Remapping Performance: Common Ground, Uncommon Partners
Jan Cohen-Cruz
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by Lisa A. Lowry

Throughout *Remapping Performance,* Jan Cohen-Cruz returns to the performance *Cry You One*, giving the reader the sense that this work provided her crucial insights into how artists engage directly with pressing social issues. *Cry You One*, created by two New Orleans theater companies, ArtSpot Production and Mondo Bizzaro, was a performance, which centered on the environmental degradation of the southern Louisiana wetlands. The performance took place within a literal and metaphorical journey as audience members traveled by boat and by foot through the wetlands. Performers acted as guides leading small groups of participants through the performance and providing their group with a unique perspective on the state of the natural environment. *Cry You One* defied notions of traditional theater by collaborating with non-artists (an environmental scientist, community members, and community leaders), placing the performance within the natural environment, and requiring active engagement from the audience.

In *Remapping Performance*, Cohen-Cruz describes a new "vibrant hybridity" that has emerged in the arts as artists collaborate with others around social issues without forsaking their aesthetic concerns (4). This "vibrant hybridity" includes endeavors, such as *Cry You One*, wherein theater artists use their skills and experience to create shared experiences and engender understanding of social problems. Due to the increased vibrancy surrounding these efforts, Cohen-Cruz posits that it is time to recognize these endeavors as a movement. Cohen-Cruz does not settle on a term to encapsulate this movement, and instead uses terms such as cross-sector art, social practice, socially-engaged performance, socially-oriented performance, performance in uncommon partnerships, and community-based art. Hereafter, I refer to these endeavors as cross-sector art.

Cohen-Cruz takes neither an encyclopedic nor a case study approach; and while she acknowledges the former, she sometimes refers to her examples as case studies, for which those with a social science background may take umbrage. Furthermore, the lack of a consistent conceptual framework limits *Remapping Performance's* theoretical insights into cross-sector art. The strength of *Remapping Performance* lies in the diverse and innovative examples of cross-sector art and, taken as a whole, this book is a worthy step towards articulating the breadth and vibrancy of this movement.

In Part I, titled *Groundings*, Cohen-Cruz attempts to locate the conceptual boundaries of cross-sector art. Cohen-Cruz makes a distinction between performance *about* social issues and "performance in partnership towards social goals" (19). For the former, the aesthetic remains the primary focus; the finished artistic production is the goal; and the involvement of those outside the theater is minimal. For the latter, the social world is of equal, if not greater, concern than the aesthetic; extending performance methods, rather than the performance itself, to the social arena is the goal; and collaboration with non-artists is paramount. Cohen-Cruz roots her depiction of cross-sector in theatrical modes, pointing to the settlement houses of early 1900s and the community theater of the 1960s as antecedents of these "performances in partnership towards social goals" (19). However, later in the book, Cohen-Cruz shifts away from these theatrical modes to focus on art more broadly.

Cohen-Cruz presents the thesis that "one can make a life that is committed to both art and to a social issue; and that all partners, from the various fields, stretching beyond their base in services of shared goals, have much to gain from such collaborations" (10). Cohen-Cruz presents a number of attributes (e.g. the ability to translate complex content into performance, to help us deal with uncomfortable topics and feelings, to foster creativity, and to create shared experiences) that performers can bring to bear on social issues. The book speaks most directly to artists already working in these partnerships and artists (or artists in training) who aspire to pursue performance but not forsake their concerns for the wider social world. Cohen-Cruz successfully highlights ways in which these artists can "make a life" (but not necessarily a living) working on social issues without abandoning their artistic ambitions.

Cohen-Cruz never fully clarifies the role of the non-artist partner, leaving unanswered questions as to what the non-artists bring to, and in what ways they benefit from, these collaborations. The non-artist partners vary from partnership to

partnership, both in terms of who they are and their involvement level (from minor involvement to full collaboration). The non-artist partners vary from those with lived, relevant experiences (e.g. those living on contaminated land; the elderly) to those with subject matter expertise (e.g. environmental scientist, gerontologists). Despite this broadness, Cohen-Cruz makes some interesting proposals in regard to the non-artist partners that deserve further inquiry. For example, she mentions the potential for artists to work as a bridge between those with lived, relevant experience and subject matter experts, suggesting that artists could challenge the "cult of expertise." This proposition could help policymakers and administrators bring their knowledge to the table in ways that are respectful of other types of knowledge.

Cohen-Cruz, with the help of a contribution from Julie Thompson Klein, depicts partnerships as either multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary. Transdisciplinary partnerships focus directly on the issue and transcend disciplinary boundaries and knowledge. Cohen-Cruz presents *Cry You One* as an example of a transdisciplinary partnership: something new was created that exceeded the partners' disciplines and experiences. The most powerful examples of cross-sector art in *Remapping Performance* seem to reach this transdisciplinary threshold. Unfortunately, this typology of partnerships does not carry through the book, leaving questions on transdisciplinary partnership unexplored. Under what conditions do transdisciplinary partnerships emerge? What are the barriers to transdisciplinary partnerships and how can they be overcome? Cohen-Cruz hints at the answers to some of these questions but does not address them in a systematic way.

The chapters in Part II, titled *Platforms,* provide insight into cross-sector art by depicting different ways through which these cross-sector art endeavors may emerge. Again, these chapters are more useful in portraying the breadth and variety of cross-sector art than in providing a theoretical understanding of the movement. Throughout these chapters, Cohen-Cruz touches on the challenges of collaborating across sectors, including insufficient time; power imbalances; and a lack of common terminology, methods, measures of success, and end goals. Each chapter is supplemented by an interview with an expert in the field, providing additional perspectives on the creation of cross-sector art.

Chapter 3 focuses on the role of universities in facilitating and/or participating in cross-sector art. The chapter provides numerous examples, the cornerstone being *The Penelope Project*, a partnership between "theater students, the staff and residents of a long-term care facility, professional theater makers, and student and faculty members from other relevant disciplines, including gerontology" (109). The project was an adaptation of *The Odyssey*. In addition to its dedication to the social issue of caring for the elderly, *The Penelope Project* was exceptional in its use of the nursing home as the performance setting and its use of actors and nursing home residents to explore aging directly. Despite its departure from traditional theater, *The Penelope Project* remains in the realm of theatrical performance, tying it to its theatre forebears presented in Part I. The rest of the chapter explores where and how cross-sector art can become integrated into academic setting and curriculum.

The chapter on neighborhood ecosystem focuses on cross-sector art rooted in place through active engagement with local history, culture and people. Cohen-Cruz frames this chapter around New York's Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts (NOCD-NY), a network of artists and others dedicated to strengthening the role of local arts and culture in citywide policy. However, the framework is an uneasy one; it's unclear how NOCD-NY's policy work interacts with the work of these artists. The resonance of this chapter is restricted by the lack of a centerpiece example. Furthermore, many of the examples in the chapter, rather than remaining in the realm of theatrical performance or methods, focus on art more broadly. The shift away from theatrical modes makes the focus on theatrical modes in Part I an insufficient framework and renders the omission of the larger tapestry of the intersection art and social issues curious.

Chapter 5 focuses on cross-sector art as a tool for cultural diplomacy by depicting smARTpower. SmARTpower was a project funded by the US State Department and designed by the Bronx Museum, which "featured an artist or artist collective in each of 15 countries for 30-45 days engaging with especially people under 30 and women, local artists, teachers, and people with expertise from other than the arts aligned with the specific project" (159). Cohen-Cruz provides examples of four of these projects: a puppetry workshop focused on recycling and community building in Caracas, Venezuela; an audio tour project with women living in a shelter in Bangalore, India; an art project that incorporated traditional iconography and shared meals in Nepal; and a portable architectural project focused on climate change in the Philippines. In each of these examples, Cohen-Cruz depicts diverse people working together and creating something new out of the shared experience. Cohen-Cruz worked as an evaluator of the smARTpower program and gives detailed thought to the resonance of these collaborative art projects and the shortcomings of the smARTpower as a whole.

Cohen-Cruz's depiction of cross-sector art gives the reader a palpable sense that when these endeavors work, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For Cohen-Cruz, this is the essence of transdisciplinary endeavors: they achieve what individual disciplines, methods, and experiences cannot achieve on their own; they transcend boundaries and allow for authentic connections. Hopefully, Cohen-Cruz will continue to explore these transdisciplinary partnerships and with an eye towards exploring the role of the non-artist partners through in-depth case studies. Overall, *Remapping Performance* is a fascinating glimpse into how artists can engage with the wider social world.

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