

Boxing lessons

Emerging from the shadows, a new multi-sensory performance from Bay Area hip-hop veterans The Coup

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While still a child in early-'80s San Francisco, Boots Riley witnessed something he didn't quite understand but that would stick with him for the rest of his life. Walking into a theater performance at the venerable Mission District art space [Project Artaud](http://www.projectartaud.org/) (<http://www.projectartaud.org/>), Riley saw actors in body paint writhing around him in apparent agony on all sides. It was meant as a simulation of the AIDS epidemic, with the actors portraying the afflicted. But it didn't enlighten him much as a kid.

"It just scared the hell out of me," Riley recalls. "You walk into this place, and it's like a whole city, with people all around you."

Given how Riley's own work with long-running hip-hop group [The Coup](https://www.facebook.com/TheCoup) (<https://www.facebook.com/TheCoup>) likewise mixes political activism with overwhelming performance energy, it's fitting he would look back on this experience as the inspiration for The Coup's new multimedia project, [Shadowbox](http://tickets.ybca.org/single/PSDetail.aspx?psn=18862) (<http://tickets.ybca.org/single/PSDetail.aspx?psn=18862>). Featuring the work of street artist Jon-Paul Bail, videographer David Szlasa, and a host of other bands and performers, *Shadowbox* casts the Coup's music in the context of an all-encompassing artwork that attacks the audience from all sides. He's debuting the project at the [Yerba Buena Center for the Arts](http://www.ybca.org) (www.ybca.org) on Aug. 16, but he hopes to eventually take it on the road to wherever an art establishment is willing to fund it.

Riley prefers to remain secretive about what the performance actually entails. He's described it in the past as featuring puppets, drones and "Guantanamo Bay go-go dancers," whatever those may be. To Riley, having the audience come in blind is key to maximizing the impact of the show.

"Some of the things that would make people probably want to come to the performance are things I don't want to talk about before they happen," Riley says.

What we do know is that it'll feature multiple stages and a dizzying roster of collaborators, from socialist hip-hop militants [Dead Prez](https://www.facebook.com/thedeadprezidents) (<https://www.facebook.com/thedeadprezidents>) to dream-pop duo Snow Angel, comedian W. Kamau Bell, chamber orchestra Classical Revolution, and the New Orleans-style second line unit Extra Action Marching Band. All of it will be encased by Bail's black-and-white artwork, which will give the audience the impression of being in an actual "box of shadows."

Bail, a Bay Area street artist perhaps best known as of late for his "Hella Occupy Oakland" poster, was one of Riley's early heroes on the Bay Area art scene. The two met in the late '80s amid a wave of neo-Nazi skinhead activity in the Bay Area, which the two of them helped fight to counter.

"When I was in high school I would hang out at Alameda Beach," Riley recalls. "Back then Alameda was still a navy town and they didn't like a lot of black folks coming around. Police rolled up to harass us, and the police insignia on the car was covered in a swastika. The first thing I thought was: 'Who the fuck did that?'"

It turned out to be Bail, and the two artists quickly bonded, putting up anti-Nazi posters around the city. They've remained friends through the years, but they haven't collaborated on a large-scale project until now.

"He was the first artist I ever met who was trying to do something more with art than just make art," Riley says. "He had a collective at California College of the Arts at the time, which had the slogan — 'no art for art's sake.'"