

Urban intervention, street art and public space

Editors: Pedro Costa, Paula Guerra and Pedro Soares Neves

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Editors:
Pedro Costa
Paula Guerra
Pedro Soares Neves

Graphic Design:
Pedro Soares Neves

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U. PORTO



Street Art & Urban Creativity
International Research Topic

Introduction: Urban interventions, street art and public space

Pedro Costa, Paula Guerra e Pedro Soares Neves

The relation between urban interventions, street art and public space have been marked by wide debates and academic discussions in recent years, which have been fueled by diverse moves in several artistic art worlds, including the expansion of site specific artistic interventions, the movements towards community involvement on art production, the increasing visibility of graffiti and street art and the diversification of its practices, or the imbrication between architectural work and artistic intervention on public spaces, amongst many other examples. Specifically, whether they are ephemeral or temporary, or whether they come from within or outside the communities in which they are developed, these interventions in public space have been introducing in recent years a new perspective on what is the city, and the urban life, through creative dynamics that reflect territorially embedded mechanisms, but also particular social and cultural process which need to be better studied. Public space, being a privileged place for interaction and encounter but also for self-expression and symbolic affirmation, is naturally the arena for the development of interesting processes in this field.

Often transformed in an entertainment and consume-based place and understood through the lens of the tourist gaze, and being an expression of the contemporary globalized world, public space can also be seen as the place for the expression of the difference, the transgression and the arena for liminality processes and for the expression of the diversity of identities, as it always have been through history. While the boundaries between time and space, public and private, real and virtual are being blurred by contemporaneity, the importance of the territorially embedded mechanisms that support artistic practice and of the significance territoriality conditions of the social and cultural processes that are beneath them do not cease to increase, and drive us to the need of further inquire on these problematics.

The progressive change in the relation of the artistic practices with territories and, mostly, with urban space, reflects what E. Soja (1989) describes as the “spatial turn” of the arts and sciences in the 1980's, configuring a renewed understanding of the relation between the social and the spatial, which translates in a wide diversity of urban interventions in the public spaces of the cities.

The territoriality of the artistic phenomena, profusely described in the literature which studies the relation between cultural activities and territorial development (cf. e.g. Scott, 2000, 2014; Costa, 2008; Costa and Lopes, 2013), proves that artistic urban intervention has become increasingly linked to local attributes of place, which is assumed with constitutive significance itself, being urban interventions concerned to dialogue with the territories in which they are developed, in order to question, refunction and contest prevailing norms and ideologies, and to create new meanings, experiences, understandings, relationships and situations (Pinder, 2008).

It is important to remember that the territoriality of artistic practices owes much to the work of Howard S. Becker through his pioneer concept of the art world (Becker, 1982; Crane, 1992; Guerra and Costa, 2016). Many of the chapters of this edited book transport us likewise to the concept of scene - one which was developed later, by the end of the XXth century. Through post-subcultural theory, in which the defense of artistic, musical and cultural scenes played a tremendous role, the territory came in as a crucial variable of artistic production) (Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Bennett, 2008). The notion of cultural scene was developed from the concept of art world, such as Howard S. Becker proposed it (see Bennett and Peterson, 2004: 3). According to several authors, this concept can articulate very functionally the dimensions of local and global contemporary dynamics. It is born in the context of the theories called ‘post-subcultural studies’, to determine several sociocultural activities which are clustered by location (normally a neighborhood, city or urban area) and/or type of cultural production (for instance a style of music) (Bennett, 2004: 223; Straw, 2004: 411). The work of Straw (1991) was seminal in this. He offers a sophisticated analysis of the interaction between music, taste and identity, exploring the idea of translocalism, that is, how clusters of different agents musically and geographically disperse can be involved in collective cultural practices thanks to the ability music has to transcend physical barriers. Since then the concept

has been progressively used in the analysis of the production, performance and reception of popular music, taking into account time and space coordinates (see Guerra and Costa, 2016).

Space is truly a critical factor when approaching musical scenes (Guerra, 2013, 2014 and 2015). Its practices and relationships are inscribed in space, and in constant articulation with other social processes. Cultural scenes have a very urban nature (Blum, 2001: 10), but are not circumscribed to cities. Due to new communication technologies and to the mobility of physical supports – such as cassettes, CD's and vinyl – as well as gigs and tours, the limits of each scene have expanded. On the one hand, more people can access, for instance, recorded music. On the other hand, nowadays technology, besides making processes more accessible, warrants a quality similar to the old recording processes. Thus, musicians and bands do not need the support of major labels to get the attention of the public, doing all things needed autonomously, from recording to publicizing their music. The development of the Internet made the communication between bands and fans easier – accelerating the scene dynamism, its beginning and development, up to its disappearance. Scenes can be brought up in urban contexts as well as in rural ones, and in areas of rural-urban contiguity. They can come up in both centers and periphery. Moreover, the bond between scene and fixed physical location has become more tenuous – today a scene can be translocal and even virtual (Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Guerra, 2014 and 2015).

The “urban intervention and street art” “scenes” and “creative milieus” are undoubtedly marked by these processes. On one hand, this importance of space and of territory is clearly marked in the way the attributes of place and its socio-economic and cultural contexts influence the artistic creative practices and the cultural fruition. But on the other hand, the importance of place and of its specificities can be translated in the assumption of an embedness in territorially-based processes which are themselves in the genesis of creative processes (including the characteristics of the local production/consumption systems, their governance mechanisms, and their representations systems), where aspects such as the symbolic attributes of place and its morphologic characteristics are central, and the informality-based processes and liminality mechanisms that specific places can offer can be the difference on unlocking particular gatekeeping processes in the local-global art-worlds of contemporaneity, through the development of creative atmospheres and reputation building processes that anchor local creative milieus in global dynamics (cf. Costa, 2008, 2012; Costa and Lopes, 2013) and that are particularly significant for the development of which A. Scott designates as the cognitive-cultural capitalism (cf. Scott, 2008, 2014).

The origins of this book and all the process that conducted to it reflect this reality. It has its direct origin on an international call for papers, issued by Pedro Costa and Paula Guerra, which aimed to give body to a publication on the thematic of creative milieus and cultural scenes in contemporary urban spaces. The organizers of that publication were surprised by the great quality and interest of the proposals for papers which were presented, even if many of them were not focused specifically and directly on the “creative milieus” and “urban scenes” approach they were looking for. Interestingly, many of the papers raised the issue of the relation between urban interventions (particularly street art approaches) and public space. That was so stimulating that the authors, drawing also upon previous work on that area, decided to give birth to another project, complementary to the edition of the original idea of book, which would be specifically focused on issues of urban interventions, street art and public space. For that, they joined Pedro Soares Neves, which have been working for years in the field of street art and urban interventions, is executive director of Urbancreativity international research topic on Graffiti, Street Art and Urban Creativity, that among other publish the Street Art & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal (Neves, P.S. Ed. 2015, 2016). The diversity of contributions put together in this book acknowledges the variety of debates and perspectives that mark contemporary discussions on the relation between art and public space, with particular reference to the case of graffiti and street art, which attracted most of the contributors that came from various disciplines and backgrounds.

At a time when disciplinary boundaries are progressively blurred and new creative dynamics are emerging with new approaches in public space, we aim naturally to emphasize the importance of these themes in the development of the contemporary city, as well as in the current work of artists, urban planners and cultural mediators. This must acknowledge the increasing diversity of (artistic) urban intervention on public space. On one hand, this diversity is expressed in the variety of artistic expressions that embody these interventions: street art / graffiti, performing arts, visual arts, sculpture, (ephemeral) architecture, festivals, etc. On the other hand, this diversity is

expressed on a variety of forms that embody these processes: formal/informal, institutionalized or not, legal or not mainstream/alternative, legitimized or not, etc. We are not interested to enter here in the huge conceptual debates about what are urban interventions and what is street art, or about the different typologies we could define within contemporary artistic urban interventions on public space. For simplification, we assume that we are generally speaking of interventions that have an artistic purpose, that is, that mobilize intentionality on that field, and that are developed on urban territory, specifically in what can be considered the public space.

It is worthwhile to notice that these artistic urban interventions became progressively “central” in contemporary societies and in academic reflection (but also in policy and planning practices), particularly in recent decades, due to a diversity of mechanisms, which include (i) the increasing centrality of public space on daily life practices, through more hedonistic and conviviality oriented lifestyles; (ii) the progresses on art history and artistic schools trajectories, giving space to more open and de-sacralized practices, as well as to more community and site-specific oriented types of artistic work; (iii) the rising awareness by policy makers and public administration of the social, cultural and economic importance of urban intervention movements as well as of their impacts and their usability as tool for development; and (iv) the growing social demand for these practices, linked to the movements towards the de-sacralization of arts, the enhancement of performativity, (self)expression and cultural diversity and the development of civic participation and grassroots community building processes.

Naturally it is not our aim to cover all these debates and discussions in this introduction, but just to set the scene for the discussions that will be made in the following chapters. In order to enable a better framing of those discussions, there are just three main alerts which we would like to highlight prior to entering in those debates. First, is the notion of the fluidity of the concept of public space, which crosses with the debates on the notions of public space and public sphere. More exactly, we shall be aware of the multiple crossings (public/private; collective/personal) which conduct us from the notion of public space to the one of public sphere. In practice, we have a public sphere which crosses the public/private divide or the collective/personal divide with the several attributes which usually define the public space: (i) its property or management (e.g public space if managed or owned by public institutions); (ii) the way it is appropriated or used (e.g, public space if there is access or conditions of appropriability in it); and (iii) the interested in the name of which it is used (e.g, public space as a public good, or as a common asset, mobilized for public interest).

Assuming this degree of complexity, urban interventions can be seen as developed in a variety of public spaces, with diverse characteristic, which are in practice different components of the public sphere. Besides, the liveliness and multiplicity of uses of public sphere is conditioned and determined by a diversity of factors, such as urban morphology, (sub)cultures, socio-demographic composition, socio-economic conditions, artistic skills and knowledge, conviviality and sociability practices, regulations and norms, etc.

A second alert which we would like to leave here relates to the debates on the relation between urban interventions on public space and territorial valorization. Naturally urban interventions are not neutral and any artistic intervention have impacts in social, economic, cultural or environmental fields, which are diversely felt and perceived by the diverse stakeholders involved in that process, in that territory (the artist, the community, the urban authorities, the cultural institutions, the cultural mediators, their art worlds, etc.). The discussion on this relation between urban intervention and valorization can be seen at two different levels. On one hand, considering the contribution of artistic urban interventions to urban development and the mechanisms of transmission of that (that is, considering the multiple functions of urban intervention at the light of the several dimensions of sustainable development: promotion of economic efficiency, social equity, environmental quality, civic participation, identity expression,...). On the other hand, considering the ways urban intervention lead to the valorization of place, in diverse (material and symbolic) arenas (artistic intervention promotes territorial valorization – or de-valorization – at multiple fields: economic, symbolic, cultural, etc.). The wide debates around the contemporary trends to instrumentalization of arts, or the discussions on the role of artists and creatives as (marginal) gentrifiers of our cities are certainly linked to this umbilical relation between artistic intervention and valorization of place.

Thirdly, we would like to alert to the need to understand and cope with the territoriality of the dynamics associated to urban intervention. Creative dynamics are often embedded in specific territorial realities (e.g cultural quarters, brownfield locations, regenerating areas, etc.) and in specific governance forms (see, e.g. Costa and Lopes, 2013)

which are fundamental for the vitality and the sustainability of those territorial systems through time. This implies that there are fragile equilibria which can be compromised by artistic intervention in the public space if these interventions are not solidly grounded on a deep knowledge of that territorial system. The relationships between these urban interventions and the reputation building mechanisms that are generated on those systems; between these urban interventions and the use conflicts that are verified on those systems; and between these urban interventions and the institutionalization process that can occur triggered by those practices; all of them are crucial to the sustainability of those areas as loci of creativity and artistic dynamic. As several studies have shown (e.g. Costa and Lopes, 2106, 2016a), conflict and informality are important drivers for artistic vitality in particular parts of urban space, such as cultural quarters or other, and public sphere plays there an important role in the nurturing of the creative milieu, which need to be constantly managed through the power relations between the agents involved. Besides, these kind of regulatory processes, in their diversity, have naturally also implications, both to the public policies as well to the art worlds themselves, as can be exemplified by the analysis of the case of local policy towards graffiti in Lisbon (Costa and Lopes, 2015; Neves, P.S., 2015).

Having these alerts in mind, several branches of discussion can be identified and can structure the debates which will be held in this book. We draw our attention to four of them:

- a) the way urban interventions confront the concept of public space (or public sphere) and the current challenges to its broadening (e.g. with social media networks,...); public space notion is constantly challenged at several levels: in the social practices as mean of artistic work and self-expression (e.g. new art work platforms), as mediation mechanism (e.g., photo reproduction and documentation of street art), or also as reflexive instrument in the dialogue with the city (e.g. for educational purposes);
- b) the way artistic urban interventions and street art contribute to the production of urban spaces and shape the social practices that occur in them and contribute to the evolution of the collective and individual representations of those places;
- c) the way artistic interventions and art practices transform and symbolically shape urban spaces, that is, the ways they contribute to the resignification of public spaces (and which artistic mechanisms are used to that);
- d) the way they enable reflexive processes and co-creation of knowledge, empowering the communities and promoting development processes (e.g., using urban interventions reflexively for educational purposes, academic and research targets, or urban planning processes).

These four reasoning lines are the backbone for the analysis conducted in this book. Following this introductory chapter, which just sets the broad scene for the discussion that will be held in the next texts, we have four distinct parts in this book, which refer to each of those four thematic branches in the analysis of the relation between artistic urban interventions and public sphere.

First part, entitled “Arts, life and everyday live: broadening the public sphere(s)”, deals with the issue of the relation of creative practices with urban public sphere, deepening and deconstructing the notion of public space and the way artistic and daily life creative practices challenge it, through specific territorially embedded mechanisms. Three chapters constitute this first part of the book.

The first of them, entitled “Transfers between the Urban and the Human. Inhabiting the City from the Public Art” (Chapter 2), delivered by Letícia Gonzalez Menéndez, brings us a discussion on artistic practice in public spaces, perpectivating public art practices from an anthropologic point of view, through which the author aims to demonstrate how “creative action” reminds “latent” to the experience of the “common” that the author considers redefines public place as a space for the collective experience, and discusses how this mechanisms can contribute to the livability and the formation of alternative “communities of feeling” in the urban realm and to the production of the practices and the representations of “living in the city”.

After this, the chapter delivered by Glória Diogenes (Chapter 3: Youth, Media and Social Networks: contemporary

subjectivities) allows us to see this broadening of the relation with the public sphere in practice through a different point of view. Basing on a ethnography of cyberspace research in Orkut social network, the author notices an hybridism between the virtual public space and the city's public space, exploring the practices and representations of organized soccer fan groups in this digital social network, through the analysis of their profiles. Through a survey on these youth profiles, studying a population which lives, in their majority, on the outskirts of Fortaleza, Brazil, the author explores the way the rivalry between soccer teams' fans groups mobilize and represent their feelings in the cyberspace and the way these youth groups represent and produce their public image.

Finally, chapter 4 ("I come from Porto and bring a Porto in me': essays on a cartography of affections in/of the city"), by Paula Guerra, presents us another way of exploring the boundaries of the public sphere and the impacts artistic practices can have on it. The author describes the result of a project which was developed in 2012 in Sé neighborhood, at Porto, Portugal, which mobilized local inhabitants on a research action process which was based in the development of individual cartographies as a tool for the empowerment of young adults in their local communities. Drawing upon the situationist idea of derive and psychogeography practices, the youths involved in this project were producing a new relation with their community and their territorial insertion through the recollection of images and the setting up of an exhibition which challenged their perceptions and images about the historical center of the city where they lived and to reconstruct the symbolic and affective landscape of the spaces they were used to know.

The second part of the book ("Urban interventions, representations, and the (re) production of urban space") brings us three approaches to the way artistic practices and urban interventions in the public arena contribute to the production of urban space, and how they shape urban landscape and the social practices that develop in it. Ágata Dourado Sequeira's article (Chapter 5: "Ephemeral Art in Impermanent Spaces: The effects of street art in the social construction of public space") centers in the analysis of street art in the urban context of Lisbon metropolitan area, in Portugal. Through a study which inquires essentially the relation between street art, the image of the city and the spaces in which it is developed, and the role of the actors and institution which shape those practices, the author argues that street art can contribute both (and simultaneously) to the (re)creation of the image(s) of the city and to the promotion of critical discourses on the urban public space and the powers that shape it. It is argued that this is made in a way which is related to the increasing visibility and broader social legitimization of this art world and that is, in parallel, accompanied by a reconfiguration of institutional processes, involving a diversity of actors, from street artist to promoters or public institutions.

Departing from a diverse empirical reality, the city of Palermo, in Italy, Luisa Tuttolomondo, on chapter 6 ("Between formal and informal practices to manage the city: the role of street art in the Old town of Palermo") deals with similar issues. Having in mind the evolution of the Old Town in the center of Palermo, the author emphasizes the complex dynamics of interaction between the more formal and the more informal practices of urban management and of civic participation which took place in this area of the city in recent years. It is particularly studied the discourse around some of the public sphere problems known and identified in this part of the city, considering the practices of the use of its public urban spaces, and the ways actors involved interact in public arena. Acknowledging the diversity of forms that the street art manifestations have assumed in the center of Palermo, the author recognizes the diversity of their impacts on the public space, spanning from the consolidation of pre-existing dynamics (such as the configuration of the place as "underground" or bohemian") to the promotion of change in the use of urban spaces (and its symbolic ..) in other cases.

Finally, on chapter 7, Madalena Corte Real and Maria João Monteiro Gomes drive us through the case of "Camilla Watson photography and its impact in the social production of public space in a neighborhood (Mouraria) in the inner city of Lisbon". The authors aim to investigate how the photographic work of Camilla Watson in this changing old neighborhood of central Lisbon has affected the social production of space of this district. Confronting the experiences of the residents and of the visitors of this quarter regarding the project and its results, the authors try to perceive how different constructed realities are molded by this artistic practice and to compare them at the light of the respective contexts. Both narratives are articulated with the continuous and ongoing change process that affects the neighborhood contributing to (re)create images that consolidate and validate the (diverse) social representations of space.

The third part of the book (“Public art and the resignification of public space”) deals with the mechanisms through which artistic interventions transform and symbolically shape urban spaces, but now departing more from the “artistic action” perspective, than from the “urban” point of view, and confronting distinct examples and case studies, in very different points of the globe, which bring us the power of artistic practice on urban space through the specific case of street art and graffiti interventions.

Polona Lupinsek’s article (Chapter 8: “Untitled”), leads us to Yogyakarta, on Java, Indonesia, to show us how the artistic practices in this field have been shaped by the specific socio-political and cultural context of the country and the local atmosphere of the city itself. The author argues that the artist relation with the community has evolved both in the engagement relation that they build with local population and at the way this is reflected in artistic work they produce. The increasing on the visibility of street art, in very diverse forms, on a society where it was essentially invisible, leads mostly to socio-political benefits (more than artistic or economic, at this phase, the author argues), contributing to the empowerment of the communities involved and the increase of social awareness at different levels.

On Chapter 9 (“Urban Visuality through Stencil”), Rachel Souza, drawing upon a diversity of examples of stencil interventions throughout the world, puts herself in the point of view of investigating the aesthetics and semiotic dynamics of stenciling within the public arena, examining the aesthetic elements that arise from this artistic practice as public space intervention. Urban visuality is used as an entrance point to explore city as “collage” and the artist himself as a “bricoleur” in what refers to stenciling practices. Drawing upon this framework, the author identifies symbolic overloads and the resignification of symbolic aggregations as two sign-line elements of the stencil’s insertion in the city.

Finally, on chapter 10 (“The Writing on the Wall: Embraced or Despised”), Voica Puscasiu drives us to the debate on the differences between graffiti and street art, discussing these social constructed concepts and exploring the symbolic differences as well as the social, economic and cultural effects that the diverse perceptions about it bring to the respective communities, and confronting the potential for the “establishment” of these artistic practices in what concerns to the receptivity of art markets and institutions.

To close the digression held on this book, part four (“Research action in practice: urban interventions and knowledge co-creation”) brings us two cases which illustrate in practice the ways urban interventions can enable reflexive processes and the co-creation of knowledge with the communities, generating empowerment and enhancing development processes, through the use of image-based instruments.

The first of these examples is brought by Elenise Cristina Pires de Andrade, Edivan Carneiro de Almeida and Milena Santos Rodrigues in Chapter 11 (“Graffiti, street, delirium: arts defiances”). The authors, drawing upon a Deleuzian perspective, bring us the questionings that arouse by the confrontations which were enabled by three events held at 2014 in Feira de Santana, BA, Brazil: a graffiti event on a public school wall; an event about street art on a museum; and an academic meeting which provoked the crossovers between different knowledges and expressions, mixing students, teachers and artists and confronting them with the pluralities of the city and its potential for a diversity of encounters. The authors explore the potential of these images and their analysis to defy pre-defined thoughts and to think reflexively about the field of research and university extension programs on education and their relation to the city.

Finally, on chapter 12 (“Beyond the visible on decoding the layers of a cultural quarter: Photo-essay on a reflexive urban intervention”) Pedro Costa and Ricardo Lopes take us to the results of one urban intervention they conducted in 2012, assuming a research-action based methodology, at Bairro Alto, the main cultural quarter of Lisbon Portugal. This intervention aimed to explore the reflexivity of this district users’ and to promote the discussion on the codification layers of a cultural quarter, as well as on the conflicts that are inherent to them, on the appropriation of public space, both at material and symbolic arenas. In this paper, which is presented in the particular format of a photo essay, the authors bring us a set of images that show us some of the results achieved with artistic this happening, which enabled them to explore the different layers of (in)visibility and liminality that are present in the informal urban context that usually characterize the creative milieus which develop in cultural neighborhoods.

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