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Brooklyn Hi-Art! Machine

Mildred Beltre

Abstract

The *Brooklyn Hi-Art Machine!* is a socially engaged art project in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, created by two mothers, Mildred Beltré and Oasa Duverney, who are also artists, Caribbean-Americans, and native New Yorkers, and who have been residents in the same building in Crown Heights for the past sixteen years.



Fig. 1. *Lincoln Place Residents weaving cloth stripes into The Guilty Ones Are Not Those Who Commit the Sins, But Those Who Create the Circumstances, chain link fence weaving, 2015. Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Photo credit: Scott Dolan.*

The Brooklyn Hi-Art! Machine is a socially-engaged project started in 2010 by artists Mildred Beltré and Oasa DuVerney, two mothers, artists, and community members of Caribbean descent living in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. We have been neighbors for seventeen years and started having drawing and sewing nights in each other's apartments eight years ago. Realizing that art making nurtured our friendship and creativity, we decided to take our art-making out into the streets in the spirit of friendship and with the goal of community-building. We wanted to actively resist the negative prejudices that haunt and criminalize black and brown bodies, and remake the streets as a creative and generative space for people of color.

Dubbing ourselves the "Official Unofficial Artists-in-Residence" of our block, we set up tents, tables, and art supplies on the street outside our apartment building, creating fence-weavings, holding art workshops, and inviting anyone walking by to stop and make art with us. In this way, we co-founded the *Brooklyn Hi-Art! Machine*, a collaborative public art project that explores art-making as a community-building tool.



Fig. 2. *The Guilty Ones Are Not Those Who Commit the Sins, But Those Who Create the Circumstances*, Fence Weaving, 2015. Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Photo credit: Daniella Hanerfeld.

For the past five years in our workshops, people of different ages and backgrounds connect and exchange ideas and stories, which lays the groundwork for community organizing and reclaiming public space for peaceful actions and play. Using the sidewalk as a creative and inviting space has provided a context for engaging with others outside of the usual social norms and routine daily activities. Our vision is to facilitate a public space for community members—often silenced by socio-economic circumstances—to get informed, feel empowered, create, and organize to take positive action.



Fig. 3. *Do Not Disappear into Silence, Fence Weaving*, 2014. Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Photo credit: Scott Dolan.

Crown Heights is a neighborhood in Central Brooklyn near Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Museum. Once considered one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Crown Heights saw dramatic demographic changes in the late 1960s, when White Flight radically changed the populations of Brooklyn, and Crown Heights became a majority African-American, Caribbean, and Caribbean-American neighborhood. The neighborhood now also has a populous Lubavitcher Hasidic section, centered around Kingston Avenue, south of Eastern Parkway.

In the 1980s and 90s, the neighborhood became known for its high rates of crime and racial tension demonstrated by Crown Heights Race riots of 1991. But demographics are changing. According to census data, the black population shrank to 70 percent from 79 percent from 2000 to 2010, and the white population almost doubled to 16 percent, while the number of Hispanic and Asian residents also grew” (Gregor).

With these changes in demographics, and the increased desirability of Crown Heights as a place to live, given its proximity to the park and public transportation, huge increases in rents have followed. The average rent for a

one-bedroom apartment jumped 47 percent between 2010 and 2015 to \$1,877 a month, while the increase for Brooklyn overall was 29 percent, at \$2,607 a month (Kaysen). These huge increases in rents have brought about mass displacement of the poorer residents in the community. Crown Heights is especially affected by this phenomenon that is taking place in many communities of color throughout the city.



Fig. 4. *Guide to Tenant Rights and Community Activities*, was produced and published by the Brooklyn Hi-Art! Machine in 2015. Photo credit: Scott Dolan.

Most recently, the *Brooklyn Hi-Art! Machine* have worked to address Housing Rights through the creation and distribution of a guide to tenant rights and community activities; simplifying the state's basic tenant rights information, making it visually interesting with graphics and activities that nurture community relationships. With the help of previous grants, we were able to print and distribute copies of the guide locally and free of charge.



Fig. 5. *Hope Less, Do More*. Fence Weaving, 2013, Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Photo credit: Scott Dolan.

Gentrification isolates the existing residents of the neighborhood from the newer, more affluent ones. This is done both through the creation of businesses meant only for the newer, more affluent residents, as well as through more aggressive policing of people of color. Public and collective projects are a way of combating the social isolation that leads to suspicion amongst neighbors as opposed to cooperation. By engaging our neighbors on the street, we facilitate conversation and trust which is often lost when a community undergoes significant transition and upheaval.

It is important to us, as artists, to not create work solely for the gallery but also to use our practice to make artwork with and for our community. By creating art activities on our sidewalk we provide a visible and participatory space for Crown Heights residents of all ages to see and interact with each other. These workshops serve as a creative outlet for our neighbors and provide an opportunity to engage with each other outside of the daily routine and thus encourage a new kind of interaction, one leading to new social relations based on mutual respect and understanding.



Fig. 6. *We Are Still Here*, Fence Weaving 2012, Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Photo credit: Scott Dolan.

We work with the youth and adults of our neighborhood, on the street, creating an open space for artmaking and community dialog. Over the years *BHAM* has evolved from art workshops and free snacks to also hosting tenant rights meetings, creating public installations, a free publication, and collaborating with local community organizations and artists. In the summer of 2016, as a response to the upcoming elections, where some politicians are openly engaging in race-baiting and other racist tactics, we want to explore how as a community we engage in discussions about electoral politics and what we need to demand from our elected officials, the current political candidates, and what value or meaning voting has for us, if any.



Fig. 7. Two longtime residents of Crown Heights holding up posters created during a Brooklyn Hi-Art Machine silk-screening workshop, 2015. Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Photo credit: Scott Dolan.

Works Cited

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About the author

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