

1.3. The street as canvas: street art and the construction of artistic careers

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Abstract

This communication aims to discuss the relations between art, urban space and the city, which is the aim of the ongoing PhD thesis project. Specifically, the purpose is to understand how an urban public space can be configured through the ways in which it connects with the city and the artistic field – namely the realms of art in the public space, considering in particular street art, as artistic manifestation of an intrinsic ephemeral nature.

Therefore this paper will have its focus on the processes of production of street art in the metropolitan context of Lisbon, with a reflection based on a field work research that includes a series of interviews to several artists to whom the street is the main recipient of their artistic interventions, as well as other influent actors in urban creativity, a detailed photographic recollection of images of such artistic displays and further documental analysis.

Particularly, a reflection on the constitution of artistic singularity, both in what concerns the artistic career, the diversity of artistic profiles in street art and the very plasticity of the artistic work, can be made. What motivates the artists to use the street as their canvas, and from it to build an artistic career, and what very particular mechanisms of legitimization exist within the promotion and production of urban art in Lisbon, are some of the interrogations that are to be explored here.

Keywords: Public Space, Cities, Street Art, Artistic Career, Urban Sociology.

The changing world of street art

In this paper I aim to approach some of the reflections that have been resulting from a research project about the transformative potential of art in the public space, in what concerns its potential of change in the populations, the institutions and the people who create.

Recently, one has been observing a rapidly growing phenomenon in the streets of Lisbon. Following a global urban tendency, street art has been gaining more and more attention, as an increasingly larger number of artists finds the opportunity (or is given that opportunity) of leaving their unique mark in the city's walls.

Therefore, as recent as this is – while street art differentiates itself from the graffiti languages, all the actors at play are trying to figure out what exactly is street art and what potential rests upon it. The population, the artists and creatives behind the works, the contemporary art world, the academia, media, private entities and public institutions – are all constructing their own views and positioning about this subject, making it an exciting field for the attention of social sciences, as it is still in the process of establishing itself as a consolidated art form within the creative specificities and potentials of urban public space.

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The ephemeral character of the street art pieces allows them to reveal what is probably a more immediate potential for transforming the public space, which can also be read from the time frame in which the several moments of the creative process happen: the planning process of the piece (from a single individual's decisions about what place to choose and techniques to use, to a myriad of contacts between several agents such as the collective of artists, street art producers, public institutions and private stakeholders or owners of buildings); the making of the piece, that allows a specific moment between the artists and the passer-bys, set somewhere between the performative and the interactive; the media and online reactions are also very immediate once the pieces are finished, in an intensity of images and comments that is also very transversal in terms of who produces this discourses, in a way that may be unique for a form of contemporary artistic creation.

Right now, and particularly in the last 6 years, Lisbon has been the stage of a diverse set of manifestations of street art, that imply a set of changes happening in the streets, at several levels. One of them is lies within the plasticity of the pieces: from the very expressive basic act of painting a wall in the street using spray cans, techniques the urban dweller is long familiarized with through the presence of graffiti, to acts such as placing a stencil, sticker or poster, or even making three-dimensional objects to be 'released' in the streets. The plastic possibilities are immense. On the other hand, the motivations to artistically intervene on the streets are as diverse as the individuals are: to make a message pass, sometimes a subversive one and with strong social critique; or to experiment with a new form of 'canvas' (the city walls), while at the same time creating the opportunity to turn this act of in an opportunity to build a career in the creative and artistic field.

The interpretations of what it means to make street art are also very diverse, but what seems transversal is the notion that street art, although having its roots in the political mural art and the graffiti aspect of hip hop culture, no longer confines itself to the meanings and ways of making that these art forms usually implied, but actually at times seems to blend with other expressive forms – from non-artistic fields to even the field of contemporary art.

With aesthetic languages that are very current, street art has also been subject to incorporation (or sometimes appropriation) from companies, for marketing purposes. This might reveal a conflict, as some artists find in this an opportunity for paid work, while other artists feel street art should be free from all the constraints but their imagination and artistic intention.

The institutional approach to street art has also been subject to change. The possibility of the artists using walls for their works has been facing some regulating initiatives by the city hall. From these regulation a new paradigm is visible – street art not as an act of sheer illegality but as an opportunity to value the urban space, in terms of the possibilities it implies of showing Lisbon as a contemporary and modern tourist destination. At the same time, artists have been instrumentalizing the possibility of support by the city hall in terms of creating their own visibility and further work opportunities.

Power and communication in the public space

Two main aspects in this research are the ways in which not only relationships of power but also the communication aspect of public space are revealed through the art it exhibits.

In fact street art, being of ephemeral nature and such a direct form of interaction with the public space, strongly reflects a set of relationships of power within public space. It illustrates

(both figuratively and literally) the struggle for a space of communication, of visibility, among competitors such as advertising and institutional powers. If, as Lefebvre famously stated, public space is a stage of intense sociability and diverse meanings (Lefebvre, 2000), it is also a space of social contrasts that might be explicit in its very planning – hence the notion of the city as a bureaucratic and class map whose disparities are intended to be suppressed through culture and art (Zukin, 1993). On the other hand, the very use of culture and art can in the end reveal these same contrasts, constituting a way of control and domination, given its capacity to produce symbols and establish place. This research project argues that such effects of art in the public place are also visible in the current production of street art in the urban metropolitan context of Lisbon.

Since the public space is also a powerful mean of communication (Lofland, 1998; Campos, 2010), the art it features, as is the case with street art, can be read not only in terms of what the actors involved have to say through it, but also in terms of how the way it is produced and promoted can speak to us about the mechanisms behind making public space in an urban context: «(...) Space not only structures how communication will occur and who will communicate, it also has consequences for the content of that communication.» (Lofland, 1998:186). Therefore the study of street art can fuel a debate on what actually means ‘public space’, when the city might seem at times overpowered by huge advertising billboards, that might as well depend on a net of bureaucratic authorizations, or in a simple authorization from a private owner of an exterior façade. At what point private decisions make public space and what can the practice of street art show us in that matter is too big a question to give a definitive answer in this paper, but there are a lot of important aspects to be approach concerning this matter.

Therefore several questions can be made, namely on why the control of public space is not in fact responsibility of everyone but the entities that organize it, or advertise in it, or that build in it, or simply own it; the use of walls in the public space as the medium for several forms of street art, that appropriates itself of them, so many times illegally, others not, is evident symbolic expression of confrontation and dispute of urban space, reflecting relations of power and tensions that relate to the life in the city on a daily basis. The feeling of exclusion provoked by domination and public communication by media and advertising is on the root of that appropriation of the street walls as a mean of communication – also, undoubtedly, public. It can be argued that street art, in its most spontaneous and unprogrammed forms, being of ephemeral nature and in the global current contexts, has the potential to accomplish the promises of public art (Hayden, 1995) in a more direct way. Because it is more immediate and unexpected, it can also be very critical, posing by its mere existence questions about the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the state, local institutions and the capital of occupying what is in fact called ‘public’ space. It origins a debate about these issues, fueled by situations where the competition for public visual space is sometimes blatantly aggressive.

Another aspect that is also an important part of this project is the assumption that street art can also be a strategic element in the construction of an individual creative path. As a specific communicational space (Campos, 2010), urban art is expression of identities, lifestyles and discourses from who produces it. As it uses public space as canvas for its artistic manifestations and also as a vehicle for communication, it seems to make a commentary on the visual and artistic forms that are more conventional and institutional, reclaiming for itself its very own space. This is also an undoubtedly political and ideological statement (Stahl, 2009). The fact that so many street art initiatives are being promoted – from the public

initiatives to the private ones – contributes to the fact that there are possibilities for the artists to have their work visible in a way that is possible today as maybe it never before was. Also, the necessary quickness inherent to making an illegal artwork in a wall is so many times not necessary through these initiatives or intermediaries, so there is more time to devote to the artwork and therefore more and more complex pieces appearing, that allow the creators and artists to develop their techniques and imagery in what might be a more fluid way. Visibility might come with compromise, and the discourses of the makers of street art are diverse. As important as thinking about street art as a form of building an individual path is the reflection about what is artistic work in this field and who are the agents around it, in a particular context where these considerations seem yet so diffuse.

The attempt of providing answers to these questions is indissociable of specific methodological approaches. So this research assumes a qualitative aspect to it, including a set of interviews to several stakeholders – from creators with really diverse profiles to associations, institutions and collectives – within the street art that takes place in the streets of Lisbon. Being this an essentially visual object of study, it is equally important the construction and analysis of a set of images resulting from the field work that document or attempt to illustrate the several aspects that will be subject to reflection. And a necessarily solid anchoring in a theoretical support resulting from a transversal bibliographical research is also fundamental for this project – as it is for any attempt of adding knowledge to a field of research.

In this paper in particular, I'll approach the ways in which making street art and developing a creative or artistic career are related, in a context where this inter-connection starts to be an actual possibility. Making street art right now assumes different forms, from the more independent initiatives to the ones that are part of institutional actions. The first being usually connected with a certain anonymity and/or peer-recognition of the artist, where the act of making an artistic mark in the public space assumes a political role of appropriation, the claiming of a place for communication that counterpoints the advertising and the institutional marks that dominate the communication in the public space. The second relating to the collaborations in artistic projects commissioned by institutions, where the artist is no longer semi-anonymous but a recognized creative, being the act of intervening artistically in the street not as much an individual political claim to a space for communication but almost an act of construction of an artistic persona that is recognizable in the broader field of the contemporary art scene, with all the opportunities that come as a result. While at the same time both of these forms of making street art are equally rich in terms of what they say politically about the powers that intervene in the public space and the several meanings that are imbued in these actions.



Figure 1 - Underdogs. Artwork by Interesni Kazki. Photo by the author.

Making street art in Lisbon

The designations of 'urban art' or 'street art' are not free of a certain degree of polemic, which will not be approached in this paper, for the sake of brevity. Instead, let us stick with the choice of using the term 'street art', as it is arguably a more specific form to designate such a current for of artistic creation.

One can trace the roots of street art back to an act ancient and primordial such as drawing on a wall. Or later, writing one's name in stony walls, making it therefore public. Fast-forward to the contemporary age, it is in the events of May 1968 in Paris and in the birth of graffiti within north-American hip hop culture that one can trace the origin of what is now widely recognized as street art. As for the Portuguese context, this origin is inseparable of the political mural paintings and writings on the walls as political statements and calls to action in the period immediately after the revolution of April 1974. What these contexts have in common is the inherent social agitation and political uncertainty, so the act of using a wall in the public space as canvas or platform to communicate might also be seen as a form of questioning the social and political status quo, while at the same time making essays on freedom in the very public space. One can't avoid thinking about the recent popularity of street art and the current social context of economical crisis, a connection that can seem particularly strong while analyzing the ways the artists and creatives of street art in Lisbon build their careers.

As for graffiti, it also has expression in Portugal, through the influence of American hip-hop culture, with several writers making their mark known in the city walls, trains, etc. The quickness of the act of painting that the spray cans allowed these writers, a certain aesthetic and even a specific ethos are still to be found within street art in a broader sense, as there is an intimate relation between street art and graffiti culture. Actually, several 'old school' graffiti writers have embraced the practice of street art, so the legal and illegal creative practices in urban public space are hand in hand.

It comes from a simple act of observation, to state that street art has grown in the last few years as a field of its own. Actually, and despite the obvious proximity, it has been detaching itself from graffiti, although it might include its techniques, as well as stencils, posters and other less formatted expressions under unexpected forms that show once more how rich in terms of plastic experimentation the creative field of street art can be. Also to be found are

elements of graphic design, contemporary painting, comic book universe, etc. These such diverse ways of making show an intimate relation to the actual diversity of profiles of the people who make it: some with a background in 'traditional' graffiti, others in several branches of design, illustrators, many contemporary plastic artists (that 'come from the gallery', so to say) that try the street as a new canvas for their work, self-taught creatives, among others.

The constitution of street art as an artistic field in its own right is central to this research, and intimately linked to the personal career paths the street artists chose.

In truth, it can be said that street art has been penetrating other universes, being the processes of artistic recognition (Heinich, 1993) beyond the world of street art a reality in several cases. Several street artists in fact seem to have a unique ability to enter other «social worlds of art» (Becker, 2010), in particular the contemporary art circuit, to which the relationship with specific stakeholders or agents within it is key and can launch a career that flourishes both within street art and the contemporary art world, while the boundaries between both are not completely dissolved in a transversal body of work. Simultaneously, other relationships are inevitable, as the process of making street art many times involves a relatively vast network of agents, public and private entities – which I will refer to in detail in the section that follows.

Projects and initiatives of street art in Lisbon

Lisbon, as other urban contexts and with a part on a global phenomenon, has been the stage of several manifestations of street art, with a specific set of diverse ways of promoting and producing it. These several initiatives include not only the individual will to intervene in the city's public space, in one end of the spectrum, but also the promotion of street art events from public and private entities in different molds. These distinct forms of production and making street art are eloquent in terms of what are the powers and the people involved, and what relationships between street art, its artists and the public space are being experimented in Lisbon at the present time.

A relatively rigid systematization of the different types of production of street art will prove not to be exact, because the inter-relations between all of the actors involved are a profuse reality, when it's not the case of an individual artist's initiative. However, despite this tendency for the interdependency of the several actors involved, there are in fact strong differences and motivations between them, which does allow for a simple systematization effort.

In this sense, in order to explain the characteristics of these different forms of production, it might be useful to arrange them according to their more or less institutionally planned character, in an ideal-type way. As consequence we have, on one side, the absolutely non-institutional initiatives, and, on the other side, the projects of institutional initiative, which in the case of Lisbon, are promoted by GAU (Galeria de Arte Urbana – Urban Art Gallery), an organism of the city's municipality. Among these two poles are other types of production of urban art that result from processes of mediation between the institutional entities and the artists, through agents, such as associations or collectives that assume the role of promoting street art. In the following paragraphs I will approach each of these types of processes of production of street art individually and in more detail.

As for the non-initiatives – let's refer to those as those *individual initiatives* - they essentially translate the will of an artist or a small collective or artists to intervene in the street, sometimes (though not necessarily) without any kind of mediation or concerns towards legality. In this

aspect it would be much like traditional graffiti, if not in the content or intention, but in the form or ways of making. These might be relatively spontaneous initiatives; with of course the amount of planning that is necessary to turn the initial idea to a physical realization. Most of the times, these are not authorized interventions, but the result of the initiative of the artists, who find in the walls of the city a canvas for their work and will to self-expression. These pieces can have a rawer and even subversive intention in them. It is totally 'untamed' street art, while meaning in a very clear way the willingness to reclaim their space within the city's public spaces. If on the one hand there might be a risk in the moment of making the piece in the street and not getting caught, on the other, there is a certain feeling of surprise or even serendipity for the alert users of the public space when discovering that a new piece of art just 'appeared' in a wall or tree or sign in the street they are passing by. This is certainly a stimulating effect of communication between artist and passer-by that contributes to a sense of communal belonging in relation to the city.



Figure 2 - Individual initiatives. Artwork by Pantónio. Photo by the author.

In relation to *public initiatives* of street art in the context of Lisbon, the work of GAU (Urban Art Gallery) is paramount. It is an organ of Lisbon Municipality that aims to promote several street art initiatives around the city, while claiming an important role in displaying the works of street artists in this city but also in mediating the obtaining of permits for the artists to intervene in privately own exterior spaces (such as a building's façade, or a surrounding wall, for instances).

The work of GAU started in 2008 with localized interventions in Largo da Oliveirinha and Calçada da Glória, with the intention of rehabilitating the Bairro Alto area by cleaning the profusion of tagging that could be seen there (and still can, despite the efforts against it), while at the same time creating a space for quality street art that could be on display. Of course the idea is polemic in several ways and raises a lot of tremendously interesting questions, but those will be approached in a different occasion.

GAU has been establishing itself has a very active institutional branch that promotes several distinct interventions and with them an opportunity for the artists to showcase their works in

legal walls with considerable dimension. This might not only mean no time constraints while painting and the budget for the materials for doing so, but also the visibility and further opportunities for paid work, mainly from companies who want to incorporate some of the aesthetic options these artists take, in their products or image.

One example of the work of GAU is 'Rostos do Muro Azul' (Faces of the Blue Wall), an initiative with several editions in which several artists were invited to send their projects for painting sections of the wall that surrounds a psychiatric hospital in Lisbon. Another GAU project is the one called 'Reciclar o olhar' (Recycle the look), where public glass containers for recycling bottles are painted by basically anyone who is willing to send a project – not only street artists, though many do too. Simultaneously, the place where the initiatives by GAU started (Largo da Oliveirinha / Calçada da Glória) is still, from time to time, subject to interventions, as well as many other sporadic projects that this entity promotes a bit all over the city.

Of increasing importance is the work being developed by the *mediation agents*, mainly in the form of collectives or associations of people who propose to promote street art events or initiatives. These might be collectives of artists (either former or in the active) or cultural associations, being, again, the profiles of the individuals within it, diverse. The work of these agents is important, as it's often them who bring the knowledge of the process of planning a street art initiative – from the idea of the artist to the bureaucratic net of authorizations that will be necessary to accomplish it. The mediation process can be between the several stakeholders involved, such as the artists or collectives of artists, the municipality (through GAU), associations of cultural intends, and the owners of private property where there is an interest (from either side or both) in making a street art intervention. There are several associations or collectives that play the role of mediation agents for the production of street art in the context of Lisbon. One of them is the project Wool, that in collaboration with Lx Factory, a privately own deactivated factory complex that now welcomes several cultural initiatives but also a lot of small companies and their offices, fashion and interior design stores, galleries, restaurants and bars.



Figure 3 - Wool on Tour, Lx Factory. Artwork by Mário Belém and Makarov. Photo by the author.

This location, from time to time, accommodates editions of Wool on Tour, that brings street artists to Lx Factory, to intervene in the former factory's walls. Another privately held former factory that also promotes street art initiatives for their inner walls is Fábrica Braço de Prata. This is a building of large dimensions that used to serve as a gun and ammunition factory, while now is the home of several cultural activities: it hosts theater and cinema sessions, dance lessons, concerts, a book store, art exhibitions, a restaurant and bar, among other facilities the deactivated factory rooms allow. From time to time street artists are invited to submit a project to paint sections of the walls that surround this building, forming an open air gallery of urban art. It might be because of the influence of this association in a specific area of Lisbon – bringing some animation and cultural life to a pretty depressed and de-industrialized zone – that other walls in other buildings around here became also the canvas of several street art manifestations. One can read in this juxtaposition between the derelict building and the brightly painted artwork a critique to the powers and circumstances that allowed that a once lively area of working factories became a forgotten and depressed district, between the rich Parque das Nações neighbourhood and the historical downtown.



Figure 4 - Fábrica Braço de Prata. Artwork by Vhils. Photo by the author.

Other examples - although not extensively listed - of associations that mediate urban art initiatives include APAURB (Portuguese Association for Urban Art) – with collaboration projects such as «40 anos, 40 murais», a celebration of the 40 years of the revolution of 25th of April 1974, or the interventions in the Alcântara tunnel; Ébano Collective, that proposed the recent series of pieces that took place in the Graça neighbourhood, «Passeio Literário da Graça»; also to be mentioned is Project Crono, which programmed several initiatives, including what may be one of the most recognizable urban art projects in Lisbon – the painting of the façades of a set of derelict buildings in the centre of Lisbon, under permit of the city hall. Finally, Underdogs, a platform for Portuguese and international street artists that, working in partnership with the city hall, allows the artists to be able to create street art in large scale in Lisbon, while also stimulating the exchange of ideas, graphic languages and artistic concepts for international street artists.



Figure 5 - 'Passeio Literário da Graça', by Ébano Colective. Artwork by Mariana Dias Coutinho. Photo by the author.

Career paths and strategies

Several interrogations have been stemming from this research, namely in what concerns the career aspect of the people that create street art in Lisbon.

One of them concerns the commercial effects that the growing popularity and visibility of street art has been stimulating. There is in fact an increasing amount of companies or brands that see in street art an opportunity to promote commercial products, and it's not uncommon for partnerships to happen between brands, associations and the public institution, in urban art events.

On the other hand, there are also appearing small companies that revolve around the current production of street art in Lisbon, mainly in what concerns tourism. Street art guided tours are already a reality, just as online street art city guides that pinpoint what pieces to look for, destined to a specific niche of tourism that seems to be growing. Actually, the global visibility of street art and the profusion of images from street art pieces that everyday can be found online, is becoming a powerful tool for the marketing of cities as a tourist destination. Lisbon is no exception, being often featured in quick (and very debatable) lists of 'the best street art cities' – as a simple google search can attest. While on the one hand this mediatic attention is by no means a reliable indicator of the comparative quality and quantity of pieces or street art in each city, on the other hand it shows how street art is currently being used as a powerful tool for marketing cities as tourist destinations, in a tough competition among urban destinies that aim to pass an image of trendiness that certain tourist segments might look for in their travel choices.

Another aspect that stems from all the current interest and visibility of the street that is being produced right now is the commercial appropriation of its visual languages for the purpose of selling products: artists are invited to decorate store windows, for instances, or to decorate cars or clothing items. This might for some artists consist of a valid opportunity for

paid work through an activity that is parallel to their body of work, while others might consider it an unthinkable activity, an unwanted detour from their work, or its misuse.



Figure 6 - Postalfree van. Artwork by Vanessa Teodoro. Photo by the author.

Which brings up a very interesting question: with the several events and street art initiatives that are being programmed and promoted by private and public entities, at what point the artistic and creative work that is implied in the painting of a considerably large wall, for example, can be consistently and fully be considered work in its self right, and therefore systematically paid accordingly? Maybe the fact that this aspect is so diffuse at the moment and in this context lies within the fact that this is a new field that is constituting itself, but while there starts to have a consistent response from the several stakeholders – public and private entities – and new agents start to emerge and have a fundamental role in the promotion and establishment of a systematic way of doing things, this specific artistic production, when inserted in this net of relations and influences, might just have to be paid for the work it represents and not a sort of highly elaborate and technically specific ‘hobby’. While that isn’t the case, street artists who make this activity their main focus, will continue to develop their own strategies of sustainability, such as working with brands when possible, for some, or making pieces in canvas that might be more immediately sellable. And, interestingly, to these different strategies might correspond even a different signature: it is common that a street artist signs the piece he/she made in the street with the name he/she uses, often one they created for that purpose. On the other hand, on their incursions in more sellable formats, such as serigraphies or objects, the signature might just be their real name, as a strategy to distinguish both streams of what is in fact a single – yet diverse – artistic career.

This brings another relevant aspect in terms of this duality: globally, there is a certain movement of recognition of some street artists by the more conventional and ‘gallery-oriented’ contemporary artistic spheres. There are several examples of urban artists that have seen their work recognized in a broad scale, with their art pieces being exhibited in galleries (both indoor and outdoors), festivals, retrospectives, published in monographies and

catalogues, etc. Others might form collectives and organize street art events themselves, or even put together galleries – in the ‘white cube’ sense of the word – to showcase their works. So as some street artists move from the street walls towards the gallery space, other ones move from the gallery towards the street, since opportunities in that sense have appeared and this way they can experiment new plastic approaches to their work.

This reveals the different backgrounds of the diverse set of people that make street art. Some initiated their artistic path within traditional graffiti culture and eventually gained interest in experimenting with different graphic languages, or exploring other frames of artistic production. Others initiated their street art incursions as result of a will to further stretch the boundaries of the career they were already developing, be it in the context of design or in the field of contemporary art in a stricter sense.

Another relevant observation is the term these artists use when referring to themselves and their work. They’re virtually as diverse as the creators interviewed, and the particular word they chose to refer to themselves (‘artist’; ‘designer’; ‘grafiti’, etc.) reveals just that – the makers of street art come from different backgrounds and have also different expectations and strategies, just as they have different artistic languages and bodies of work. And it might just be these diversity that makes street art such a rich field of change.

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