercise of freedom*. It was that quest that inspired *The Fight*, a project done by the neighbours of Tate Modern.

---

<sup>10</sup> GRAV, *No More Mystifications*, pamphlet, 1961

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* 8