

From squares to walls: contemporary murals of OSGEMEOS, Nunca and Bicicleta sem Freio in Lisbon

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Abstract

Recently there has been a resurgence of murals in several European and American cities. Street art visual practices have privileged murals as one of the most suitable formats to address public spaces. Despite the increasing recognition and significance of murals for the visual culture of these cities, this contemporary urban art practice has not received much attention from recent literature. This paper provides a literature review on contemporary murals, giving an account of their popularity, their relation to location-specificity and global presence, as well as the means of dissemination of such art expression. The study will then focus on a set of case studies in Lisbon, regarding the paradigmatic shift from sculpture commissioning to mural commissioning within Portuguese-Brazilian cultural relationships. The works of OSGEMEOS, Bicicleta sem Freio and Nunca will be discussed in this framework, questioning what the contributions of contemporary mural works might be for the public spaces of the city.

Keywords: Contemporary murals, Street Art, Lisbon, Portuguese-Brazilian Culture Relationships.

1. Introduction

Contemporary commissioned murals are the most mediated public art works in the urban spaces. Not only because they are embedded in the arena of visibility that the walls have come to represent for humanity but also because they fit the social digital network environment and its ways of dissemination. By foot or by car, murals are available to be photographed quickly and posted and shared. In the last century murals had been elected as the means to portray historical processes by Mexican muralists. The making of the work and the medium employed constituted a metaphor for the integration of the individual into the collective, if one considers the technique of fresco as a kind of populist medium. Today, mural interventions have been reborn as a popular art expression in the streets although not in respect to the symbolic evocation of a collective labor technique. Perhaps the flat format of the work as well as the performativity of the making are particularly suited for photo documentation and digital network publishing.

Pop art and surrealist characters as well as abstract supre-

matist shapes meet and challenge the visual languages of public art interventions that have furnished the cities in the past centuries. In this paper, contemporary murals will be discussed from the viewpoint of art representation in the city by considering other forms of public art. Within particular contexts such as the Portuguese – Brazilian cultural relationships from which this study is driven, the shift from commissions of statues and monuments to street mural interventions will be traced. Although a quick search on the internet shows empirical evidence of mural interventions being a popular expression among street art festivals and other public art events in our cities, the contemporary manifestation of this public art form is less studied in the research field of art. For this, a literature review will contextualize the need to research further contemporary mural art expression due to the enormous quantity of examples available in the cities and the little research covering this art field. The argument will move further to case studies regarding the public art produced among Portuguese-Brazilian cultural relationships with examples that illustrate the paradigmatic shift from the phenomenon of statues and monuments placed in squares to mural interventions on the walls of buildings. The paper

will characterized the works of OSGEMEOS, Bicicleta sem Freio e Nunca in Lisbon, while confronting the global art expression of the authors and the works conceived, especially in Lisbon. In this analysis, the features that characterize visually their global art works and its adaptation to the specificity of place will be further discussed, while questioning these contributions for the public spaces of the city.

2. Mural art as street art expression

In recent years murals have become a substantial part of the urban art displayed in the cities. A quick view in a search engine after typing “arte urbana” or street art will show a great diversity of non-commissioned and commissioned mural works. In such murals, artists intervene on the street wall, creating site-specific works, often appropriating architectural elements as urban ready-mades or interacting intertextually with the meanings of places (Elias et al., 2013; Elias et al., 2014), and picture the city as a living palimpsest of images shared locally and globally in social digital networks. Murals are suitable formats to photograph, publish and share in the social networks of the world global village (Irvin, 2012). Public art festivals, mural art city programs, and gallery commissions have also increased the practice of this art expression. Whether officially or unofficially, mural art has been requested in the past century in quite different manners according to different political and cultural contexts (Elias, 2007; Elias and Leonor, 2012; Loeb, 2013). City squares, once elected as the space to place public artworks, are now dismissed in favour of walls or spaces left over after planning. In terms of commissioned works there is a shift from commemorative statues, busts, or abstract sculpture to large-scale murals. Particularly in the context of Portuguese-Brazilian cultural relations, whose subjects, means of representation, and discourses have become detached from the commemorative rituals raised in the nineteenth century and are now tuned with this mediatized street art expression (Elias, et al., 2014). During the 20th century most of the production of public art within this cultural relationship was dominated by statues and commemorative monuments which related the historical past of the two countries (Elias et al., 2013). In the 21st century, street murals became part of this cultural relationship while displaying visual languages rooted in the graffiti and street art practices of a young and globalized generation of artists (Elias, et al., 2015).

In the scope of urban art, concepts of graffiti and street art are not consensual. Street art is considered a derivation of graffiti, offering a more flexible attitude towards institutionalization (Lewisohn, 2007) whereas writers continue their illegal graffiti on-street practice (Campos, 2009) along with commissioned works. Although contemporary murals are considered as the main outcome of graffiti and street art works (Irvine, 2012), there is a lack of a deeper analysis of this particular art expression in the city. Urban sociology and cultural geography studies address graffiti and street art practices in their cultural dynamics (Ferro, 2011; Silva, 2011; Anderson, 2009). Gender studies are concerned with issues of practices of gender and relation to power (Machado, 2013). In visual anthropology (Campos, 2010) and art history (Simões, 2013) mural paintings are referred as masterpieces that show the artistic skills of the writers. There is also a common agreement to relate the, “the world is our canvas” attitude of graffiti and street art with the expanded field of the artistic practice in the seventies (Simões, 2013; Irvin, 2012). Nevertheless, there is much to relate with these contemporary approaches. Surrealist statuophobia and involuntary sculptures, or futurist manifestos and De Stijl’s statements on colour in buildings can also be discussed in this context as they already experienced the city as a working site (Careri, 2003; Marques, 2012). Authors discuss street art in relation to suprematism, constructivism and abstraction (Lewisohn, 2011), and the land art definitions of site and non-site (Irvin, 2012), mentioning as well pop art collage, appropriation, remix, and repetition. However, murals are not the subject of research in terms of process work, meaning, composition, or site-specificity. These can be the main dimensions of murals to analyse further. In Walls of Empowerment, Latorre (2008) wrote that the concept of ‘mural environment’ refers to the site-specificity that is originated with the location and physical space that encompasses and is included by the mural. Known (2004) drew attention to the definition of site specificity, or the actuality of the site, by describing the development of the relationship between the work and the site. The notion of site specificity has been discussed in the frame of street art but not focused particularly in the features that generally compose mural intervention (Kuttner, 2014). Although the question of what makes a mural site-specific has been answered street mural art is not the main focus of such research (Abdelrahman, 2012).

3. Mural interventions in Lisbon: cases of the Portuguese-Brazilian cultural relationship

In the scope of public art, the Portuguese–Brazilian cultural relationship has been traditionally represented in public spaces by statues and monuments. In Portugal these works were mostly framed by the political and ideological context of the Portuguese dictatorship political system that ruled almost half century (1933-1974). After this period, Portuguese democracy (1974-) has been open to different ways of commissioning art works, which impacted as well on the kind of public art proposals created within this cultural framework. Other public art practices began to emerge with the opening of new media, variety of subjects, and visual languages as well as the involvement of new promoters. Such is the case of the works of OSGEMEOS, Vihls, Bicicleta sem Freio and Nunca, who were invited by Underdog Gallery to display public art works in Lisbon. At the same time, Lisbon is now a welcome city for such public art works, with the help of the City Council Urban Art Gallery. These works place the Portuguese-Brazilian cultural relationship in a global and mediatized context thus calling for a culture of fruition of the city visibly distinct from the previous orders that framed this cultural connection. The murals of OSGEMEOS, Bicicleta sem Freio and Nunca in Lisbon address issues of mediatisation, authorship, and site-specificity that may characterize some aspects of contemporary murals.

3.1 - OSGEMEOS in a business boulevard of Lisbon

This recent intervention by OSGEMEOS was promoted by the CRONO Project and by the Council of Lisbon (CML). A partnership between the Azafama Citadina Association, the CRONO project and the Gallery of Urban Art of the Council was developed during the years 2010 and 2011 with the objective of welcoming projects of graffiti and street art in various public spaces in the city. The former idea was first launched by a group of people aiming to facilitate the presence of an art available to all in the city space. Considering the public and private institutions and associations involved in the spaces of the city this kind of commission shows us an example of a social process running in a Down / Up basis. The proposal was designed and then the Lisbon Council joined the initiative to officially support the intervention (Neves and Lopes, 2015).

The Brazilian artists OSGEMEOS are famous because of their murals conveying political and social messages featured by the yellow characters that label many of their works in various cities of the world. In Lisbon, OSGEMEOS have developed their work without predetermination of any assignment or subject. In this intervention, they drew the usual yellow character with a scarf hiding the face. There is a particular detail in the label of the scarf. In the place of a brand there is the saying “I love vandalism” (Fig. 1.).



Fig. 1. Works of OSGEMEOS and Blu at the Fontes Pereira de Melo Avenue. Source: Elias, Marques and Leonor (2014)

Blu's mural, painted on the same street, marks the same political statement by showing us an opulent character with a crown in which the ornaments are the signs of the multinational oil companies. These works use the intertextuality between the local and the global, which goes beyond the recognition of characters that BLU or OSGEMEOS usually create in metropolitan centers around the world. These works are located in one of the busiest boulevards that connect two centers of business, trade and financial areas - Marquês do Pombal and Saldanha Squares. Because of this placement, the works have a site-specific context since they address the issues of capitalism and globalization (Fig. 4.). Indeed, after these interventions, the fruition of Saldanha / Marques de Pombal junction cannot be dissociated from these new aesthetic proposals of urban art. The presence of these interventions does not go unnoticed and the works contribute to a new understanding of this space, which was formerly aesthetically depressed. These street murals with a monumental scale question the local and global economic

powers represented in the cities and thus publicly challenge the citizen through their social and political message (Elias et al., 2014).

3.2 Lisbon is a girl

The bicileta sem Freio were invited by Underdogs to create a public art work in Lisbon in 2012. The intervention by Bicicleta sem Freio in Cais do Sodré takes the motto of the sea and features a waving composition structured by marine elements tiding a girl, the main character of the mural.

The group of designers and illustrators, Douglas, Victor and Renato, is known by their dynamic, 70s inspired colored compositions, with drawings of girls as the characters of their public art works. Besides the 60s/70s imaginary of commercial hand-painted illustrations of products such as tanning oil, the girls of comics, and Lichtenstein's female characters that may come to the mind of the viewer, these girls recall somehow Botticelli's Venus or the representation



Fig. 2. Bicicleta sem freio, LA. Source: Artslant. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.artslant.com/9/articles/show/40000> [Accessed 16/11/2015].

of Medusa by Caravaggio and Bernini. The Bicicleta sem Freio murals are fully dynamic by the way the long hair and other features are shaped and spread in several directions (Fig. 2.), thus replicating intrinsically similar lines that organize the features of the composition.

In the case of the mural of Lisbon (Fig. 3.), it is impossible to deny the relationship between the preexistence of the place and the new features of the mural as they re-frame moments of the history of the city and symbolic images associated with Lisbon's imaginary. The words Clube Naval de Lisboa report the usage of the building and become meaningful for the mural work as they integrate the composition and link some of its features. The words also help to give a direction to read the image composition. Clube Naval is read along the two first walls of the building performing the revolving sea waves that envelop the body. Lisboa is read on the top of the face of the girl as if her name was the name of the city. In this sense, it is possible to nominate a portrait of Lisbon as a marine figure staging dramatic stories of boat journeys in the sea.

3.3. Nunca Pedro Álvares Cabral

Nunca is a Brazilian artist who has been creating characters that are meaningful for the places where murals are displayed. In Brazil, the artist confronts the country with its original past, drawing characters that resemble the native Brazilians (Fig. 4.). In Berlin, Nunca has created a punk character. Near London he has conceived a character that symbolizes the Queen, as a bee, recalling issues related to colonialism and the power of the nation. As for the intervention in Lisbon, he was invited by the Underdogs Gallery to create a large street art mural. The work is directly related with the historical past of the two countries since Nunca portrayed Pedro Álvares Cabral (Fig. 5.), the Portuguese navigator who arrived at Brazil in 1500 and opened the colonization of the land to the Portuguese and other Europeans.

Nunca draws the character in order to offer a critical view about the actuality of the country. Pedro Álvares Cabral holds a can and is begging for money, a pose that is represented by the few euro coins about to land inside the can. Nunca uses a mix of techniques that are symbolically laden. It is possible to recognize the graffiti roots of the artist through the spray can contour applied to trace the



Fig. 4. Mural of Nunca, Brazil. Source: Wikimedia [Online] Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mural_of_Nunca,_Brazil,_%C5%81%C3%B3d%C5%BA_Narutowicza_Kili%C5%84skiego_Streets_corner.jpg [Accessed 16/11/2015].

features on the wall. The use of the plain shade to contrast with the background may also have similarities with the pop art techniques. But it is the black lines crossed over the plain shapes that most characterizes his work and attaches the features to the history of image production, when engraving and drawing were the predominant media for producing images. The application of crossed lines to create tonal and shading effects is called crosshatching. A specialty popular in the fifteenth century, this is an artistic technique to create the illusion of depth by varying the quantity, thickness, and spacing of the lines (Petherbridge, 2010). Regarding the native past that Nunca carries in his work, crosshatching can be seen as the appropriation of techniques of dominant cultures of other times.



Figs. 5, 6, 7. The work of Nunca in Lisbon. Plain shape and crosshatching technique.
 Source: Photos by André Santos & José Vicente | DPC | CML 2014 [Online] Available at:
<http://www.stick2target.com/pedro-alvares-cabral-by-nunca> [Accessed 16/11/2015].

4. Conclusion

Ultimately, the public art produced in the frame of Portuguese-Brazilian cultural relationships follows the phenomenon of the global resurgence of mural works. This cultural relation was once represented in public spaces by the exchange of state commissioned busts, statues, and monuments. Contemporary murals inhabit the walls and building facades of cities worldwide. Partly, the wide recognition of the authorship of street murals depends on the mediatization of these works, the systematic employment of visual elements by the artist, and their ways of engagement with the sites where murals are displayed. This means to consider the documentation and publishing of the public performance

of the artist while making the mural, as well as the sets of techniques, sort of compositions, characters, and response to the urban surroundings that the artist might take as their label. The recognition of the author through the work displayed may be rooted in graffiti's attitude towards the urban territory, namely the identification of marks created by individuals in public space. But the use of certain media, sets of techniques, characters, or color charts are also markers that quickly reveal who is the artist, whether the viewer is walking in the city, browsing on the internet or watching a commercial.

The systematic employment of such markers may also recall some aspects of authorship in modern art, namely the fascination with the identification of an author's gesture, medium,

and techniques. What makes the site-specific notion in these global authorial marks of murals interesting is how the artist responds to the urban features, culture, and pre-existences of the place. In Lisbon, the works of OSGEMEOS, *Bicicleta sem Freio*, and *Nunca*, while positioning the Portuguese-Brazilian cultural relationship in a global and mediated arena, show different approaches to site-specific engagement with the city. Os Gemeos' yellow character calls attention to Lisbon's capitalist and globalized boulevard, whereas *Nunca*, using his crosshatching technique, updates the image of the historical character Pedro Álvares Cabral. *Bicicleta sem Freio* takes advantage of the surrounding physical environment and the urban features by proposing a composition that addresses the subject of the sea, thus recalling some of the history and symbolism of the city.

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