

Artistic research in multicultural environments: a case study from Programa Vocacional (São Paulo, Brazil)

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My name is Juliano, I am a musician from São Paulo, Brazil, established in the Netherlands since September 2016.

I am going to talk about my experience working for "Programa Vocacional", an artistic tutoring program sponsored by the municipality of São Paulo.

First, it's important to give a brief context of the city and, specially its margins. São Paulo is a 16 millions habitants city and an important economical center of Brazil. If our country is well known by its incredible social inequalities, in São Paulo these inequalities are clear as crystal.

Living in the central regions of the city can provide you with a minimum of infrastructure in terms of culture, health and education, but the same does not apply to a habitant of peripheral regions. There, people are constantly threatened by police brutality, violence from drug dealers, lack of jobs, no basic health and education.

One data that exemplifies this is the life expectancy of the population in different neighborhoods. While in the rich districts the life expectancy is around 80 years old, in the poor regions of the city this average is of 54 years. That's 25 years of extra life that one has if he is lucky enough to be born in 30 kilometers over here. After all, as you can imagine, it is quite rare that one works his way from the poor to the rich district.

Programa Vocacional was created 16 year ago with the goal of promoting artistic tutoring thought the peripheral regions of the city. It works with the concept of self-emancipation, which means that, as tutors, our job is to instigate the participants to find theirs voices in the artistic medium they are interested at; theater, dance, music and visual arts.

In the context of violence where the population is, being able to communicate through art can be an important tool not only to release tensions of daily life, but also as an effective way to position politically against injustices.

My work took place at Cidade Tiradentes, one of the poorest districts of the city. Although one of the less assisted districts of São Paulo, Cidade Tiradentes has a huge cultural complex, with a theatre, several rooms for rehearsing, cinema, and even a 3D printing laboratory.

The size and grandiosity of the building, standing next to simple and roughly made houses, makes it quite intimidating; this complex, built with money from a French private foundation, is a bit like an elephant in the middle of the room, standing there to remind the inhabitants from Cidade Tiradentes of how unequal our society is and that, over there, people are definitely on the bottom of it. Not coincidentally, the cultural complex has constant a problem of little use by the local population.

When I arrived in this huge complex, I was surprised to find in the music room a beautiful grand piano that almost no one played, except few occasional professional pianists that came to perform. During the music tutoring sessions, we spent moments exploring the piano and its mechanisms and it was clear that the group had curiosity for the instrument.

In the beginning I sensed that there was with the piano the same shyness that I saw when people were entering this huge cultural complex. A grand piano does not belong to their reality, as much as that building doesn't. In that sense, the grand piano was a miniature-like metaphor of the whole complex where we were. Imponent, majestic and foreign to their social soundscape. Most of them were reluctant on trying to play the instrument and you could see the uncomfortableness.

Through the sessions, things started to get interesting after they realized that we could open the board of the piano and explore the strings and all the surface of the instrument, not only its keys. This changed completely the relation with the piano.

From this moment on it was possible to see curious people, searching for different sounds, putting gadgets over the strings to change the timbre it would produce and searching different percussive sounds that the boards and bottom of the instrument could do. While exploring the instrument, it was clear that different sounds were being invented and musical creativity was growing.

And, of course, one of the most valuable characteristics of the piano is that we could gather everyone around the same instrument to make music. This was very important since we had a culturally heterogenic group: some individuals were part of neo-Pentecostal church and listened to hymns and music from the church, some were into rap and Brazilian funk music, others listened to commercial pop and wanted to be in "The Voice" or similar.

After several sessions exploring the piano we decided to work on a song by Adele that one young man brought. During the whole process I was always pushing them to create the music by themselves, so when we got to the point of working with one song that was familiar to them the work flowed surprisingly easy.

Basically, they organized all by themselves the arrangement, and who would take which part on the piano. I was happy to see that I could take the role of simply suggesting different possibilities and let them work.

Seeing this group making music independently and together at a grand piano gave me the feeling that the idea of self-emancipation made sense on that context.

It was in the overall a short process but I was very enthusiastic with the outcome. On a local basis, it was possible to break down shyness towards a foreign object, the piano, and to gather people from different and often antagonist "clubs" together. Investigative skills and musical perception and sensibility where developed, and the feedback from the group was very positive.

I am a performing musician and most of my time I'm making music with other people. Because I know the power that music can have in integrating people and in developing a strong and personal identity, I wanted to lead through this process and I hope to achieved at least a part of this.

I will present a very small video where you can see one rehearsal of this song and have an idea of how that work was developed.

I'd like to end with a quote from Paulo Freire, Brazil's foremost pedagogue and educator.

"Ninguém educa ninguém, ninguém educa a si mesmo, os homens se educam entre si, mediatizados pelo mundo"

No one educates no one, no one educates one self, people are educated together mediated by the world.