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STREET ART: CONTESTED SPACES AND CONTESTATION THROUGH (PUBLIC) SPACES

Abstract - Cities are a privileged platform of many forms of social and political contestation. Street art emerges once more on Lisbon's walls as a political instrument. The current resurgence of a political contestation painted on them, reminds us of the post April 25th (1974) legacy, when political related murals were frequent throughout the city, reflecting an ideology of social change and an artistic collective consciousness of citizenship. Today, street art reflects visible signs of a political struggle evidencing the uneven paths of social and economic insecurity, instability and violence. Paintings on the walls illustrate a denial of the conventional modes of protest representation and expression (formal and institutionalized). This way, street art creates an increasingly virtual world, reflecting a will of recognizing the places, as if they spoke, therefore claiming another space of both autonomy and speech. Additionally, in this context, streets can also become places of shouting and expressing against everyday oppression, violence and fatigue.

This extended abstract – as a part of a research project on 'real utopias in socially creative

spaces' – discusses street art in the urban public space as a mean of representing and expressing opposition and contestation. The discussion is illustrated by examples taken from Lisbon (Portuguese city), in different types of places, such as politic-related spaces, university spaces, public transportation hubs, big crossroads, commercial areas and abandoned industries and harbors.

Keywords: Street Art, Protests, Public Space, Lisbon

1. Introduction – “Society has been completely urbanized... The street is a place to play and learn. The street is disorder... This disorder is alive. It informs. It surprises... The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become 'savage' and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls.”
(Lefebvre, 1970, p. 19)

As the World Urbanization Prospects [\[2\]](#) reveals, over 75% of the developed world now live in cities and urban agglomerations. Although the globalization of the network society (Castells, 2000) is unevenly distributed, these networks of cities incorporate a vast amount of population mobility, flows of intellectual and material capital, expanding beyond historic and local identity politics, allowing it to be possible to reach farther, faster, deeper and cheaper (Friedman, 2005). They are too, as Carmo (2012) pointed out, arenas of struggle and conflict where social forces, operating on complex and often unpredictable ways, take over and remake spaces.

Street art has emerged in this moment of speeded and interconnected urbanization, and it's no surprise that has greater visibility in global world cities where accumulation of people, capital, built infrastructures and flows of information are densest (Irvine, 2012). Irvine defends that to some extent street art is a response to globalization while resisting being absorbed into its convenient processes. It interrupts the totalizing sense of space produced in modern cities with a local, place-bound gesture, standing that “we're here with this message now”.

As Manco (2004) said, street art is a transitory phenomenon. It's the movement of images

across urban spaces and the gradual decay of surface and application. This art – layers of posters, stickers and modern pictographs of urban artists painted in particular corners of the city – acts as urban visual ephemera, placed in the night to create an iconic language (Armstrong, 2005). It can be defined roughly as unsolicited art that is somehow attached to a surface or placed in public view, either by the artists themselves or by someone supportive of their cause or project.

Implicitly set as a challenge to urban relations, as the transgressive act of property crime, some expressions of street art have become an emotionally charged public order issue. For instance, despite the increased mobilization of anti-graffiti technologies, sponsored by explicit anti-graffiti policies and laws – recently Lisbon Municipality has declared “war on graffiti” –, these forms of unsanctioned “public art” persist. That persistence can in part be attributed to subcultural responses to the urban wars on graffiti. For other hand, in spite of some people still consider street art as a public transgressions, it is a visual culture of the city, an artistic expression that appears, disappears and reappears in public spaces and it has become a vehicle for the people who live in these urban environments to reclaim a small segment of space through the creation of illegal art in public places.

But this artistic expression also uses a discourse that challenges an indiscriminate criminalization of street art: the promise of the creative city, a narrative promoted by scholars like Landry (2000) and Florida (2002). Beyond these tensions between urban authorities and street artists, the rise of creative cities discourses and the importance of creativity to the postindustrial economy has afforded the opportunity to rethink the way the creative practices of these artists are valued and the appearance of new forms of public art (McAuliffe, 2012). For those involved in street art world, the creative city offers new paths to recognition, through commodification of those works in advertising (Borghini et al, 2010) or even through successful contemporary art marketplace (Campbell, 2008). In addition to that recognition, the quasi-hegemonic narrative of the neoliberal creative city (Carmo, 2012) promises more substantive rewards as jobs in the creative sector, aided by strategic investments in creative hubs, quarters and clusters (Evans, 2009).

These creative city dissertations have enlisted the arts as a driver of urban change and regeneration, where the public art plays an important role in the production of urban space (Sharp et al, 2005). Public art can contribute to the production of an innovative or creative milieu (Landry, 2000; André, 2008) within which creativity can be nurtured and flourish. As a part of the urban fabric of the creative city public art has become a universally recognized marker, and the presence of street art can be seen as “both a sign and a medium of a district’s upwardly mobile reputation” (Zukin & Braslow, 2011, p. 133).

Street art is nowadays an important alternative medium of mass communication, for example related to the consumption of particular public goods (Visconti et al, 2010) or linked to political messages (Chaffee, 1988). But street art can also be seen as a source for increasing the visibility and facilitating the organization of grassroots movements, raising civic consciousness through very short and incisive messages. Ranging from pure resistance and social contestation to modest beautification of urban space, street art transforms places and their sense via many artistic representations - graffiti, murals, sculptures and urban installations, stencils or stickers – reflecting new cultural and politic visions and fighting against inertia, established order and often driving relevant urban changes. This artistic expression, made in public urban space, brings the visible signs of a political struggle subscribing uneven paths of social and economic insecurity, instability and violence, showing a refusal to the conventional modes of representation and expression of protest (formal and institutionalized).

In this context and because this urban phenomenon cannot be understood outside its socio-geographical context this work is a study of the contested city and its imagery, as a discussion of the messages that bubble to the surface and attach themselves to urban walls, electrical boxes, light posts and boarded-up buildings in Lisbon, that emerge as criticisms and protests against the politics associated to the actual economic and social crisis in Portugal, such as austerity, shrinking of the welfare state or decline of social rights, exposing not only the words and understandings of street artists and other collective groups, but also the socio-spatial focuses for these imprints – the public space were they emerge – and their relation to the diversity of messages.

As part of a research project on 'real utopias in socially creative spaces', this work (initial study of a more extensive work) discusses the role of street art in urban public space as a means of representation and expression of opposition, as platforms of social identity and support of social contestation, looking at Lisbon artworks location examples, through the debate of the dialectical relation between the imagery and the urban space where it emerge

2. The Beginning Of Social Manifestations Through Street Art – Over time there have been several designations for the artistic expressions performed in public spaces, hence it is not easy to define Urban Art in a simple way (Silva, 2007). Moreover, the differences between languages and meanings that each one assigns to some this and other concepts related to art, creates further discussion surrounding those terms (Neves, 2010).

According Visconti et al (2010) the discussion about Urban Art considers, on the one hand, the durable forms of aesthetic transformation of public settings, and on the other side, stresses the artistic practices that are developed in the streets who have multiple ideologies about the attempt to recover the public space as part of the creative expression. Despite many synonyms – interventionist, participatory, conceptual, contextual, subversive, outsider, mural (Klein, 2012) – most of the terms used for urban art share the same energy: broad aesthetic definition, status of vandalism and/or subversion of rules, collective work made by a group of artists or with the possible involvement of the population (Neves, 2010). The Graffiti and Street Art are examples of artistic expressions that interacts freely with public space and tend to reflect social, political and cultural aspects of society, expressing some kind of collective contestation through artistic creativity.

In fact, the term graffiti dating back to the late eighteenth century, when the first graffiti appeared on the walls of Herculaneum and Pompeii cities with words of protest and romantic poems (Simões, 2011). To this type of graffiti we give the name of pichamento [\[3\]](#) (Portuguese word similar to

tag

[\[4\]](#)

), recurring in the Roman period and the Medieval Era. The Modernist movement of the early twentieth century associated with expressions such as "kill the street" (Le Corbusier) and "usonian" (Frank Lloyd Wright), were responsible for the emergence of a modernist architecture in the core city, leaving the urban peripheries socially disadvantaged where this art movement was started. The modern concept of graffiti was born in South Bronx neighborhood in New York and the term is still most strongly identified with 'hip hop' culture. The first tags (usually names or nicknames) appeared around the city in the late 1960s and by the 70s they began to include more pictorial elements, as well as increasing innovations in typography and style. Through this art, young people made themselves known and reached a popular fame, countering social exclusion that they were victims for living in peripheral and marginalized neighborhoods. The movement soon became international and its styles and forms continue to develop and mutate (Manco, 2004). In spite of the creation of policies for prevention and prohibition as a brake on expansion of graffiti (and despite some of these policies have worked) this art quickly spread across the country, reaching several European countries (Germany, France and England) and South America (Brazil). By the 80s graffiti was seen differently and become accepted by the general public, largely due to the popularity of hip hop culture. At this point museums and galleries have come to recognize it as an art form and art journals began to publish articles on this topic (Correia, 2013). The artist Jean-Michel Basquiat was a major contribute to that promotion.

The graffiti has developed and democratized up (becoming to be practiced by young people from different ethnic groups and social classes), with more original works, adapting to

contextual changes and giving rise to new expressions of Urban Art. Its development gave way to a sub-genre: post-graffiti or street art. These new artistic expressions of street art explore current subjects (social, cultural, economic and political issues) and express themselves in a ludic way through city. They are ephemeral expressions and belong to a time of constant changes where creativity serves the need of communications and manifestation. By street art we mean techniques like mural paintings [5], stencil, stickers [6], poster-bomber [7], collages and scratching the surface

[8]

Although street art began as an underground, anarchic, in-your-face appropriation of public visual surfaces, has now become a major part of visual space in many cities and a recognized art movement crossing over into virtual space and the museum and gallery system (Irvine, 2012).

One of the ways by which the graffiti and street art arrive to city was via the collective work of big dimensions, like mural paintings that are originating from Mexican art, between 1920 and 1930 (Correia, 2013). These paintings quickly spread throughout the world - with more expression in the major urban centers - as a way to express certain ideas in public space through art. They rise normally in periods of political tension and, can be made by common citizens or be associated with political movements that use these murals as a way to express their ideals.

To the set of those mentioned urban manifestations, we should add the stencil. This technique is quickly to perform, has an unlimited reproduction and consists in a template usually made on paper/paperboard, under which ink is applied. It pretends to transform any urban structure in an aesthetic object, by using pictorial and verbal messages. Its genesis, although uncertain, is described by Manco (2002) as one of the first techniques of artistic expression originated in primitive caves. The anthropomorphic figures and hand silhouettes were produced by blowing paint around a hand placed on a surface to create an inverted imprint. This idea was adapted across globe: leather and papyrus templates were used to decorate Egyptian pyramid inner walls and the Chinese cut stencil from paper to decorate silk with ornamental devices. Travelled from Asia to Europe the stencil was used as a decorative technique from the medieval period to the 1930s church walls, floors, furniture, textiles and wallpapers. American artists like Andy Warhol had developed new techniques and visual ideas that had a great impact on art and design, as Pop Art pioneer. Stenciling is still used as an interior decoration method and, in a more functionally way, as a graphic method for printing and signage. Through this technique, urban artists, use stencil to communicate their ideas in a free and ephemeral form of artistic expression, even during the Second World War, when Italian fascist uses stencil to paint propaganda and the Basques and the Mexicans used it in protests during the 1970s.

Despite stencils are essentially ephemeral and wear away with time, they tend to have longer lifespan than other forms of street art and graffiti. They often survive to municipality clean-ups and frequently used by collective groups and political movement to spread their messages. This is not say that they are more permissible than other artistic expression, but it does point to the issue of placement of street art. As referred early and also like Manco (2002) pointed out, although the size of the piece is an important factor, placement is crucial for the artists to be able to communicate symbolically, politically and artistically to an audience. In this sense, many artists feel strongly about this issue of location and make quite conscious decisions about where and whom they want to communicate – in other words, what are the exact public spaces to implant their work, and through which they challenge the municipality authorities and national political system.

3. Street Art In Lisbon (Public) Spaces – Assuming the complexity that the very concept of public space behaves, we consider that it is an outdoor space that, as Habermas (1984) pointed out, is at the heart of democratic functioning. It is the place, accessible to personal, cultural and social representations, as it is a symbolic space where political, social, religious, cultural and intellectual speeches who constitute the society are confronted (Narciso, 2008). Today, although cities have ways to control and regulate both spaces as people (in which the public space is a direct testimony of that economic and political power), they are the spaces where the tradition of opposition to capitalism, war, social exclusion and racism are not lost. They can be considered spaces that allows the reconstruction of alterity, celebrates autonomy and challenges hierarchy, and also initiatives in which individuals shape their own contexts and create new desires, thus escaping the attempts to impose order from above, configuring spaces marked by autonomy and plurality. In doing so, they are also welcoming creativity, contingency, uncertainty and a constant (re)negotiation of sociospatial processes.

As Wodiczko believes “art is an alternative act of speech and an important ingredient of the practice of democracy. Active and critical art helps democracy to preserve its life”, putting it on the landing of the citizenship exercise (Wodiczko, 1999 apud Cruzeiro, 2011). It is, in fact, an understanding dialectic between art and society that determines that artistic practice joins a critical involvement in public space. Thus, present at various times and contexts of the twentieth century - somehow also expressed in the appearance and evolution of graffiti and street art – it is frequently that the art speech includes concepts such as democracy, political and public space as part artistic practice. In this universe, despite the easy contestatory character that some of street art works produce, the artist links himself to projects that seek to defend and test

alternatives, creating new opportunities for collective action and becoming, like the artwork they create, both a social product and an integral element of their own society. The artistic expression facilitates communication, overcoming the barriers of verbal discourse, thus allowing greater expression of emotions, feelings and affections, anxieties and aspirations.

Although present in other cities outside the Portuguese context, Ferro (2011) note that the first traces of graffiti appear in Lisbon, only during the second half of the 80s of the last century. Appearing initially in the suburbs of the metropolitan area (more specifically in surrounding municipalities), graffiti spread rapidly from the periphery to the city. By 2000, with the emergence of events and exhibitions, graffiti have conquest place in municipal agendas. Indeed - and although many initiatives continue to emerge without any artistic quality in places that challenged the municipal authorities and make this art acquires a negative connotation within the population more conservative – it has been sought to make this urban art, not only a good visual art but also a cool art, thus contrasting the vandalism initiatives that arise in the city, trying to mitigate the pejorative image they have and which is expressed in these paintings. On one hand there are writers who seek the projection of their name in visible areas of the city, on the other there are organized groups who use this practice as a means to claim their participation in urban public space. Still, only since 2009 with the creation of the Urban Art Gallery responsibility of the Lisbon Municipality, this art has confirmed his public and political recognition. All the art projects, supported by the Municipality authorities, intends to legalize this practice, limiting it to legal structures for this purpose. Nevertheless they keep the contestatory message against the Portuguese contemporary reality. Still, the greatest expression of discontent and protest, including the appeal and encouraging collective manifestation of dissatisfaction is revealed by other practices not so legal.

In fact, Lisbon is a city of great cultural production. The current landscape of the city is filled with several types of urban art like sculptures, monuments, installations, graffiti, street art demonstrations or even political murals. This urban visual communication is strictly related with the territory [and its appropriation] through symbolic and iconographic artistic expressions that are located in specific public spaces. The street as a place of power may also be, in this context, the place of shouting and expression against daily oppression, violence and fatigue. Several urban structures are used to manifestos of political, social appeal and encouragement of popular force and for the calling to manifestations and strikes.

In this study the spatiality of contestation expresses by street art results from a collection of multiple georeferenced photography of countless works of urban art dispersed around the city that, in some way, contains a message or representation of political and social statement. For this, we walked up the main avenues and across the squares, through regular alleys of artists meetings, crossing the city in its fully urbanity, looking for the smallest artistic expression associated with contestation. In addition to this fieldwork, we made an online research to collect

the artwork that although made recently, were quickly eliminated either by municipal policy to combat graffiti, whether by other urban users that felt uncomfortable with the political and social messages. These work documented approximately 800 images of urban art, ranging in technique and messages transmitted.

Today, although the political murals [9] have no longer much expression as in the post-April revolution, are again on Lisbon walls as a political instrument. They are once more part of the Lisbon urban landscape that acts as incubator for these kinds of manifestations. In addition to these murals, graffiti, pichamentos (or tags) and stencil technique, are also in the walls (Fig. 1). Words like “revolution”, “social class against social class”, “general strike”, “death to thieves”, “death to capitalism”, “youth on the streets”, “troika government”, “anti-capital”, “this is our street”, “resistance”, “liberty lives when the state dies”, “civil disobedience”, “until when you will endure”, “oppression”, “fight”, “occupy”, “fascism never more”, “opens your eyes”, “united we stand divided we fall”, “bow to no one”, “precarious they want us, rebels they have us”, “troika out of here”, “pray for Portugal”, and many others.



Fig. 1 – Words of contestation expressed in Lisbon street art, 2013

Nevertheless, the public space where these words of contestation arise is continually in a state of production, and embodies endless opportunities for modification and resistance. As street art practices demonstrate, no matter how controlled spaces are, they are also subordinate to lived experiences and are thus open for subversion. Even within the capitalist economy of space, there are marginal spaces, which while often neglected, are necessary for the conceptualization of the city as a complex arena (Waclawek, 2008). Gauthier (1998, p. 256) suggest that "in general, graffiti writers appropriate objects and places in and around the city that have been neglected, forgotten or rejected. Singling out these sites, they turn them into temporary areas of visual and cultural production".

About these marginal spaces, Hetherington (1998, p. 107) said that they are "not only things pushed to the edge, they can also be in-between spaces, spaces of traffic, right at the centre of things"

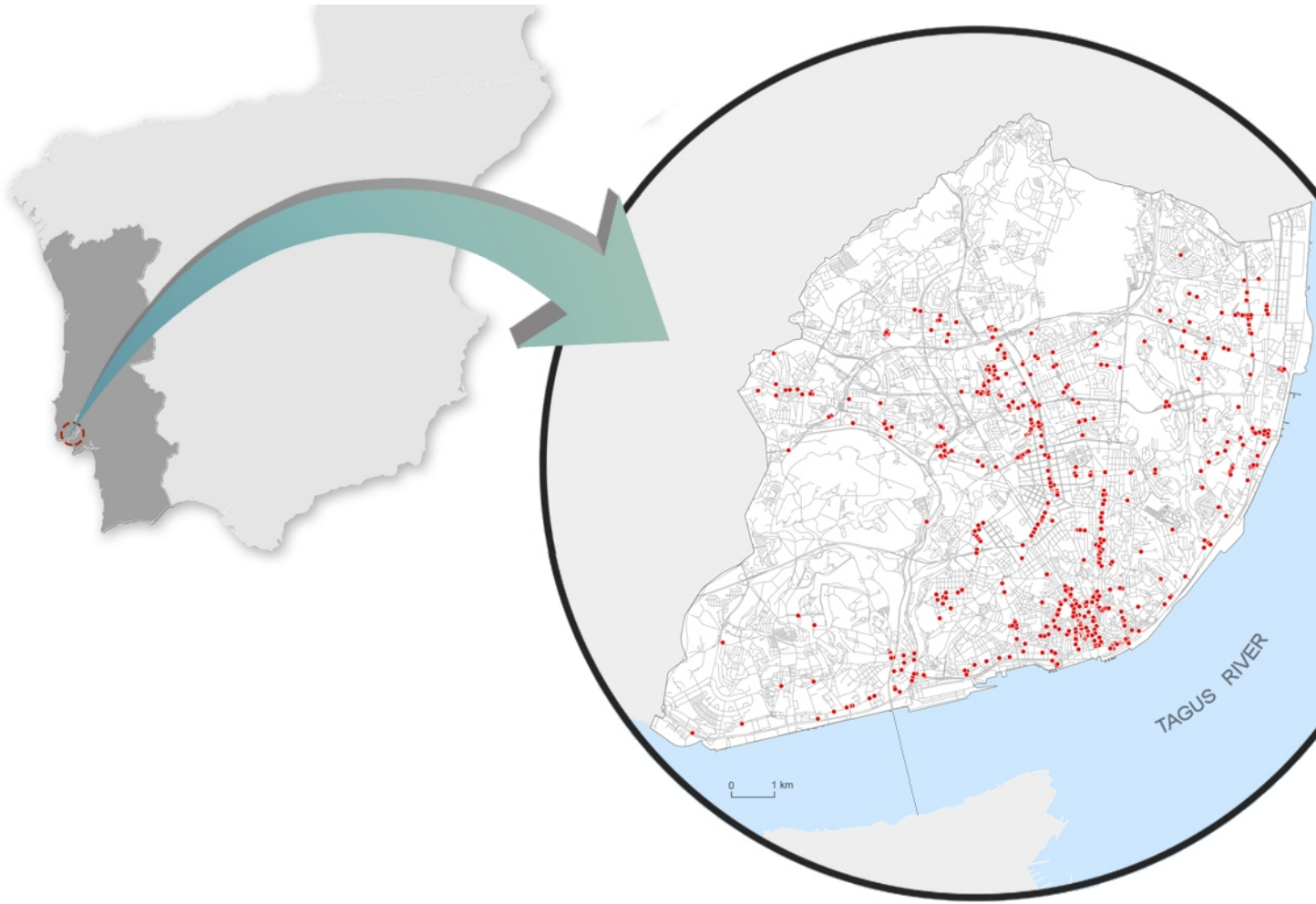
– not necessarily by way of geography, but rather by way of use, related both to physical space and to identity or social space. This marginal realm that affords the subversion of space is relevant for street artists.

This issue of site-specificity is a challenging one for street art. To Know (2002) this critical interaction between art location with contemporary urban life and the spaces of a city is the principal street art's *raison d'être* in the public sphere. These type of art seeks to be integrated as part of urban art, architecture and landscape, while disrupting the balance of public space, whereas the work of an artist can be found in numerous cities and the same artwork can be reproduced in seemingly random locations. However, these street art practitioners seek particular places in the context of a city that best respond to or benefit from their practices.

4. The Public Spaces Of Actual Contestation – As mentioned before, the political and social freedom that characterizes the contemporary world, allows on the one hand greater social communication between communities and, second, gives space to contestatory and revolutionary messages – for which street art is a privilege technique – that tend to locate, increasingly in public places with greater visibility. As Waclawek (2008) refer, because these works are typically rendered in more accessible locations and is not aimed primarily at other

street artists, urban painting is an interventionist tactic that reaches a larger segment of the population. These artists have expanded the communicative potential of their visual language, thereby increasing what she defines as "accidental" audience – that involves an element of unpredictability, surprise or accidental encounter.

Therefore, while most of graffiti artists create community pieces but due to space restrictions their more experimental work tend to be placed in locations that are difficult for the public to access, other urban artists or collective community groups – linked to political groups, anarchists or other anonymous ones – aim to bring visual life to run-down areas (former industrial areas or run-down building), popular sites that will be seen by young people (university campus or other student spaces), places that communicate to wide audiences (main transport hubs), or near to main political spaces (government buildings or historic squares). We found that, in Lisbon, those are the main sites where the street art manifest itself with more intensity (Fig. 2).



[PDF: Scratching the surface](#)