

Towards A Hip-Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip-Hop Arts movement By Danny Hoch

More than twenty years ago, in 1984, I was a graffiti writer, a breakdancer and a rapper. I was pretty damn good, too; I was, however, not an artist in any of the above categories. I toyed with each discipline, didn't work too hard at the craft, and had no vision for a career as a hip-hop artist, because hip-hop was not viewed as "art." Instead, I went to school to study theatre and became an actor and playwright.

Now, after serving as artistic director of the NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival for five years, I am asked by folks inside and outside the culture to discuss hip-hop's aesthetics. As great as these conversations are, the consistent challenge has been to define not what hip-hop means as culture, but what hip-hop means as art—in fact, to make the case that hip-hop *is* art.

Hip-hop art, when it is bad, is often embraced by the mainstream as the entirety of the talent and voice of the hip-hop generation. When it is good, outsiders and insiders alike misunderstand it for reasons of politics and fear. Bad hip-hop art is invariably inarticulate, unpolished, amateurish, juvenile. Good hip-hop art is highly articulate, coded, transcendent, revolutionary, communicative, empowering.

Unfortunately Hip-hop, bad or good, is almost always relegated to a marginalized gray area, a penalty box, if you will, where it is denied the status of art; it is seen either as radical political thought, a really bad manifestation of pop culture, or, with some luck, as novelty entertainment.

But if hip-hop is to be discussed as art, then what are its aesthetics? And, just as important, what happens to hip-hop's aesthetics when they are mixed with the aesthetics of "recognized" art, or when hip-hop's venue changes from the street to the stage, from the subway car to the gallery, from the schoolyard to the screen?

Traditions, Conditions, Phenomena

Hip-hop's origins are multi-faceted, politically conflicting, consistently debated and highly complicated, because we are still living through many of the same conditions that caused its birth. Nevertheless, hip-hop's aesthetics lie foremost in the social context from which it sprung. The end of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, the turmoil of the militarized political movements (Black Panthers, Brown Berets, Young Lords, etc.), urban blight and the advent of Reaganomics, the digital age, an exploding prison population, epidemics of crack, guns and AIDS—all of these forces converged to create a socioeconomic landscape unlike any other in history. That situation, combined with New York's inner-city demographics—Southern blacks living alongside Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Jamaicans and a handful of working-poor whites, all of whom drew upon both inherited and appropriated cultures in the face of urban decay and accelerated technology—created a legacy of art forms and language that would wind up being inherited by all races, colors and classes around the world.

Hip-hop issues from the following traditions, conditions and phenomena:

- An African and Caribbean continuum of storytelling and art
- A polycultural community of both immigrants and migrants
- Appropriation of European cultural traditions and Japanese technology
- A legacy of political and gang organizing
- The bumpy transition from post-civil rights and militarized nationalist organizing to the supply-side economics of the 1980s
- The devastating effects of Reaganomics on urban America
- The age of accelerated technology.

The notion that hip-hop is solely an African-American art form is erroneous, and this becomes clear when we really examine its aesthetics. It is certainly part of the African continuum, and if it were not for African-Americans there would be no hip-hop, but hip-hop would not exist if it were not for the polycultural social construct of New York City in the 1970s. Hip-hop art is so multilayered that it could never have been born solely from the African continent, or solely from a poor community in the U.S. without African diaspora traditions. Neither could it have been spawned solely from a polycultural community in Durban or Barcelona or from a rural Missouri community devastated by Reaganomics. It could only have been born of the fusion—and profusion—of all of these complex conditions and circumstances.

Inheritance, Reclaiming, Fusion

Looking at the original four elements of Hip-Hop, we find its aesthetics:

Graffiti: Political graffiti existed for many years as an outlet, as did the tradition of scratching one's name into a tree or inscribing "I was here". But it was not until the blight of the 1960's that young people started to make a habit of writing their names in public places, not just to let everyone know that they were there, but to lay claim to public property in the face of poverty and powerlessness. Many poor youth in New York City High Schools in the 1970's were encouraged to take classes like woodshop and printing, where a strict block style of writing was used, and one could even say 'enforced'. Early rebellious variations of this block style became the basis for Hip-Hop generation graffiti lettering. Add the advent and proliferation of the spray-paint can, and the widening gap between rich and poor, and you see a culture where poor youth are not only putting their codified names on public transit, schools and property as if to say, "We own this- this is ours", but you also see a highly evolved language emerging from groups of young people (crews) who are battling for graffiti stakes and fame in certain neighborhoods and on train lines. City walls and the physical facades of trains define the style of painting, as do the limitations and properties of the spray can and the wide-tip marker, and the colors available from Krylon and Rustoleum. Graffiti artists encode their work not only against police and the rich, but also for each other, to the point that some don't even paint their name, just their style. Crackdowns on graffiti across the country change the aesthetic again, and we see graffiti artists painting on canvas, and being celebrated in museums and galleries around the globe.

Graffiti Aesthetics: Enforced Block Letters, Reclaiming of Public Space, Codified Ownership, Train-As-Canvas, 1970's-80's Art Supplies (and colors), criminalization of the form.

DJ-ing: This element can be attributed to the *dub* and *sound system* traditions from the island of Jamaica, dating back to the 1950's, but exported to New York en masse in

the early 1970's, when selectors or record programmers would attempt to loop and ultimately reverb the instrumental segments of reggae records, because they extended the playability and most importantly the danceability of a song. Jamaican immigrants brought this technique to New York, along with the tradition of huge outdoor speakers, which enabled DJ's to play for more people, and bring the club outside. However, the popular music of choice in NYC then was disco, and those were the records that were being looped. Add to this the advent of newer mixers and analog artificial beat machines, where you can create your own beats like a musician, and still play the disco record. When the DJ sought to loop the break beat in the mid-70's, by pulling the record backwards by accident, that's when the famous *scratch* was discovered/invented, yet this by-product became part of the aesthetic, and people began to expect it in the art. The repeated breaks become the *samples* that also contribute to the aesthetic, and DJs ultimately become composers in their own right. The form is a codified art unto itself, not solely reliant on recording, but also on battling in the skills of scratching, looping, bumping and mixing live.

DJ Aesthetics: Jamaican Sound System, Disco, funk & soul, 1970's & 80's electronic musical technology as musical instruments, Dancer Appeasement, Codification of Recorded sounds by sampling.

B-Boy/B-Boying/B-Boy: Commonly known as *breakdancing*, this is the reason why the DJ was searching for the break beat in the first place, to get people to dance. The dance traditions of West Africa, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic can be found in this dance, yet it is informed by the breaks of disco and funk music. Poor youth could not afford to go to the downtown discos, nor did DJ's own their own clubs, so illegal improvised outdoor parties took place, with electricity provided by the closest streetlamp. Park jams called for a different kind of dancing. The urge to get all cute and John Travolta was lessened if you were dancing outdoors on asphalt and concrete. Gangs were dying out by this time in New York, but the tension was still there, so fighting moves began to join the repertoire, as did martial arts choreography thanks to the popularity of kung-fu films, which dominated movie houses in poor neighborhoods. If we're talking about aesthetics, let us not forget cardboard and linoleum. The 1970's saw an acceleration in manufacturing and a proliferation of cardboard packaging that had never been seen before. It was also a time where New York City apartment dwellers were replacing their linoleum floors of the 50's and 60's with carpet. The sanitation department was notorious for underserving poor neighborhoods and leaving heaps of trash in the street, along with copious amounts of cardboard and linoleum. The backspin, windmill, glide and headpin would not have been invented were it not for young people re-appropriating these two mundane items. They certainly didn't conceive them in a dance studio at Lincoln Center. They defied the ground by spinning on it, on their backs, on their heads, on garbage.

B-Boy Aesthetics: Bomba, Rumba, Capoeira, Salsa, Funk, Soul, Gang Fighting (battling), Stylized Kung-Fu, Asphalt/Concrete Dance Space, Sanitation, Cardboard/Linoleum.

Rap: This tradition is clearly rooted in Afro-Cuban Rumba, Puerto Rican Plena, Southern Blues, and Jamaican Toasting. You can see it in the battle, the griot, the storyteller, the call-and-response. We can also see a connection to the Black and Latino political poets of the 1970's, as well as another unexpected influence. In the 1970's when the NYC Board of Education realized it was failing to adequately educate the city's poor Black and Latino youth, they implemented an unofficial curriculum of Limericks in all English classes from First Grade through High School. Instead of overhauling the entire system and reallocating resources, they figured if they could get the kids to

rhyme, maybe they could read enough to fill out a job application. Well, Scottish Limericks are pretty boring. But they sure are catchy. Problem was, "There once was a lad from Gylwynny, who sold his poor sheep for a penny..." ain't got nothing to do with what's happening in the South Bronx in 1974. So young people appropriated Limericks and made them about their own experiences, everything from party rhymes, to rhymes of self-worth, to micro and macro socio-political analyses. They rapped these Rumba/Toasting/Plena/Blues Limericks over the instrumental disco beats that the DJ's were playing in the clubs. This was happening for years before anyone ever thought to record it. In fact, the DJ was the original rapper, throwing in these Caribbeanized street 'Limericks' to get the crowd hyped up between songs. Later, the DJ's brought in specialized hype men (rappers), who would just do the rapping. Soon, the rappers were the star of the show instead of the DJ. As the crack epidemic, the gun epidemic and the prison epidemic swept through U.S. urban communities like a war-50,000 people were murdered with guns between 1985 and 1994, and the prison population grew exponentially, 40 new prisons built in NY State alone-the content of the lyrics changed. In the 1990's corporations realized that the gritty, graphic stories of misery, abuse and pain coming from poor youth, combined with beats you could party to, were the recipe for riches, and they encouraged rap artists to glamorize and romanticize urban misery, even if it was not their experience. The culture wars of the 90's demonized rap-making it even more popular, and brought both a resurgence of the party ethic which made billions more, as well as a resurgence of politically conscious and wildly articulate rap artists who sold.. well, fewer records.

Rap Aesthetics: Toasting, Plena, Rumba, Blues, Bomba, Palo, African-American Poetry, Call & Response, Limericks, Urban Blight, Party-Animation, Corporate Demand, Exaggeration, Battle.

To summarize, here is a list of many of the aesthetics from hip-hop's original four elements, in no particular order:

- Codification of language (spoken and written), dress, gestures and images
 - Call and response
 - Sociopolitical context and legacy (post-Civil Rights/'70s nationalism/Reaganomics)
 - Metaphor and simile
 - Illusion (magic)
 - Polyculturalism (immigrant and migrant)
 - Battle, braggadocio (competition)
 - Lack of safety, barriers, boundaries (stage)
 - African and Caribbean diaspora performing traditions
 - Lack of resources and access
 - Reappropriation by hip-hop creators of materials, technology and preserved culture
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- Urban Blight
 - Criminalization of poverty
 - Criminalization of culture

One note: I believe that political context, lack of resources and reappropriation belong together in a list of more traditional aesthetics like metaphor, codification and illusion. Not only do they provide an aesthetic context from which hip-hop has sprung, but they

have informed—and continue to inform our artistic practice, even when the form or genre varies.

What's Next

Hip-hop art is not a coincidental pop novelty. It involves craft, which varies depending on the discipline. There are old and new traditions, which are recognized by people inside and outside the culture. Other forms that have emerged and are recognized as elements of hip-hop art—beat-boxing, language, fashion, self-knowledge—all draw upon the same set of aesthetics.

In the past 10 years, a new wave of hip-hop arts has taken shape in dance, music, writing, visual art, and other forms. These new works follow hip-hop's aesthetics closely, and yet they are not wholly comprised of the original four elements. These works instead are products of a generation that grew up in hip-hop and is now branching out of the fundamentalist book of elements and rules.

Some works are created by traditional hip-hop artists who feel limited by the original four elements, yet wish to continue the aesthetic; some are made by hip-hop kids who went to art school, others by art school kids who discovered hip-hop later in life. Some of the creators are old-school B-boys who have recognized that, as artists, they want to do more than perform in Las Vegas as an "attraction." Others are old-school graffiti artists whose gallery work has provided a vastly different context for their vision of what they can do with paint (or with other materials—such as metal sculpture, clothing or computer software). Still others are rappers who feel the need to expand the possibilities of their storytelling beyond the 16 bars they are allotted on a rap record.

For me, the most exciting place where this new hip-hop art is taking shape is in theatre. Hip-hop theatre provides the best paradigm for examining what the new hip-hop aesthetics are, what they aren't and what they could be.

Hip-hop in Theatre, Theatre in Hip-hop

I REMEMBER SEVERAL YEARS ago running into Stretch Armstrong, an underground hip-hop music personality in New York. I gave him a flyer for the Hip-Hop Theater Festival, and he said, "Hip-Hop Theater Festival? What the fuck is this, some ill new marketing ploy that I've never heard of before?"

The Hip-Hop Theater Festival is, in fact, the only institution of its kind that curates, presents, produces and develops a broad range of hip-hop and hip-hop-generation theatre. In five years we have presented more than 75 plays, and branched out to four cities—New York City, Chicago, San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

At the festival, we constantly ask ourselves: What constitutes hip-hop theatre? In determining what makes it into the festival and what doesn't, we came up with these criteria: Hip-hop theatre must fit into the realm of theatrical performance, and it must be *by, about and for* the hip-hop generation, participants in hip-hop culture, or both.

The clamor for more hip-hop theatre on the legitimate stage is not unlike the cry of theatre artists of color during and after the Civil Rights Movement. But few hip-hop theatre pieces fit into a solely African-American slot, or an Asian-American or Latino one. This is because the face of the Hip-Hop generation is considerably more diverse. And this is a good thing, because Hip-Hop shouldn't fit into a tokenized 'slot', and certainly not one that narrows its scope. It's a bad thing because theatres don't seem to have a category for this work, and therefore don't know what to do with it. That's okay, they'll catch on soon enough.

What It Looks Like

A QUICK RUNDOWN OF A FEW works that have been presented at the Hip-Hop Theater Festival will give you a picture of how diverse and eclectic hip-hop theatre is.

Hip-Hop Theatre Junction's *Rhyme Deferred* is a play with two DJs onstage who are live-scoring modern hip-hop-based dance choreography (in other words, *not* breakdancing), yet the story is about two brothers who are MCs. Another piece, *Five Elements of Change*, from the Tortuga Project of Albuquerque, New Mex., uses Aztec dance, capoeira, breakdancing and rap to tell the story of hip-hop's relationship to indigenous culture and sustainable farming. Nilaja Sun's piece *Black and Blue* is about a young woman at a hot New York city summer day-camp playing a musical role as Smurfette. The protagonist of Ben Snyder's conventional play, *In Case You Forget*, is a graffiti artist, but the play is about much more than spraypainting.

The Hip-Hop Theatre Festival also presents dance theatre: *tOy/bOx* by Philadelphia's Olive Dance Theatre pares down B-Boy movements to tell a story about a fantastical toy. Rennie Harris Puremovement's repertory embraces narratives told through B-Boy and pop/lock-inspired dance. Jonzi D of London's *Lyrikal Fearta* and *Aeroplane Man* use hip-hop text and choreography to weave stories about police brutality, British hip-hop culture and the modern-day African diaspora. Benji Reid of Manchester performs what he calls "hip-hop mime" in his *Holiday* and *13 Mics*. Eisa Davis's plays, *Umkovu*, *Angela's Mixtape* and *Six Minutes*, are three entirely different plays that delve deeply into language and issues that could only come from this generation and culture. *Umkovu* is a conventional play about people struggling with the conflation of violence and commerce within the Hip-Hop music industry. *Angela's Mixtape* is literally a hip-hop generation musical and theatrical mixtape of weaved together scenes and memories of the playwright's childhood growing up as Angela Davis's niece. And *Six Minutes* is a very unconventional, highly experimental play that teases with exercises on hip-hop language and references, yet focuses on the surreal relationship between two Ph.D's caught in a sweaty, high-octane struggle of love, abuse, politics, class and activism. My own work ranges from monologues dealing with hip-hop commercialization and the prison industrial complex in *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop*; to the explorations of polycultural hip-hop in *Some People*; to a standard two-act play, *Till The Break Of Dawn*, about a group of idealistic hip-hop-generation teachers and activists who go on a trip and learn how to live with some difficult contradictions.

All of these pieces either employ hip-hop's elements, comment on hip-hop culture itself, or address specific issues that affect the hip-hop generation. More important, they incorporate hip-hop's wide range of aesthetics, and not just the four original elements. The plays, while structured within a contemporary Western theatre model, rely on some, if not all, of the 14 aesthetic elements I listed earlier.

It is a huge misconception to think that hip-hop theatre means doing a rap music version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or that hip-hop theatre must have any one of the hip-hop elements, for that matter. In 2002, for example, the festival received a curious complaint that Indio Melendez's piece *Manchild Dilemma* did not belong in hip-hop theatre, because he didn't rap or breakdance in it. His piece was about a Latino kid who joins the army to get away from his mother and inadvertently gets sent to Operation Desert Storm in 1991. The piece starts with a real video-letter from his pregnant girlfriend, asking when he's coming home, and the story unfolds into a series of solo scenes taking us from his home in the projects to the recruitment office and a drill sergeant who hunts him down to force him on the plane to Kuwait. All of the language, references, locales, contexts and the story reflected dilemmas of the hip-hop generation; it didn't need any of the four elements of hip-hop to qualify as a "hip-hop generation play." And it was a great piece of theatre. It belonged in our festival, just as it belongs on the main stage of every theatre in the country.

On the other hand, a play entitled *Bomb-itty of Errors* was performed in New York City a few years ago and has since toured internationally. I found it painful to watch—not because it was poorly written, poorly acted or poorly directed. It was actually a genius adaptation of *Comedy of Errors*, performed by greatly talented, former New York University theatre students. But as universal and timeless as Shakespeare is, performing his plays in rap does two very damaging things. First, it sends the message that the hip-hop generation has no important stories of its own, and that in order for hip-hop to qualify as theatre, it must attach itself to such certified texts as those of Shakespeare. Second, it devalues hip-hop as art by relegating rap to humorous accompaniment. The feeling that results is of watching a hip-hop minstrel show. Not only wasn't the play *about* the hip-hop generation, but the audience (and ticket prices) failed to reflect the generation as well. This was not a hip-hop theatre piece, but rather a Shakespeare adaptation that infused rap. Ouch.

The festival continues to receive hundreds upon hundreds of submissions of "performance poetry" or "spoken word." For some reason, people think that undirected, unchoreographed recited poetry equals hip-hop theatre, but this could not be further from the truth. A recited poem with some movement in it does not make a play. Nor is it "spoken word." It is simply a poem with movement. Sometimes it's a great poem with great movement that has been made into a play, like Marc Bamuthi Joseph's amazing piece *Word Becomes Flesh*. But the notion of lumping spoken-word poetry into the category of hip-hop theatre distorts, dilutes and diminishes not only hip-hop and theatre, but also poetry.

Contradictions and Challenges

Hip-hop has become a catch-all box for post-multiculturalist arts, a way for mainstream theatres to check off both the "young" and "of color" boxes at the same time. Artists of color whose works have nothing to do with hip-hop are often pigeonholed into the category of hip-hop. Meanwhile, hip-hop artists are often pigeonholed into the ethnic or minority category. It is up to us to make sure that we are not pitted against each other, especially in a climate of decreasing arts funding and trend-based arts funding.

Few theatre directors know how to handle hip-hop aesthetics, many have no idea what they are, and rare is the dramaturg who knows what to make of a hip-hop text. At the same time, few hip-hop theatre artists know what dramaturgs do or understand how they can help. There are few theatres commissioning hip-hop theatre artists, and even fewer that are offering artistic development for this genre. As is usual in the arts, the amount of resources is not proportionate to the work being made, or the work screaming to be made, and the situation is even worse for the hip-hop arts movement.

Hip-hop was already swimming in dangerously contradictory waters when it sprang up as a grassroots art form in the ghettos of the biggest capitalist state in history. Now that hip-hop is maturing in the fields of art, activism, education and business, what are the risks of hip-hop theatre itself becoming elitist and exclusive precisely because of having penetrated mainstream institutions? What happens to graffiti's aesthetics when the canvas is legal and the museum is commissioning you? What happens when the rapper whose main themes are selling crack and suffering and death makes it big and gets himself a 401K? Isn't that what hip-hop set out to do in the first place—take over mainstream institutions and redistribute power and ownership?

What about *cultural* power and ownership? If the Def Jam, No Limit and Jay-Z empires are examples of this revolution in the for-profit world, then what will the revolution look like in the not-for-profit world? Will not-for-profit institutions co-opt hip-hop culture into their programming and hoard grant money without really giving up any power? Will hip-hop art at not-for-profit venues become highbrow and distant from its intended audience?

What happens to all that codification? What happens when we share (and sell) the language that *the man* wasn't supposed to understand? If the answer is that we create a new language, then where is it? What happens when hip-hop moves into the opera house, and we still don't own the opera house? What if we *do* own it?

How do the aesthetics of hip-hop change when the cardboard and linoleum become a \$20,000 marley floor? How do the aesthetics change when, instead of plugging into a street lamp, an artist is plugging into a million-dollar sound system in an acoustically tuned concert hall? How about when your audience is paying \$75 to see you on Broadway instead of free in their own neighborhood? What will hip-hop theatre look like when, instead of hustling together something with one light in a warehouse in their spare time, the artists are being paid union salaries, and the play enjoys real development money and a staff of designers and dramaturgs?

In 2050, when we of the hip-hop generation are in our seventies and eighties, will we be hovering around Lincoln Center with our wrinkled Ecco suits, buying thousand-dollar tickets to see renditions of Busta Rhymes and Benji Reid? Will we still be relevant? Will the thirty-somethings be complaining for *us* to get out and give them the keys so they can start their own movement? Or will hip-hop generations keep generating themselves, as poverty and injustice does?

I'm not sure of the answers to all these questions, but I know that hip-hop is not waiting until it turns 70 to find out. Hip-hop, for the most part, is not waiting to "get into" Lincoln Center, and hip-hop is not waiting for anything, because, unfortunately, the last and crucial part of this aesthetic is that hip-hop creates work through a fatalistic lens that has little to do with passing reckless youth. Most of the hip-hop artists who lived through the 1980s in America's cities never thought we would reach the age of 20, let alone 30. Many did not, and many who did so spent their time behind bars or under very difficult circumstances. Even if our lives or families were not directly affected by crack, guns, AIDS, Giuliani, Daley or Riordan, the bleak expectation of premature death is greatly responsible for many hip-hop artists not seeing ourselves in a trajectory of artistic longevity. Not as individual artists, not as ensembles, not as institutions. Add mistrust, discrimination and marginalization, and you have a situation where many artists wouldn't even think of approaching an arts institution, let alone performing in one.

That said, there are quite a number of us who have survived the 80's and 90's; who have, albeit through sacrifice and struggle, moved the culture forward, and who now feel entitled to not only enter these historically exclusive institutions, but run them and own them. Which poses another question- should hip-hop be concerned with developing autonomous institutions as happened with the Black Arts Movement? Or should Hip-Hop take its rightful place in the mainstream venues that are theoretically "for the people"?

If the Hip-Hop generation now outnumbers the baby boomers and the blue-hair arts patrons, then aren't WE the people? I say we are, and that motherfuckers need to not only give us a slot in the season, but they also need to hand over keys. At the same time, I wouldn't have founded the Hip-Hop Theatre Festival if I thought someone was gonna give me a key. But one of the unique things about the HHTF is that although it is an institution, it hasn't sought its own separate venue. Its goal is to, as Hip-Hop did with Limericks, Turntables and Kung-Fu, reappropriate performance spaces and resources that our artists and our audiences are entitled to.

This leaves us in a contradictory place of negotiation. Part of Hip-Hop wants to be accepted, and part of it does not. Part of Hip-Hop wants to institutionalize, and part of it does not. Therein lies an age-old contradiction, one that predates Hip-Hop: that of wanting to change things within and outside of the system at the same time. This is not so much an aesthetic as it is a strategy. The Hip-Hop generation is working the inside and outside 'the system' in the arts, politics, business, education and activism. These two poles, point to an inner battle within Hip-Hop, a battle that has made it difficult to even attempt to define the aesthetics of Hip-Hop.

We often speak of Two Hip-Hops. There is the corporate one that we are allowed to see on TV and hear on the radio, the one we're allowed to buy. Let's call the artists and movers/shakers who practice this kind of hip-hop the "*blingers*". Then there is the other hip-hop, practiced by the grassroots artists and activists, the ones hustling grant applications, standing in the rain at protests, using Hip-Hop for social change and community education and empowerment, you know.. the "*righteous*".

These days, the *righteous* are mad at the *blingers* for being sellouts, for misrepresenting the culture, for exporting a one-dimensional image of itself. And the *blingers* are mad at the righteous because they feel hated on, and responsible for carrying the entire culture (and all oppressed people) forward on their shoulders. Thirty years have gone by, Hip-Hop is worldwide, but we're still fighting each other more than the people who are denying Hip-Hop access.

Even among the righteous there are those who criticize folks who have crossed the line to work with an institution, and those within institutions who criticize those who will not. This constant infighting in Hip-Hop goes beyond the *inside/outside* the system dialectic, and the capitalist/socialist, blinger/righteous dialectic. The reason for this is hip-hop's battle aesthetic.

Battling is a key component of Hip-Hop aesthetics. It signifies resistance, rebellion, mastery of skill and competition. But if hip-hop artists continue to look at hip-hop simply as a "game", then we devalue our culture. And how do we make good art? Game is distraction, sport, and competition. If hip-hop is to have artistic longevity, it cannot remain in sport or pastime. If grassroots activists continue to disqualify, or refuse to acknowledge the gangster rappers' bling, and if Hip-Hop Industry moguls ignore, or do not support the work that grassroots Hip-Hop artists and activists are doing, then both sides have already lost the battle.

Hip-Hop must transcend the battle, by reappropriating it. This is something that is so elementary to Hip-Hop, but we never thought about doing it with something WE created. Why? Because Hip-Hop has always looked outside itself for resources, rather than looking at our own creations as resources themselves. Record companies never thought twice about appropriating what Hip-Hop creates. But when will we, inside the culture reappropriate our own resources? It would be revolutionary- for real.

The two Hip-Hops must engage each other every day, and support each other equitably, in a reciprocal way. If Hip-Hop corporate moguls only engage the grassroots when it benefits their bottom line, and if the grassroots only engages the moguls when it funds a project, then we are not thinking long-term. At the same time, if we support corporate Hip-Hop that is socially unhealthy, then we defeat our purpose, and if we support grassroots artists who are not very good artists, then we are not challenging the aesthetic either.

If Hip-Hop Arts are going to have a future, then we must critique one another's work, but not solely through the limited lens of Western aesthetics. Too often we read reviews by outsider critics who simply do not have the language, context, or understanding of hip-hop culture to seriously critique a piece of work, and the movement suffers because of this. We must critique one other, and we must be honest, everybody! If some shit is bad, we gotta tell them, "Yo—it's bad." And tell them why. And if it's good, we must support it, and let everyone know.

Can Hip-Hop continue to produce a steady flow of quality art, and not just one-dimensional pop-culture? I believe that hip-hop is more universally relevant and democratically resonant in this day and age than opera, ballet, classical music or traditional theatre. Only time will tell whether hip-hop becomes "classical" art in the next 200 years. I believe it will, not simply because I like it, but during the past 30 years hip-hop has already influenced generations of artists and audiences around the globe, like good art always does.

Hip-hop *is* art. Whether it is revolutionary art or bling-ass-make-money-biaatch art, hip-hop art does not depend on how many records it sells, how much the gallery piece sold for, whose hip-hop theatre piece goes to Broadway and whose doesn't, how many rallies were held, or how many times the kid can spin on his head. Although the culture is marginalized and misunderstood, it is also moving on and maturing. There are rules, there is a foundation, and motherfuckers better know the ledge. At every opportunity we must loudly define Hip-Hop's aesthetics. It is critical that we do. Why?

I attended a panel where scores of Hip-Hop artists and activists were debating over what to do with folks like Russell Simmons, Puff Daddy, Master P, and other rap moguls, who were being accused of a litany of revolutionary crimes: sending negative messages to young people, making poor financial decisions, being inarticulate, embarrassing the black community, and worst of all- misrepresenting the hip-hop movement. Harry Belafonte, the artist and cultural activist, was in the audience, quietly listening to the raging debate. After three hours, he rose and said, "Ya'll gotta define yourselves. Until you do, *they* will." Then he left. I'm with Harry.

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