

ART AND SYMBOLIC INCLUSION IN THE PLANNED CENTER OF BELO HORIZONTE, BRAZIL
ARTE E INCLUSÃO SIMBÓLICA NO CENTRO PLANEJADO DE BELO HORIZONTE
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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the relationship between hegemonic dominant culture and manifestations of the subordinate classes and the excluded through urban art. The research was built according to an interdisciplinary perspective, articulating a brief history of the planned city of Belo Horizonte and studies in the areas of art, memory and territory. In particular, the text analyzes some artistic interventions presented at the CURA (Circuito Urbano de Arte, or Urban Circuit of Art) festival, which has been developed in the urban space of Belo Horizonte. As an inspiration, the text presents the work “Brazilian Flag,” by Leandro Vieira, who replaced the colors of the Brazilian national flag with the colors green, pink and white, as well as displaying the words “Indians (here understood as Native Brazilians), blacks and the poor,” in place of the positivist motto “order and progress,” which fomented a hygienist logic of social exclusion in urban planning. As a result, the artistic interventions studied reveal themselves as counter-hegemonic works, announcing new territories of life and memory, which propitiate the democratization of the city and the public space.

Keywords: Urban Art, Memory, Territory and the City.

1 Introdução

This article¹ aims at reflecting on the relations between the hegemonic culture of dominant groups and the manifestations of subordinate and excluded social groups through urban art. In the public space, these interventions present themselves as counter-hegemonic architectures, vehicles for the representation of excluded groups, as well as vectors for the conformation of new territories of life and memory, which promote the democratization of the city. The qualitative, applied, and explanatory research was constructed through an interdisciplinary perspective, articulating the brief history of the planned city of Belo Horizonte and studies on art, memory, and territory. To this end, it investigates the planning of the new capital of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte (a southeastern state in Brazil and its capital city), in the context of the Proclamation of the Republic in Brazil, highlighting the logic of conformation of spaces and places of memory, as well as the hygienist thought of social exclusion that guided the planning process.

The text follows with the case study that involves the analysis of the contemporary art interventions of the group CURA (Circuito Urbano de Arte, or Urban Circuit of Art) and its *modus operandi* of reconfiguration of planned spaces, and the creation of new places for memory, in order to proceed to the symbolic inclusion of excluded groups in the initial moment of the conformation of the new capital. To this end, it makes use of the research of documents that include the group’s Instagram page and the news broadcasted about the interventions carried out in the city in the years of 2020 and 2021 – meaning pandemic times. It should be noted that CURA’s work has always taken place in public space, in the urban network as planned in the late nineteenth century, in areas that configure centralities, bringing together all kinds of people from the city and the metropolitan region. This form of performance leads us to use the term “urban art” in the text, in order to name the public way of making art in the city, for all those who pass by, challenging the hegemonic culture that configures the landscape (Pallamin, 2000).

As a preliminary inspiration that also comes from the field of art, originating from the streets – in this case, from the slums – , the text presents the work “Brazilian Flag,” in Figure 1, with the colors green, pink and white and the words “Indians, blacks and the poor,” displayed by the carnival designer Leandro Vieira, in 2019, during the parade of the Mangueira samba school. Such work presented itself as a landmark for an idea of Brazil in which the excluded occupy the central spot, and they do not mean an obstacle to the republican order and progress. Leandro Vieira’s flag puts into perspective the green, yellow, blue and white symbol of the country and the political project that was the fruit of the progressive thought of the 19th century, marked by social segregation and exclusion that still conform the large Brazilian cities even today. At the same time, the new flag places itself as a symbol of a different place, of a promising, colorful and inclusive nation, presented in the great popular

¹ This article stems of the final work for the Graduate course in Design, History, and Memory, by Prof. Dr. Marcelina das Graças de Almeida in the second semester of 2021 at the School of Design/UEMG. Ph.D. directed by Prof. Dr. Rita de Castro Engler.

festivity that is the carnival – but a place that for sure exists outside this event, in the midst of everyday life, in many territories lived across the country.



Fig. 1: “Brazilian Flag” by Leandro Vieira, showed in 2019. Source: Instagram @_leandrovieirarj, 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTh8VvHLi0f/>. Accessed 9 Jun. 2022].

It is this green and pink flag, understood as a symbol of a possible place, that moves the investigation of this study in search of the territories of memory and resistance of the excluded in the planned city of Belo Horizonte.

2 Territory, Memory, and Liberation

Leandro Vieira’s “Brazilian Flag,” with the colors green, pink and white and with the words “Indians, blacks and the poor,” became a museum piece in 2021, and the carnival designer was thus elevated to the position of an artist by the PIPA award (Willmersdorf, 2021).² It is now understood as a rare work, one to be studied and exhibited as an asset of historical and cultural value. It has its field of recognition expanded, moving between the streets and the institutionalized innards of art. Certainly, when the museum – a place of hegemonic culture par excellence – opens its doors to the flag of the carnival designer, this work is placed as material for the memory of the country and a symbol of its territory. It speaks of a national identity to be recognized, lived and remembered.

One conception of “territory” refers to all sorts of space over which a nation holds its power and its sovereignty. For Santos (2005), this is an old political-legal notion of territory, connected to the idea of conquering inherited from the Modernity and understood as the basis and fundament of the Nation-State, which, at the same time, shaped it. Contemporarily, this notion has been requiring permanent historical revisions, since the global communion, due to information technologies. It has transnationalized the idea of territory. In the different approaches to this notion, however, the use that individuals or groups

² The PIPA Award is an initiative of the PIPA Institute. It was created in 2010 to be the most relevant Brazilian award in visual arts. About the name PIPA, no record was found about the meaning of the acronym.

make of territory in their daily lives is also of interest for social analysis, and not only the territory itself. It is the way that the territory is used, constructed from objects and actions, that shapes the uniqueness of human space, the inhabited space.

To the formation of a nation's sovereignty over a territory, the language, the symbols, and the construction of a collective identity and a social memory are fundamental. Le Goff (2013, p. 435-436), in this respect, notes that memory is an object of power and is historically constructed according to the values of those who dominate. It is the same as saying that the historical perspective that exists in books is always that of the conquerors, of those who won. In other words, memory is in constant dispute, as are territories themselves, and it is up to the scientific professionals of memory, namely, "anthropologists, historians, journalists, sociologists," to "democratize social memory" so that this memory is built for freedom, and not for the domination of man over man.

According to Gondar (2005), in addition to historiography and oral and written words (symbolic signs), social memory is open to a variety of sign systems, which involves images in volumes or surfaces (iconic signs) and all kinds of marks inscribed on bodies or on the city landscape (indicial signs). The use of non-verbal sign systems involves other professionals, so that memory is also present and in dispute in spaces, architectures, monuments and all kinds of artifacts, as well as in landscapes, flavors, smells, and the most unusual places (Seixas, 2001). In everyday life, memory and remembering are closer to the actions, the subjects' dealings with all that configures what is lived and the territory. In this way, the city is full of places of memory that are shaped by professionals or by the subjects in their daily practices.

If one wants to think about a democratization that includes the memory of the dominated and their liberation, it is necessary to observe if this memory is established in the built landscape of the city – if it is available, as Benjamin would put it, in a situation of combat or danger, in order to be remembered and updated (Gagnebin, 2018); and, also, to understand the making of urban art, architecture, and urbanism, the way they contribute to the erasure of memories and lived territories or to the democratization of space, memories, and life in cities. Since it is impossible to think of all the national territory in one go, we seek the memory and the possible territories, demarcated through art, for Indians, blacks and the poor, even if ephemeral, in downtown Belo Horizonte.

3 The Belo Horizonte of Order and Progress

The city of Belo Horizonte was planned and built in the late nineteenth century with the goal of housing the new capital of Minas Gerais. Its project, a design shown in Figure 2, was developed by the engineer Aarão Reis, in the context of the proclamation of the republic in Brazil, according to positivist ideals that referred to a "new time" in the country. According to Lemos (1998), the so-called "republican era" was characterized by ideas of progress, industrialization and modern life that involved a new economic thought, as well as the constitution of a new urban society. Old capitals, such as Ouro Preto (also in MG) and Goiás Velho (in the state of Goiás), were considered inadequate to this emerging notion of progress and modernity. In those states, new capitals were planned to meet the new demands. Preexisting capitals such as Rio de Janeiro (RJ), São Paulo (SP) and Vitória (ES) were readapted. The projects sought to combat the obsolescence of the spatial organization and to provide the new adequate infrastructure.

According to Heliana Angotti Salgueiro (1997, p. 174), the Belo Horizonte city planner, engineer Aarão Reis,

embodies the man of the 19th century, the polytechnic who believes that education, instruction, justice, dignity, science, technique, work, industry, moral religion, intervention in the city, territory and nature would lead humanity to become solidarized in the sharing of all progress (Salgueiro, 1997, p. 174, our translation).

Guided by these ideals, Aarão Reis elaborated the project for the new capital of Minas Gerais, with a view to the quality of life, the distribution of flows, routes and the visual organization of the city and its functions. The planner integrated an orthogonal grid, defined by streets, with a diagonal grid, defined by avenues. Besides breaking with the uniformity of the orthogonal layout of the streets, the avenues created connections that facilitated displacement and the view of the landscape. These monumental axes organized the visibility and the topographically hierarchical points in function of the uses, recalling the baroque perspectival ideal, restored by the neoclassical period, experimented in the urban planning of Washington and in the remodeling of Paris (Lemos, 1998).

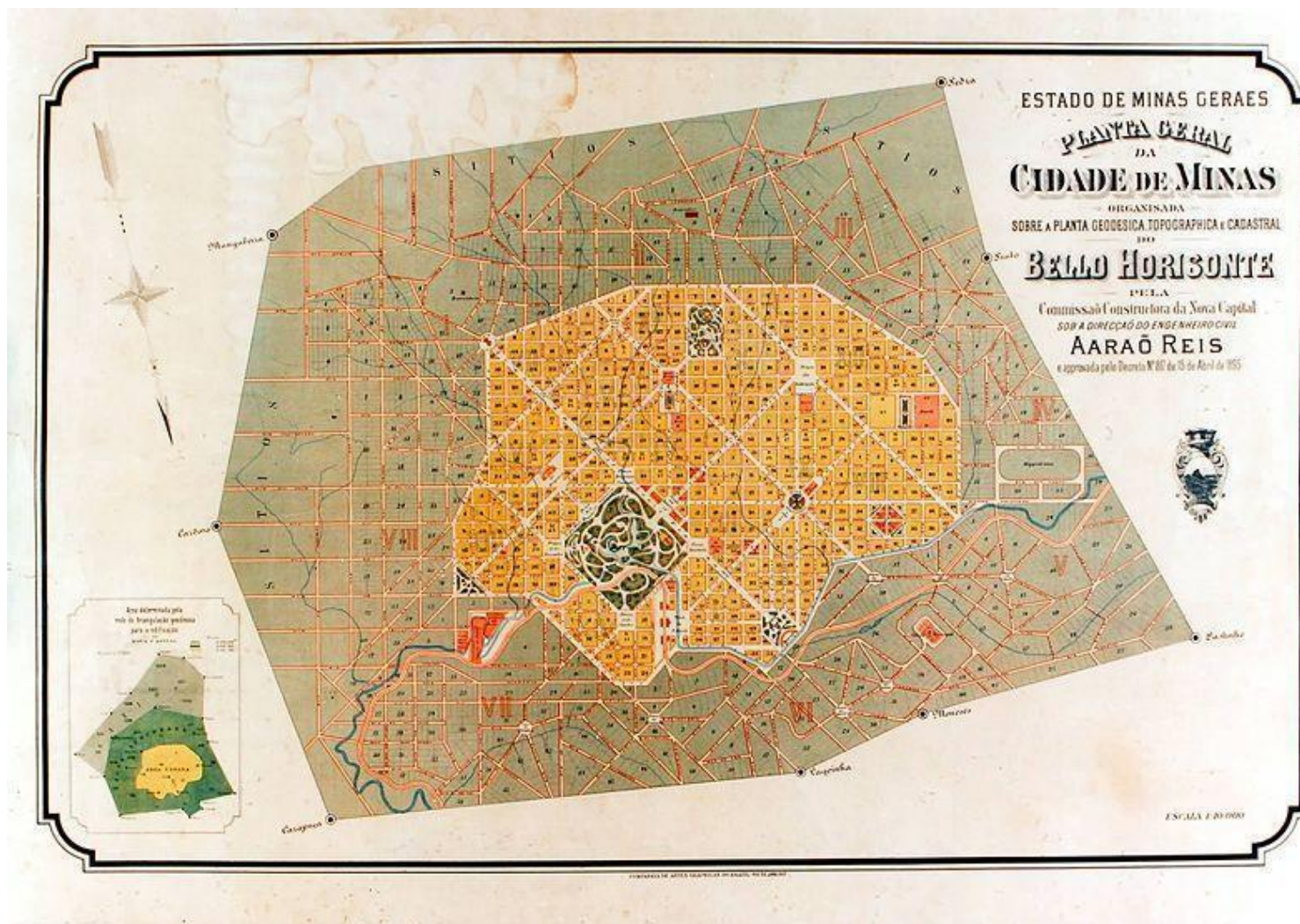


Fig. 2: Belo Horizonte city plan, by engineer Aarão Reis, 1895. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Available at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Planta_BH.jpg. Accessed 9 Jun. 2022.

According to Lemos (1988), this “ideal city,” conceived according to a main urban mesh, evidences the genesis of discrimination and segregation typical of modern capitalist urbanism. Salgueiro (2020) also identifies the political interests that regarded not only the urban organization, but also the settlement then understood as “adequate.” In the photographs depicting the Building Commission and the inhabitants of the site chosen for the implementation of the city, it is observed that “the newcomers install themselves as master reformers and displace the autochthones, in the same way that a century earlier the Europeans had expelled the Indians” (Salgueiro, 2020, p. 85). To Salgueiro (2020, p. 190), the construction of a city with modern values implied the elimination of all those who would hinder progress: to the “topographic *toilette*,” succeeded the “social *toilette*.” Planning and organization involved demolitions, expropriations, and the inevitable exclusion of the inhabitants of the place.

In the official texts, Aarão Reis narrates the difficult mission that culminated with his resignation in May 1895.³ Without friction, this mission was responsible for the expropriation of more than four hundred properties, most of them built and cultivated, which included urban lots, houses and cottages. The account shows the planner’s understanding that, in a short time, many would abandon their homes and long-standing habits (Salgueiro, 2020). Many of these excluded people settled in the surroundings of the planned city, but without an infrastructure that could house them, since this type of investment was not thought for the new capital. For Salgueiro (2020, p. 199), Belo Horizonte constitutes

A surprising example of the application of urbanism based on social exclusion. The way of settlement and the direction taken by the effective growth are harbingers of the miserable suburbs

³ Aarão Reis coordinated the commission of study of the locations indicated for the new capital in 1893 and the work of the construction commission, afterwards, in 1894.

of today's Brazilian cities: an outcome that did not cross the minds of the progressive republicans of the late 19th century (Salgueiro, 2020, p. 199, our translation).

For Salgueiro (2020), in the annals of Belo Horizonte's history, the hygienist argument is present. It is one of the strongest ideological representations of that period that justified the rejection of the poor and defined their place in the outskirts. The Brazilian *mestizaje*, which for orthodox positivists meant the conciliation of races (white, indigenous and black), was understood, in practice, in a stereotypical and discriminatory way, based on the thesis of racial degeneration. The mixture was seen as a cause of backwardness, which was of no interest to those who aimed at development and progress. In the urban network of Aarão Reis, only the names of some indigenous tribes remained as a memory of all the excluded, which, together with the names of cities, rivers, mountains, historical dates and illustrious citizens, were understood as deserving perpetuity in the memory of the people (Saraiva; Carvalho; Diniz, 2006). Poor and black people were not contemplated, and were left out of the planned city.

4 The Belo Horizonte of the CURA

In the same sense of Leandro Vieira's work, some contemporary art actions in today's Belo Horizonte seek to expand the spaces of representation of Indians, blacks and the poor, once expelled by the original urban planning. The actions of CURA (Circuito Urbano de Arte) have restored the spaces of expression for those excluded groups with the purpose of constituting territories of memories in the planned center, today transformed by the verticalization of that area.

CURA began its actions in July 2017, creating panels painted on the blank external walls of downtown buildings (Cruz, 2017). The themes and places of intervention in each edition are objects of research by the organizers, artist Priscila Amoni and producers Juliana Flores and Janaína MaCruz, together with guest curators, who select artists and proposals to be executed, having Indians, blacks and poor people also as protagonists.

The project is shared and presented to the city through social networks. The residents of the building, that will have its wall painted, receive the project beforehand to be aware of it and to give their approval. The painting process, which takes place over some time, becomes an event in itself, an open-air studio, to be contemplated and experienced by all those who live there or pass by. The interventions in the public space are duly agreed upon with the public authorities. Thus, over the years, CURA has been reconfiguring the landscape with contemporary themes through actions that involve the understanding of urban art and social inclusion. In times of pandemic and a great crisis in the country, CURA has maintained its activities, expanding their struggle alongside indigenous and black people, in the presentation of the 5th edition of the Urban Art Circuit, held between September 22 and October 4, 2020. The event had as curators the indigenous artist Arissana Pataxó and the black artist Domitila de Paulo. It was presented, also through social networks, in the form of the poster shown in Figure 3, accompanied by a text that reflected on CURA's practices and the knowledge of black and indigenous people related to the planet and the collectivity.

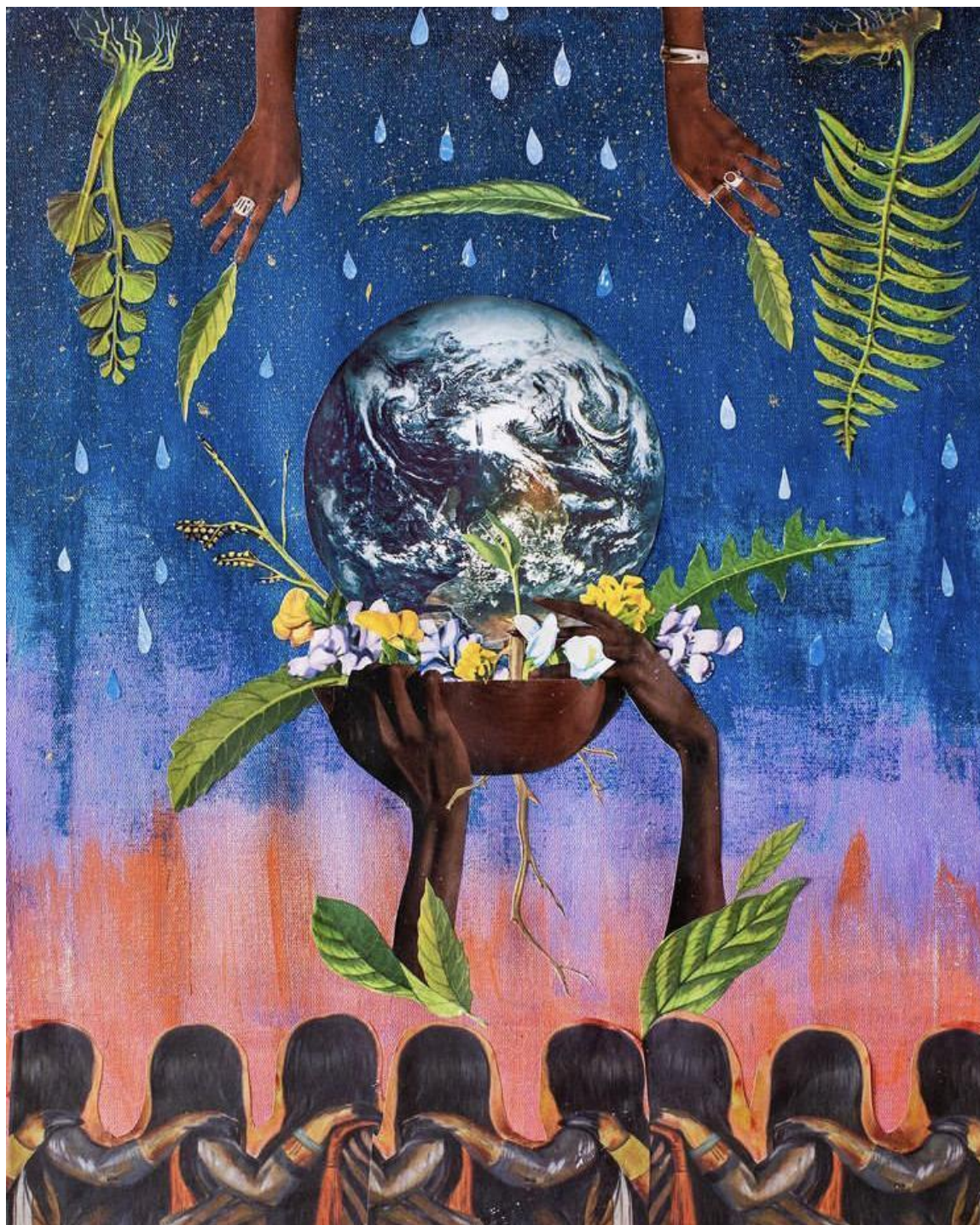


Fig. 3: CURA's 2020 poster, authored by Arissana Pataxó and Domitila de Paula. Source: Instagram: @cura.art, 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEcsavIhsf6/?hl=pt-br>. Accessed on 7 Feb. 2022.

The acronym of the group was associated with the noun “cure” and the verb “to cure,” and with the ancestral knowledge of black and indigenous people, from a feminine, maternal and welcoming gaze, announcing in the year 2020 the actions that would take place next and in 2021. Through this proposal, the struggle of the excluded would be transformed into action in the city and in everyday life. The proposed “cure” would come from this occupation of the space that had never been destined to them, and that, through urban art, would conform as a sharing of social memories that would now be available, in large format, in the urban panorama, transforming the city with new colors and new characters.



Fig. 4: Work “Entidades (Cobra Grande)”, or “Entities” (Big Snake), by Jaider Esbell, 2020. Photo by Flávio Tavares from the newspaper O Tempo. Source: Instagram: @cura.art, 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFe8lzOByCG/?hl=pt-br>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2022.

There were numerous interventions in 2020, with a highlight to the first urban sculpture made by an indigenous artist in Belo Horizonte. The luminous work, named “Entidades” (“Entities”), by Jaider Esbell, was installed in the arches of the Santa Tereza Viaduct, as shown in Figure 4. The presence of the giant snakes configured a surprising event in the city at a critical moment of the pandemic. The “big snake” has great importance for the Makuxi people, which were Esbell’s, and he explained what it represents in their culture:

The path of water, of abundance, because it lives underground, in the great underground rivers, keeping the water movement pulsating so that the springs are maintained. It is an idea of making sacred this animal that is still so trivialized in the Amazon itself, and how people do not value its wisdom, its medicine, its power, and also extending this cosmology to our daily and current reality, which is a challenge we are presented to, of substituting mining for another form of economy, this secular wave of sadness that this economic activity has caused to all of humanity (Esbell apud Revista Museu, 2020, s.p., our translation).

The scale, colors, shape and meaning of “Entidades” over the arches of the city’s historic viaduct led many people to leave their homes to see and photograph the mythical beings, never before imagined or seen on the city scenery. Both during the day and lit up at night, people created images, which circulated in the media and on social networks, of a Belo Horizonte enchanted by the forest beings. This historic landscape of the viaduct, whose arches were often climbed by poets and writers, led by Drummond, in the 1920s – in a deliberate action of the poet against the sameness of the capital of Minas Gerais (Villa, 2016) – was again appropriated by poetry, escaped the routine and met with the ancestry of the original peoples, so little or almost never experienced in the big cities.

Still in that edition, at the Itamaraty Building, between Tupis St. and Afonso Pena Ave., the black artist Robinho Santana, from Diadema (state of São Paulo), painted the mural entitled “Deus é mãe” (“God is mother”), shown in Figure 5, covering almost 2 thousand square meters. In it, there is the image of a mother with a daughter on her lap and with her son clutching her arm, all black. The scene, with warm colors such as red, yellow and pink, in dialogue with a yellow frame with graffiti by Poter, Lmb, Bani, Tek and Zoto, created a great impact on the urban landscape. The painting is situated on the most important and widest avenue in the planned city – on the great axis that directs the gaze towards the Curral mountain range, the one that forms the beautiful horizon that names the city. It was in this context of traditional space, that the great black goddess inserted herself, with her young children, and became part of the new image of the city.



Fig. 5: “Deus é mãe” (“God is Mother”), authored by Robinho Santana, 2020. Source: Instagram: @cura.art, 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGmonaAhosZ/?hl=pt-br>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2022.

The two works, “Entidades” and “Deus é mãe,” by exposing other imaginaries in the city, were attacked and threatened. Esbell’s work was the target of religious extremism and reactionary right-wingers who led racist attacks through social networks (Revista Museu, 2020). Robinho Santana’s work was criminalized in 2021, and the organizers of CURA, along with the five artists, were included, as perpetrators, in the Civil Police inquiry that investigated the occurrence of crime against the environment. The reason was the presence of graffiti aesthetics (CURA, 2021a). CURA mobilized public opinion and obtained great popular and media support in both situations. But the clash demonstrates the difficulty that exists when citizens encounter the representations of those who, for many, should remain without history, without memory, without territory and invisible.

In 2021, still during the pandemic, the highlight was the intervention carried out at Raul Soares Square, which started from the discovery of Marajoara references in the graphics of its Portuguese stone floor, as shown in Figure 6. This universe served as the reference for a large anaconda, which was painted around the square, on the asphalt, with contrasting and strong colors, yellow, blue and pink, as idealized by Sadith Silvano and Ronin Koshi – a work that can be seen in its entirety in the landscape shown in Figure 7 and in detail in the framing presented in Figure 8. For CURA, the great guardian of the waters and forests was invoked by many hands that, in communion, brought forth the largest Shipibo painting in the world (CURA, 2021b).



Fig. 6: Detail of the study of Marajoara elements in Raul Soares Square in 2021. Source: Instagram: @cura.art, 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CUTXG3Up04z/?hl=pt-br>. Accessed on 7 Feb. 2022.

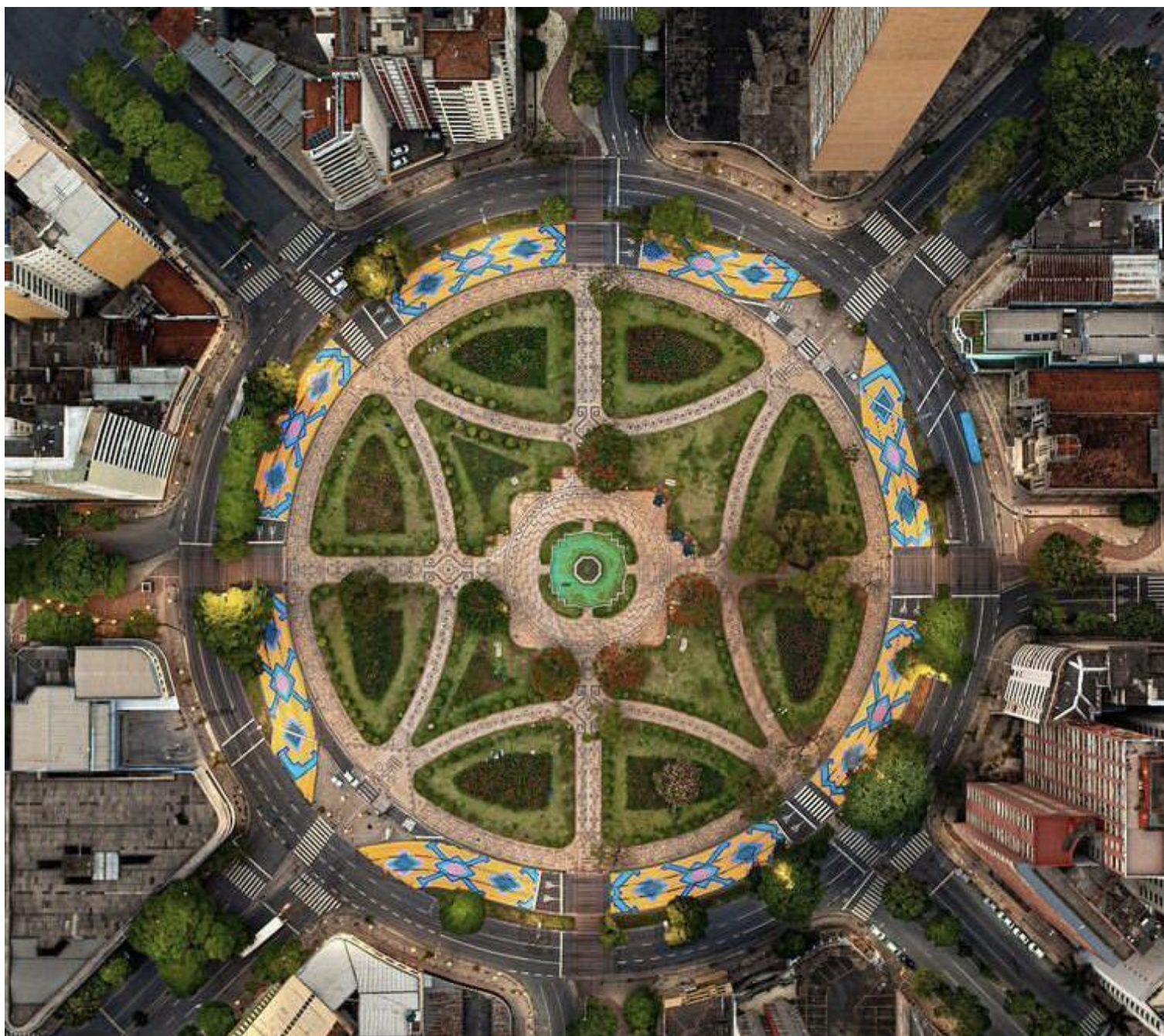


Fig. 7: Aerial view with the painting done on the asphalt, around Raul Soares Square, 2021. Photo by Rogério Argolo. Source: Instagram: @cura.art, 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXUmU1grq-s/?hl=pt-br>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2022.

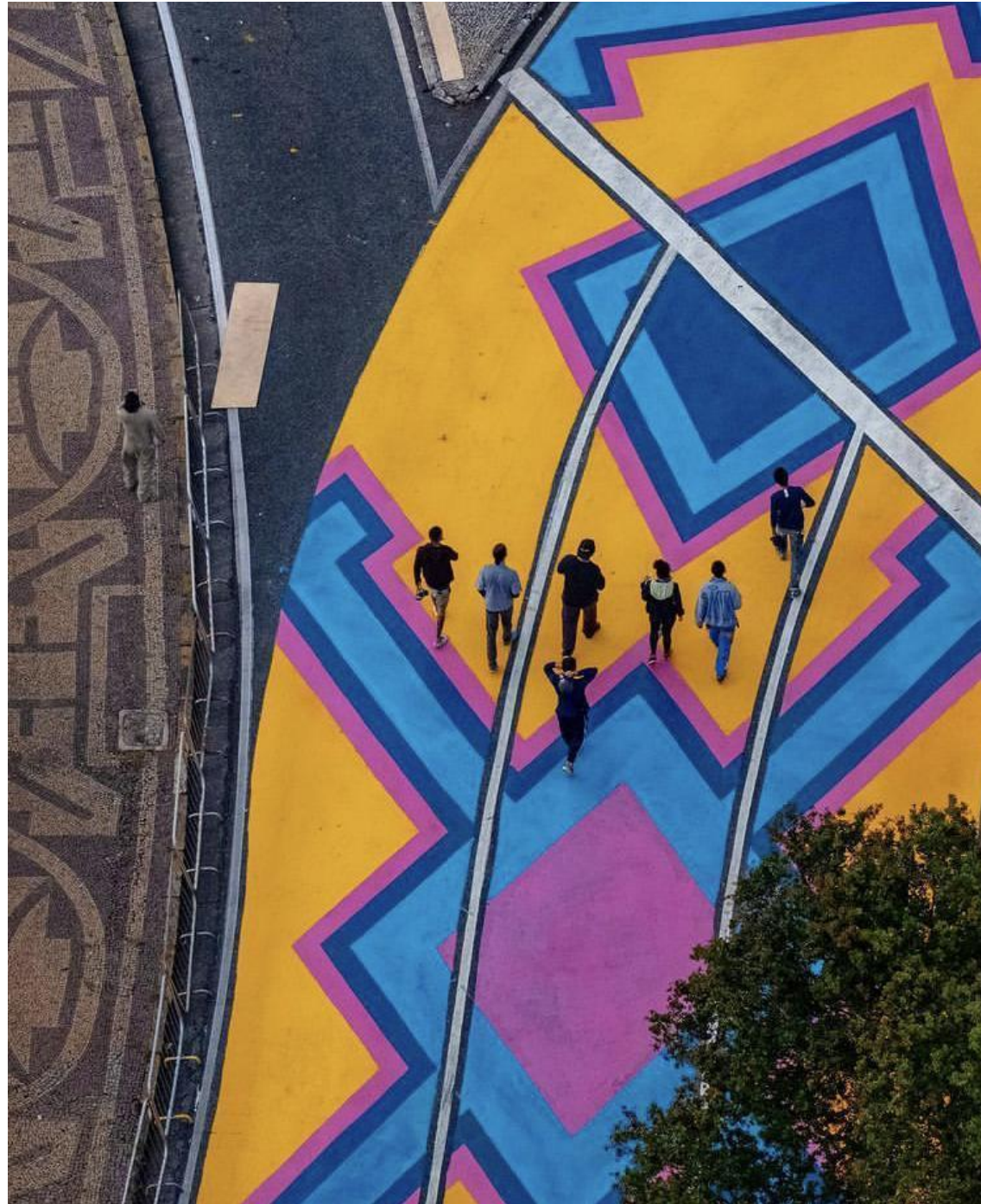


Fig. 8: Detail of the painting on the asphalt around Raul Soares Square, 2021. Source: Instagram: @cura.art, 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CV1FU4UJ6nq/?hl=pt-br>. Accessed 7 Feb. 2022.

On November 2, Day of the Dead in Brazil, in the early evening, with the painting in process, a great collective ritual of healing and enchantment was held, involving the ancestral experience, the smoking of cleansing, the cooking of sacred foods, the singing to the sacred Jussara and the painting with genipap of the Marajoara graphics. The square was renamed Patú-Anu, becoming a territory enchanted by the magic and ancestral strength of the Marajoara people (CURA, 2021c). Coincidentally, that same night in São Paulo, the indigenous artist Jaider Esbell killed himself (Assis, 2021).

5 Final Considerations

In the city, the streets, avenues, architectures, monuments, surfaces, ornaments, or, in short, all of its landmarks are repositories of memories that can be triggered at any moment along the paths of subjects. The process of building and planning these spaces, however, has often been tied to the hegemonic values of the dominant culture and its representations. In Brazil, in the context of the Proclamation of the Republic, the planning of cities was based on the positivist ideals of order

and progress, which in practice meant a segregationist and hygienist urbanization. The mestizaje of blacks, whites, and natives was seen as an obstacle to the advancement and development of the country. Therefore, those who were not interested in the so-called “project of a future” were to be banished from the planned city and were not to be represented in it.

In case of Belo Horizonte, the landscape design was based on a predominantly white and European repertoire, and the only traces that remained of those who should be forgotten were the names of some indigenous tribes in the streets of the planned city. Perhaps, a possible democratization of memory has taken place nowadays through contemporary urban art. CURA, in its impactful interventions portraying black and indigenous people, created, on a large scale, experiences of the Aarão Reis mesh that propitiated the construction of other memories in city life, true counter-hegemonic architectures. Other universes of reference, with large dimensions and in strong colors, have become visible and will certainly constitute territories of memory while those works last. Our hope is that this kind of intervention, like Leandro Vieira’s “Brazilian Flag,” can inspire a more open, democratic, inclusive, fair and respectful future in our country, giving back to Indians, blacks and the poor their spaces. May the awareness of the importance of these groups be amplified in our memories, as well as the dialogue and the mixture that, as we know, make Brazil a country of many colors.

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