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URBAN ART QUA “THE OTHER”

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a cidade e os outros
the city and the others
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I was kindly invited by V!RUS to write a text for its issue dedicated to “the city and the other,” focusing on urban art and graffiti. A great challenge, indeed. As a matter of fact, the subject of “the other” and otherness has always been present in city life and has been approached by many social scientists in the past. Cities are places of high mobility for people and communities, a place to meet and socialize, but also laden with tension and conflict among a multitude of social, ethnic, religious, and other groups. Cities were built and renovated on these foundations, which constitute their very social cement. “The other” is always present, whether transient or permanent. This otherness deeply affects metropolitan life in that cultural differences are expressed on the visible layer of the urban environment. Cityscapes are invariably contaminated by this plurality of sounds, colors, and odors resulting in plural ways of living life and the city. This is especially evident in the so-called “ethnic” neighborhoods, which refashion many of the traditions and representations of foreign lands. Thus, big cities comprise a mosaic of wide-ranging cultural references that contribute to greater cultural miscegenation and hybridity. I would even go as far as say

that this exchange of references favors cultural creativity by allowing unexpected dialogues and fusions.

How is this discussion related to the phenomenon of graffiti and the so-called "street art" (or "urban art")? Over the last decade I have delved into and written about this phenomenon (CAMPOS, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012), approaching it from different angles, linking it to the ways cities are apprehended and the digital and virtual intersect, to civic and political expressions, and so forth. In fact, the phenomenon of graffiti—qua an unauthorized and illegal expression in this urban space—has been some sort of "the other" in our cities. It belongs in the realm of the mysterious and misunderstood. It is also forbidden, persecuted, and criminalized by the authorities. Interestingly, it is always around the corner, though. I would say that it is a resilient language; one that has truly survived decades of demonization and persecution. In some countries, policies to stop graffiti are quite extreme, which has not been the case in Portugal, a context I know well. In order to more accurately understand why graffiti causes so much annoyance to the authorities and outrage to passersby, we must go back to its origins and identify its primordial nature. In Italian, graffiti is the plural form of *graffito*, which in turn derives from the Greek word *graphein* (to write) and the Latin word *graffio* (scratch). Graffiti, which we usually understand as a contemporary form of expression, actually is the result of an enduring line of unsanctioned expressions of a rule-breaking nature that has marked the history of our cities. Classical antiquity gives us many examples of popular graffiti, with political, humorous or erotic motifs, such as those found in Pompeii or Rome. Therefore, the subversive nature of graffiti appears, from the very beginning, to be associated with a number of elements: it is an expression disallowed in public space; it is frequently aimed at taunting and attacking the powers that be; and it is often carried out in the shadows and anonymously. We could most certainly say that it is a kind of "semiological guerrilla warfare" using the original term of Umberto Eco, coined by Hebdige (1987) as regards subcultural styles, or a form of "aesthetic sabotage" according to the analysis conducted by Jeff Ferrel (1996). Both authors resort to a celebrated essay by Mary Douglas (1991), which has been repeatedly employed by many researchers to interpret

graffiti as a form of "pollution." Graffiti, like many other transgressive vernacular expressions, may be interpreted as a type of visual "pollution" in that it challenges the established order, shattering the everyday familiar image of the urban landscape held by most of us. Graffiti is a stain, a form of adulteration that spoils the original meaning of walls and train cars. This explains the antipathy and disgust felt by the city authorities whose duty is to ensure public order and good city management.

Notwithstanding, phenomena such as graffiti or street art are unavoidable elements inseparable from contemporary cities. Moreover, they are examples of the democratic spirit experienced in cities. They are indicators of cities reconciling with the strange and unusual as opposed to places that operate under the repressive paradigm of surveillance and control, shakily coexisting with the danger of the interstitial dynamics of communication. However, it is precisely these energies arising from the margins, from the universe of urban subcultures and youth cultures that produce original and surprising reverberations. Therefore, creativity is found where it is least expected. Modern graffiti, which emerged more than four decades ago in the U.S., is an excellent case in point: in spite of originally being a marginal language, vigorously fought by the authorities, it has become a transnational artistic language.

What is the situation today, then? It appears that borders are being redefined, with the proliferation of vernacular, unsanctioned expressions in the public space. Graffiti qua the peripheral "other," misunderstood and disowned by both the authorities and the public, has been replaced with a legitimized, domesticated version, beginning to be taken as a legitimate art form. There follows its gradual acceptance by the "arbiters of taste," their assimilation by museums, galleries, and the art market.

The most paradigmatic example is perhaps that of Banksy, the media figure of "aesthetic sabotage" turned into an icon of this artistic movement. The commodification of graffiti seems, thus, an unavoidable trend, alongside its official consecration. But is this dynamics incompatible with the spirit of this language? I don't think so. There are still examples of graffiti in urban areas that are devoid of economic interest, aimed at criticizing the powers that be, experimenting with new aesthetic grammars, reclaiming local solidarity,

and so on. That is, we must now begin to dwell on the aesthetic, political, social and symbolic criteria that may contribute to redrafting the boundaries of these languages. While some graffiti has become Public Art (official and acclaimed), it is still possible to find some graffiti that follows old paths, living up to its ever-rebellious character. It is precisely this nonconforming kind of graffiti that might more readily surprise us. Why is it so? Because it is not commissioned, because it is not subject to negotiation and the scrutiny of those in power, because it is less contaminated by institutional rhetoric and agendas, because it does not feel obliged to please (the majority), because it is highly creative when it comes to method and results. Moreover, for the same reasons, it is the kind that can be more easily displeasing. This condition is an inherent part of the process.

To conclude I would like to sketch a brief, however provisional, definition of contemporary "street art." Actually, it should be a plural term, given the multiple facets of what can fit into this category. What are, then, in my view, "street arts"? I believe they must have the following characteristics. Firstly, they are aesthetic forms (pictorial, musical, performing, and so forth) that take advantage of streets and their particularities, whether as physical or as social and symbolic spaces. Thus, they somehow interact with buildings, cityscape, and inhabitants, leaving either more transient or more permanent marks on their own territories. Secondly, they are unofficial expressions, not legitimized by instances of ideological power (the state, city administration, academia, school, and so on) as consecrated forms of art. Hence, they always display an element of disruption, innovation or insubordination, which collides with the official arts propagandized by the regime and sponsored by the media, the cultural industries, and the art market. They are, therefore, often absent from a trade-based economy, either *en masse* or confined to the art market. Thirdly, they are vernacular formats usually deriving not from conventional mass media, but from popular media and unusual urban cultures that use public space to communicate. Fourthly, they are democratic arts. The fact that their access is not closed, protected or restricted converts them into works of art potentially available to all. Lastly, I would say that their nature is usually ephemeral. They are unforeseen, transient, "sans appointment" phenomena

that occur at the most unexpected times and places. As a result, this urban art must always impart some element of otherness, disparity, astonishment that questions or unsettles preexisting ethical or aesthetic convictions. In short, it is art qua "the other" and implies the city as fertile ground for its expression. I just could not end this discussion without presenting some examples of urban pictorial art found in Lisbon, with which I bid farewell.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

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