

Taking Over
Written and Performed by Danny Hoch
Directed by Tony Taccone
January 21 – February 22, 2009
Kirk Douglas Theatre

DiscoveryGuide



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601 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Taking Over uses a Hip-Hop style to investigate the complicated issue of gentrification

in urban areas. It's like a mix tape that Danny Hoch made from the voices that he hears in his community, assembled according to his point of view. Think of this Discovery Guide like liner notes for the play. The exercises are designed to help you make your own mix in response.

If this guide were a mix tape, there'd be a track about Hip-Hop and its background. That would be the old-school Run DMC track. There'd be one about gentrification, something sort of mainstream indie rock. The track about immigrant history and multiculturalism in the U.S. would have an Afro-Cuban feel to it, and there'd definitely be some merengue throughout. All of the issues brought up in this guide deal with opposing points of view—how they combine and recombine and change each other—right at the moment when they are in greatest conflict. Neighborhoods grow, art forms emerge and even our sense of what it means to be American continues to evolve.

As with any good mix tape, everyone is going to interact with this guide in a different way. You may find that one track is your favorite; you'll return to it over and over, learning new things every time. One track may remind you of an experience you've had in your own life, or introduce you to something new. There's a special relationship between a mix tape and a listener. We hope this guide makes your experience with Danny Hoch and *Taking Over* more personal, more informed and more thoughtful than it would be without it.

DiscoveryGuide

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OBJECTIVES OF THIS DISCOVERY GUIDE

Encourage an understanding of Hip-Hop style and aesthetics

Open a dialogue about the way gentrification impacts communities

Explore multiculturalism and fusion identities



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“The selection of experiences, memories, and the entire scope of a person’s being come into play in the creation of the self. We do not just pick one record at a time. Our inner DJs are like a multiarmed being, our records are infinitely grooved, and the sounds of our lives captured and mixed, remixed...”

—robert karimi, *how i found my inner DJ*

Toward a Hip-Hoch Aesthetic

Danny Hoch, the performer and creator of *Taking Over*, is not solely an actor or a writer. Hoch is a member of a group of artists that pioneered a style of performance they call Hip-Hop Theatre, using the creative strategies that define Hip-Hop culture as a launching point for a new type of play. Shows like *Clay*, *No Child...* and *In the Continuum* (all produced at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in the past two seasons) share some commonalities with the work that Hoch and his peers initiated and brought into the mainstream. They all use solo performers channeling a variety of characters. *Clay* relied heavily on music to tell its story, while the other two revolved around the retelling of marginalized histories in an illuminating way. But these are not Hip-Hop Theatre.

So what makes something Hip-Hop? You might think immediately of a rapper like Jay-Z, but contemporary rap developed from an earlier, multi-disciplinary, creative culture. The term Hip-Hop was coined in the 1970s in the South Bronx, New York, where different modes of street art and music started to solidify into a unified **aesthetic** and a cohesive community. Afrika Bambaataa, known as the Grandfather of Hip-Hop, concentrated the movement into four distinct elements: **B-boying**, DJ-ing, MC-ing and graffiti painting.

Each element stakes a claim in public space for communities that are disadvantaged socially or economically. Each carries

with it an aesthetic of battle and resistance. Street artists painted graffiti murals over the subway trains running to working-class New York boroughs like Brooklyn and the Bronx. By creating challenging art in unexpected places, the muralists found a way to both **re-appropriate** a part of the urban landscape and defy traditional, upper-class aesthetics.

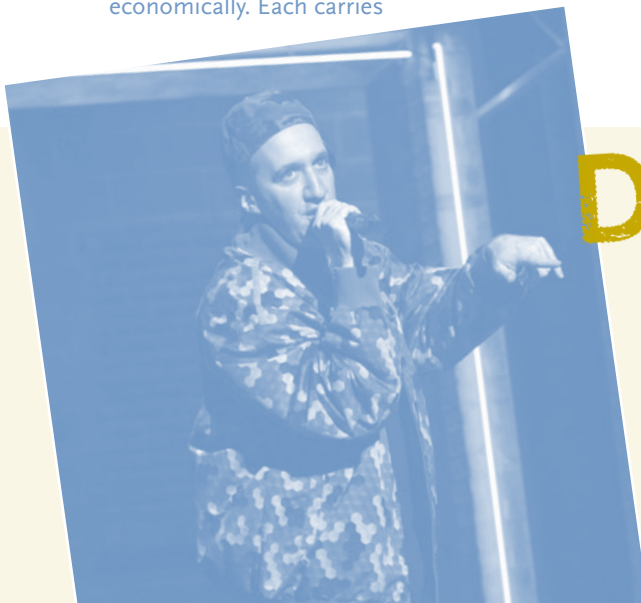
Like many art forms born from oppression, Hip-Hop is full of contradictions. At once joyful and aggressive, accessible and **coded**, it gives voice to an unrecognized immigrant history, particularly the Latino and African Americans who make up more than 50% of the population in New York City. Like graffiti text, Hip-Hop has a recognizable style and aesthetic value, but speaks a language that can only be entirely understood by an insider.

Hip-Hop is a form of collage, integrating many different perspectives into a vibrant means of expression. Think of the DJ, a familiar face in Hip-Hop. The job of the DJ is to re-mix excerpts from different sources to create a new and unique type of music. **Samples** of music, sound or speech become the instruments for the DJ's symphony. Each beat, scratch or voice remains distinct; the art of the DJ is in the recombining and layering of the pieces. In the same way, Danny Hoch recombines characters in *Taking Over* to create a larger picture of the state of **gentrification** in Brooklyn. Rather than records, Hoch is sampling points of view and mixing them live for us onstage. Thus Hip-Hop can be seen as a metaphor for **polycultural** communities in the U.S.

DANNY HOCH

Danny Hoch was born into the Hip-Hop generation in Brooklyn, New York, where he still lives today. He is a rapper, graffiti artist and break-dancer. But he is also an actor and performer with a passion for theatre. Rather than isolating these two parts of his identity, Danny found ways to integrate them, examining the Hip-Hop aesthetic for tools that he

PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS.



Taking Over

**“ALL YOU ‘AMERICANS’ GET THE F--- OUT!
GO HOME MOTHERF---ERS. Why are you HERE?
You suck! Nobody WANTS you here!”**

—Robert in *Taking Over*

“People want user-friendly multi-ethnic shopping and ambience. People don’t want to live in a f---ing safari, they just want to visit sometimes.”

—Stuart in *Taking Over*

“...Nobody said a word. Because I don’t exist. None of us do. ... So, I get free almond croissants now. Well, I don’t pay for ’em, but they really ain’t free.”

—Marion in *Taking Over*

Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is changing radically. Plagued by drugs, violence and gangs in the 1970s, the new version of this New York neighborhood boasts high-end eateries, deluxe housing developments and an insurgence of the artsy and affluent setting up shop. In his one-man show, *Taking Over*, Danny Hoch takes on the characters of nine different Williamsburg residents and embodies their divergent perspectives on who is taking over, and what happens to the overtaken.

The show opens with Robert, a Brooklyn native and graduate student making an impassioned plea at a community meeting for all of the non-immigrant interlopers to go back to where they came from.

We meet Franque, a French transplant selling luxury condos to the very “interlopers” that Robert rails against. Stuart, a housing developer, weighs in on the fiscal benefits of urban beautification, while Kiko struggles to mingle with the movie industry moving in, and Marion finds that being invisible to the new upper class has some surprising benefits.

The play includes Danny, as himself, addressing the appearance of artichokes in the grocery of the once-brutal city he calls home, balancing what has been lost against what may have been gained. While the text doesn’t rhyme, and there is only one character who raps, the style of the show speaks to Danny’s unique voice. Remember, Danny is a DJ sampling points of view, and the piece is a collage of many different experiences and cultures remixed to evoke Danny’s perspective. In the same way Hip-Hop creates a voice for overlooked histories, Danny is giving language to the people of Williamsburg who are often mute in the debate over gentrification. And in the characters of Franque and Stuart, Danny re-appropriates the people he views as oppressors by mocking their viewpoint in performance. The art is in the assembly.



PHOTO BY KEVIN BERNE.

Exercise

Who Was Here?

Find someone who's been a part of your community for a long time. A parent, teacher or familiar restaurant owner are good examples, as long as they've been around the neighborhood for a while. Interview them about living in your neighborhood. Use the following questions as a place to start, and make up some of your own.

1. What is the essence of home for you? What makes this feel like home?

2. How is our neighborhood different from when you first moved here?

3. What are some things that have stayed the same?

4. Do you feel like you belong here? Why or why not? Has that changed over time?

5. Are there people or places that you think don't belong here? Why or why not?

6. Do you think you have power or influence in our community? Why or why not?

7. What type of community do you know you would never live in, or never fit into?

8. Is it necessary for neighborhoods to change over time? Is that a good, bad or mixed process?

9. _____
(write your own question here)

Immigrant Domain

“You know who spendin’ all the money Wilma is tourists. They ain’t tourists-tourists. I’m talkin’ about the people that came here as tourists and then they stay here. I call them ‘resident tourists.’”

—Marion in *Taking Over*

Rockefeller Drug Laws

Enacted by Governor Nelson Rockefeller in 1973 and still hotly contested today, the Rockefeller Drug Laws are some of the harshest state-mandated penalties on the books for the possession or sale of narcotics. The Governor felt that rehabilitation attempts were failing to clean up the community, so he authored a law requiring a minimum sentence of 15 years to life for even first-time offenders.

Intended to deter crime, the Rockefeller Laws have succeeded primarily in sending large numbers of men and women of color to prison for minor drug offenses, overcrowding the New York prison system and costing taxpayers money. As of 1996, Latinos and African Americans made up roughly 23% of the population in New York, but counted for 85% of people indicted on drug charges.

People have strong feelings about what makes a place home and how much it can change before it doesn’t seem familiar anymore. Gentrification (more optimistically called urban renewal, beautification or revitalization) is controversial because the revitalizing of a neighborhood often displaces the current residents. While proponents say gentrification improves living conditions and brings jobs into a dilapidated urban area, detractors insist that rising property values push out low-income residents and targets them as undesirable. So what exactly is gentrification, and how does it take a neighborhood out of the hands of the residents?

The term gentrification is a relatively new one, coined in the 1960s. It usually happens like this: A dilapidated urban area becomes desirable to groups like students and artists for its city access and low rent. Artists tend to bring in galleries

“We’re not allowed to maintain culture in the face of colonial attack. And essentially what gentrification is is colonial attack. Neighborhoods that are gentrifying, they’re under siege. By the middle class and the upper middle class and the rich.”—Danny Hoch

and wealthy arts patrons, making the area more attractive to middle-income, young buyers for the “hip” character. As a neighborhood becomes more desirable, housing developers build luxury apartments and condominiums. Affluent residents attract high-end boutiques and cafés, which push out mom-and-pop businesses and push up property values and taxes. Suddenly, the original residents find they can no longer afford live in their own neighborhood. Often, they are forced to relocate to an area that is less expensive. In most cases, city regulations require that new developments retain some amount of low income housing. The current minimum requirement in Brooklyn is 20% of new units for low to middle income residents.

This might seem a simple issue of an upper class taking freely from a working class that cannot defend itself, but this is not entirely the case. There are strong arguments on both sides. Positive outcomes of gentrification include increased safety, improved housing and more commerce. On the flip side, because the community living in the area changes, the original residents often don’t benefit from revitalization. Many also say that the cultural flavor of the area is lost in the influx of new businesses catering to upper-class tastes. Most of the accounts

Vocabulary

Anecdote: *n.* A brief story, especially one that is personal

are **anecdotal**, making rich territory for Danny Hoch to address in a performance. Though people have researched the outcome of urban renewal, the human cost is still unclear because of the unanswerable question: Whose quality of life has more value? If this paradox seems familiar, it’s because gentrification is a nationwide trend. Brooklyn in the 1970s is unrecognizable from the Brooklyn of today. With the changing neighborhood identity, rates of violence and gang activity went down. But as *Taking Over* points out, many residents have found their new home much less familiar than the old one, and much more expensive. The civic crackdown on drug

dealing made the area safer for incoming residents, but the Rockefeller Laws seemed to target people of color who had grown up in the neighborhood. Williamsburg was made up primarily of immigrants before it was inundated with transplants.

Los Angeles is currently struggling with the mixed blessings of gentrification. Echo Park and Atwater Village are becoming havens for artists – the first step in the process. Silverlake is further along in its transformation, with astronomical property values becoming the norm. Glass walled condos are rising among the skyscrapers downtown, and clubs are cropping up on the ground floor where, less than five years ago, L.A.’s homeless slept in doorways. In the face of rapid revitalization, the Los Angeles City Council wanted to protect available low-income housing. As recently as May 2008, the Council enacted regulations to make it difficult and costly to convert residential hotels on Skid Row into condos. A drive down Sunset Boulevard will reveal blocks of partially constructed developments in areas that, until recently, were predominantly working-class Mexican and Korean neighborhoods. We have yet to see exactly what the repercussions will be to East L.A.’s cultural identity as it becomes the new destination for “resident tourists.”

Exercise

I Am Here

On the next page, create a map of an area that you feel you know well. It can be your school, your neighborhood or even your city. Use the blank spaces in the key below to come up with symbols to identify different areas that are important to you. Make a drawing of your neighborhood as you see it.

Key



I am safe here (can be many areas)



I am out of place here (can be many areas)

____ The _____ (without this place, it would not be my neighborhood)
(fill in)

____ The _____ (this place feels like it does not belong)
(fill in)



This color indicates areas that I have full access to



This color indicates areas that I have partial access to



This color indicates areas that I do not have access to

The Battle for National Identity

American perception of assimilation has developed over time. The United States was founded as a nation where immigrants could live their lives and pursue their happiness freely. The question of which immigrants are entitled to pursue those goals is something that we still struggle over.

Through the 18th and 19th centuries, while the United States was trying to become a new utopian republic, the metaphor of the melting pot was invented as an organizing principle. Immigrants would come to the frontier, where a fiery trial of pioneering, settlement and the construction of a nation would smelt them into a new, unified people: Americans. Their dissimilarities would meld together or melt away, and a new cultural identity would emerge. This might seem ideal if it didn't apply only to Europeans. People of color were considered second-class citizens.

In some cases, such as the African slave trade or Japanese internment during World War II, men and women were actively denied citizenship and/or isolated from the larger population. We see this fear echoed today in immigrants who pressure their children to assimilate in order to offer them the greatest chance for success. The Dispatcher character

in *Taking Over* banters in Dominican slang with his taxi drivers, but his attitude changes when talking to Ashley and Justin, his American-born children. He scolds them for speaking to him in Spanish, warning them that people will think they're immigrants.

The mid 20th century ushered in the civil rights movement. Women and people of color united to demonstrate for their rights as citizens. This culminated in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited unequal access—leading to desegregation in schools and public places—and discrimination in employment. The melting pot haltingly began to embrace the idea that democracy thrived on universal participation, regardless of race or creed.

With 21st century **globalization**, it is imperative to recognize other cultures and their values. American and international businesspeople are traveling, relocating and interacting with one another daily. This cultural mingling is brought home and applied within our borders. What follows is a new metaphor for national identity: the salad bowl or cultural mosaic. In the salad bowl metaphor, each element retains its distinct flavor while contributing to the taste of the whole.

When legislators acknowledged people were entitled to equal treatment regardless of race, creed or color, it marked another great stride in respecting diversity as a valuable part of being an American. The mosaic theory allowed for polyculturalism, assuming that, rather than weakening national unity, diversity would improve it. As you probably have experienced or seen in the news, this is an ongoing process. Polycultural sensitivity and respect is not an ideal that we have yet perfected.

Vocabulary

Globalization: *n.* The expansion of ideas or industry to a world-wide scale; one example is auto manufacturing, which imports parts, labor and even entire cars from other countries in order to provide an affordable product.



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

Exercise

Response to the Play

Did the play change your mind about anything? How?

Do you think that Hoch is fair to everyone represented in the play? Does he have to be? Explain.

Why does Hoch place himself in the show?

What is Hoch's opinion of gentrification? How do you know?

What makes *Taking Over* Hip-Hop theatre? (Or why isn't it?)

Secret Coding

“My characters are not people that I interviewed, they’re not one real estate agent that I know, or this one hippie on the street that I know. Each of the characters is a composite of many different real people, including facets of myself. So that is sort of a sampling or mix tape, because the more rhythms that you sample in a song, the more rich it becomes. And the more diverse or complex.”

—Danny Hoch

In his article “Toward a Hip-Hop Aesthetic,” Danny Hoch suggests that coded language, dress and images are an element that makes something Hip-Hop. Graffiti art is an example of coding. On the most basic level, graffiti is a way to say “we are here, and this belongs to us.” The style of graffiti is its own type of language to be learned. In the 1970s and 80s in the Bronx and Brooklyn, the style was shaded, three-dimensional, linking block letters, not entirely decipherable to the outsider eye. It was a way for groups of artists to communicate with one another. While street gangs certainly use graffiti as a means to display ownership and dominance, the Hip-Hop graffiti art culture re-appropriated the style and reinvented it as an empowering insider art form.

Coding is also a useful tool in theatre. In a short time, we as an audience are expected to get to know characters intimately so that we can understand their story. We can’t rely solely on what they say. Costumes, gestures and accents give us another layer of coded information about the characters’ histories. In *Taking Over*, Danny applies a Hip-Hop slant to this idea, reducing coding to essential yet powerful indicators. Each character’s speech patterns and language tell us about him/her. Stuart’s monologue is peppered with attacks on his personal assistant. What does that make you think or feel about the character?

You use coding in your own life to identify friends or like-minded people and to position yourself within a group. An article of clothing like a hat or a jacket can stand in for a whole identity, like wearing the flag of your country. Kangol hats were one coded piece of Hip-Hop

culture, indicating an allegiance with MCs like Grandmaster Flash and LL Cool J. Similarly, the difference between someone wearing Converse or Doc Martens gives you a great deal of information about who you assume that person is. Coding can be a source of empowerment, a way of saying “we belong together,” but it can also be a tool of exclusion.

“Hip hop is blues filtered through a century of experience and a thousand miles of asphalt.”
—William Jelani Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn*



Exercise

Cast Your Neighborhood

You are going to create a cast of characters for your community in the same way that Hoch does in *Taking Over*. Sample your experiences and imagination; these are not real people. They stand in for the types of people that you find around you.

Example:

Name: *Stuart*

Occupation: *Housing developer*

Favorite Saying: *That's not how it works in the Real World.*

Coded Behavior: *Does yoga, drinks lattes, says "shmuck"*

Lives in: *An expensive penthouse condo*

Wants Most: *Power, money, control*

Fears Most: *Being part of the "safari" outside his development*

Most Important Person or Object: *His Blackberry*

Name: *You*

Occupation: _____

Favorite Saying: _____

Coded Behavior: _____

Lives In: _____

Wants Most: _____

Fears Most: _____

Most Important Person or Object: _____

Name: _____

Occupation: _____

Favorite Saying: _____

Coded Behavior: _____

Lives In: _____

Wants Most: _____

Fears Most: _____

Most Important Person or Object: _____

Name: _____

Occupation: _____

Favorite Saying: _____

Coded Behavior: _____

Lives In: _____

Wants Most: _____

Fears Most: _____

Most Important Person or Object: _____

“Hip-hop is folklore is gospel is order is *ocha* in orbit, no bulls--t, no doubt. That’s what I think it is. I think it’s spirituality. I think it’s truth. But mostly, it’s a folkloric medium enjoyed by billions of people all over the planet that is rooted in the idea of movement.”

—Marc Bamuthi Joseph, from *The Dope Spot to Broadway*,
A Roundtable on Hip-Hop Theatre, Dance and Performance

Name: _____

Occupation: _____

Favorite Saying: _____

Coded Behavior: _____

Lives In: _____

Wants Most: _____

Fears Most: _____

Most Important Person or Object: _____

Concluding Remarks: Make Your Sound Heard

Fusion is something that Americans are particularly successful at when we embrace it, because of the polycultural environment that we live in. Break-dancing takes inspiration from salsa, tap dancing, martial arts films and swing dancing. None of the influences lose their identity, but they are recombined in an innovative way to create a unique form. When you live in a community, you become one of the sampled pieces that make up the whole sound. Your thoughts, opinions and identity make your school, neighborhood or country more complex. The tools you’ve learned in this guide will help you to better understand the music of other people’s stories. Don’t forget the value of your own unique experience. Make your sound heard.

When you’ve completed your cast, return to your neighborhood map on page 9. Place your characters where they belong in your map. Who are your allies and your enemies?

Exercise

We Are Here

Using all of the resources that you’ve gathered throughout this guide, create a monologue for one of your characters. Using your character breakdown as a starting

place, think about the way your character talks – the words s/he uses and rhythms to her/his speech. Think about what is most important to her/him, and what s/he is most afraid of. Write down what s/he would say in her/his one minute to the world. Rehearse in front of the mirror at home with an article of clothing or a prop that says something about your character. Perform for your class.



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

Yes, yes, y'all, and we don't stop...

Resources

Websites:

www.dannyhoch.com

Danny Hoch's personal site, with samples of his work, an archive of articles and reviews and video clips of his performances

www.cantstopwontstop.com

Website of Jeff Chang, an active documenter of the Hip-Hop movement, with news, a blog and a variety of ways to connect to the Hip-Hop community

www.hiphoptheaterfest.org

Site for the New York Hip-Hop Theater Festival; stay up to date with artists using Hip-Hop strategy in their performances

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93515006

"Morning Edition" story about students in Portland, Oregon, dealing with gentrification in an unusual way

Books:

Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop edited by Jeff Chang

(Basic Civitas Books, 2006) Essays, poetry and personal accounts of the many facets of the Hip-Hop movement, from its beginnings through its future; includes the essay "Toward a Hip-Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip-Hop Arts Movement" by Danny Hoch

Can't Stop, Won't Stop by Jeff Chang (Saint Martin's Press, 2005)

A self-proclaimed "History of the Hip-Hop Generation," documenting major players and roots of the movement through the current manifestations of Hip-Hop in our culture

To The Break of Dawn: A Freestyle of the Hip Hop Aesthetic by William

Jelani Cobb (New York University Press, 2007) A creative history, part poetry, part textbook, filled with insights about the genre in a style that honors the art



Film:

Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop: the Film directed by Mark Benjamin and Danny Hoch (JHH Pictures, 2000) Written and performed by Danny Hoch; a play adapted to film

Wild Style

directed by Charlie Ahearn (Wild Style Productions, 1983) Starring a cast of the original DJs, MCs, B-Boys and graffiti artists of the Hip-Hop movement, a taste of what the early scene was like

For 38 years, Center Theatre Group's P.L.A.Y. (Performing for Los Angeles Youth)

has served 25,000 – 35,000 young people, teachers and families annually through a variety of performances, residencies, discount ticket programs and innovative educational experiences. P.L.A.Y. offers programs that allow young people, teachers and families to attend productions at the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson and Kirk Douglas Theatres for low or no cost. P.L.A.Y. is dedicated to the development of young people's skills and creativity through the exploration of theatre, its literature, art and imagination.

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