

Letting the walls of the city speak: The route of a sociological research project on Lisbon's street art¹

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Abstract

This article sets out to show how a sociological research project on the production of street art in Lisbon was built, from the construction of an object of research to the development of a methodological approach that enabled the collection of a diverse set of expressive data. The notion of 'route' serves not only as a valuable instrument of research in the first stages of an investigation in urban sociology, but also as a powerful visual depiction of the development of a specific methodology and the set of techniques adopted. The diverse set of interrogations about the object that stem from these incursions, as well as the specific urban context at hand, allowed the researcher to conceptualize street art as a component of contemporary urban space and as a visual means to reveal social dynamics between the several actors involved in its production, and the city itself. Therefore, in this paper it is briefly shown how this object is theoretically framed, namely in what concerns the street artists and the way they build an artistic path and attribute meaning to the act of intervening artistically in the streets of the city, and how this connects with the worlds of contemporary art and the several contexts of production of street art; the contexts in which street art is currently created in Lisbon, from individual initiatives to the actions of associations or collectives, and the municipality; and the way in which the city, through its institutional powers, can instrumentalize street art as a way of creating 'images of the city', and how this can be explored in terms of tourism and the marketing of cities, and the conflict or opportunities that these processes reveal for the actors involved.

Keywords: Urban Sociology, Street Art, Routes, Multidisciplinarity, Field Work.

1. Introduction

This article intends to clarify both the construction of the object of analysis and the methodological options within a sociological PhD research project about the production of street art in Lisbon. In this research, street art was approached as a form of construction of public space in Lisbon's metropolitan context. Specifically, the objective of the research is to understand how a public space can be constructed through the ways in which it relates to the city and the art it features publicly – particularly, street art as an artistic and expressive manifestation of an ephemeral nature.

At the present moment, street art is the object of several distinct interventions in Lisbon, through not only the individual

initiative of artists, but also through the programming efforts of associations, projects and the municipality. The assumption underlying this research is that the analysis of the contexts of production of street art in this metropolitan ambit allows us to reveal not only different forms of conceiving and constructing public urban space, but also tensions and conflicts about it.

This article aims to focus on the methodological aspects of this research, based on a programme of field work that, besides the extensive collection of images and other documentation, also includes a set of interviews not only with street artists, but also with other actors connected to the programming of street art initiatives.

These methodological options, explored in depth in this article, made it possible to elaborate a reflection, not only about what street art reveals about the construction of public space, but also about the mechanisms through which this specific ambit of creativity, through its new contexts of production, connects with the construction of an artistic career, and with the world of contemporary art and its markets.

2. The production of street art in Lisbon: route towards an object of analysis

This researcher's first contact with street art took place, simply, with the daily experiencing of Lisbon, through walking in the streets of the city and through the experience of its several public spaces. Posters, stickers, cutouts, stencils, colorful murals showcasing diverse styles, despite appearing to have a certain affinity with the graffiti the city's walls had long known, seemed to consist of something entirely different.

This material universe suggested a different intention, not so much related to the "spreading of the name", but to communicate a message to an audience much broader than the insiders in the graffiti world, with techniques and forms of expression much more diverse than the intricate elaboration of letterings.

Meanwhile, the observation of the mdf panels that had been placed near the Bairro Alto area by a recently created organization within the municipal authority, each one presenting aerosol paintings, colorful and with various themes, allowed for further questioning. Namely, what this initiative could reveal about relationships of power in public space, and how it could itself signify an attempt of the municipal institution to control the unpredictable and spontaneous, and also what potential did it see for the production of street art murals – a practice with increasing visibility in Lisbon – for the construction of a carefully curated image of the city. Along with this initiative came several others, in the form of associations, projects or workshops, to promote street art events and interventions throughout the city.

Some authors include street art in a set of practices that reveal "artistic marginal urban otherness" (Andrade, 2010), of ephemeral and autonomous nature, distinct from "legitimate" public art and with support from local or central administration, or private entities. On the other hand, observing the diversity of contexts in which street art is made - from individual and spontaneous initiatives, to projects within in-

stitutional, collective or associative initiatives - also implies diversity in what concerns the actors, strategies and forms of cooperation within its production.

As for the street artists, I wondered about the ways they would manage the different and apparently vast forms of expression at their disposal, concerning the diversity of contexts for these practices, legal or illegal. The consequences of their options and the way in which they build a personal artistic path – when that intention exists – was another interrogation that this initial observation revealed. The increasing number of street art initiatives in Lisbon, in legal contexts, and with an increasing scale, as well as the opening of an active street art commercial gallery, broadens the outline of this question. Namely, what relationship could exist between street art and the world of contemporary art, with its mechanisms of artistic recognition, markets and exhibition contexts? Two different moments helped to build these questions: the exhibition of OSGEMEOS at CCB and the Vhils retrospective, a remarkable moment for the visibility and recognition of a Portuguese street artist.² Both illustrate the increasing presence of street artists in museums, and their insertion in the world of contemporary art.

Acknowledging this diversity of the object led to research on these perspectives to understand the purposes that these different actors - artists and producers - manifest towards a practice whose meaning largely overflows that of the artistic expression.

All this indicates that here lays, undoubtedly, a particularly rich object of sociological investigation, as it reveals urban dynamics in the practices, the identities and the meanings, the art worlds, and the construction of public space in the context of Lisbon.

3. Towards a sociological perspective on street art

Reflecting upon the bibliographical references on the problematic of art in the public space, researchers Antoni Remesar and Pedro Brandão (2010) distinguish two types of approach: those that center on the art world and those that emphasize the public rather than the art. This ideal-type distinction makes possible to pinpoint some mistakes that a work on street art could incur. The first would result from assuming that street art is a mere extension of graffiti, transplanting the literature and perspectives about graffiti to these

practices, and therefore losing the significance of a whole set of unique aspects that define street art.

The second would result from the assumption that these street expressions all have a uniformly subversive intention to them, if not in their content, at least in the simple act of intervening in a public wall. This is not at all what is observable, as there is considerable amount of negotiation and strategy in the practice of street art in legal contexts, though it might be true for the illegal and spontaneous interventions. Street art is therefore a visual vehicle to reveal social dynamics between the several actors involved in its production, and between them and the city. The way each street artist builds themselves as such, elaborating a career path, can be analyzed according to a perspective that refers to Symbolic Interactionism: that is, emphasizing the way each street artist constructs and gives meaning to the act of artistically intervening in the streets of the city, and how that process is interconnected with a broader system of signification – namely the art world and the legal contexts of production of street art.

The dramaturgical perspective that underlies works under this perspective – such as Goffman (1993; 1999; 2011), and Ulf Hannerz (1980) – in which the city becomes a stage, is adequate for the analysis of the dynamics between the different actors in the context of the production of street art – as a scenographical elaboration of the city, on one hand, and as identity construction, on the other. The context of the street art practices was a necessary starting point.

Notions such as “urban tribes” or “youth cultures” are of little interest for this research, for the simple reason that the street art world presents such a diversity and complexity of practitioners and contexts of production that these theoretical approaches would be inadequate. The approach to the “practices”, however, is of interest for this research. Lígia Ferro (2011) conceives the practices of graffiti and parkour in a setting of cultural practices that express an “interpenetration of cultural spheres, that mirror the communicative condition of contemporary culture, in which diverse contextual identities are constructed.”” The notion of mediation practices she proposes (Ferro, 2011) is also useful for the conceptualization of the ways that street art is produced, namely in the role of the agents that promote it and establish bridges between different worlds: between street art and the art market, the

institutions, or the local communities, for example.

An additional research track was inspired by the work of José Guilherme Cantor Magnani (1994), about the esoteric practices in the Brazilian urban context. The way this anthropologist chose to approach these practices, consisting of dislocating the perspective from within the practices themselves, to the relationships these establish with the city, guided this research on street art. In that sense, Magnani (1994) opted to list the different contexts for these esoteric practices according to their characteristics, which also makes full sense in a research project on street art, in which the diversity of its contexts is also precisely one of the central aspects of this research.

The work of Sharon Zukin (1993) facilitates an understanding of the relation between street art and the institutions and entities that allow and promote these new contexts for its production, particularly Zukin’s concept of landscapes of power, that attempts to illustrate the way in which the authorities that manage public space – and also the private entities that, through capital, have the power to do so – mark it with images of said power, and of which public art, in a broader sense, is a classic example, as is some street art produced in institutional contexts.

As counterpoint to this conception of the city, Alain Bourdin (2005) adds that the city is also a vast system of opportunities, in what concerns professional activities, jobs, services and products, relationships, meanings, possible behaviors, events and mobility structures. Hence the city, in the set of street art production contexts it presents, also represents a group of opportunities for the artists, who, according to their personal aims, and with variable success or difficulty, can build from their activities on street art a surplus value for the construction of a career.

In order to theoretically frame the aspect of the construction of an artistic career, some reference to Howard Becker (2010) is relevant. Firstly, in his concept of “art world”, which perceives artistic activity as collective, with several actors and respective roles. It is argued in this research that street art constitutes a particular art world. Secondly, Becker also associates career with a commitment to practices (1953), as does Richard Lachmann (1988) in the context of graffiti. Becker connects the notion of career with a learning process of meanings and techniques. This idea of progression appears in the speeches of the interviewed street artists, relat-

ing to the contexts in which they develop their practice and also on a technical level. On the other hand, street artists give meaning to the different moments of their formation and learning. Therefore, it was possible to trace elements of a personal narrative of an artistic path in their discourses.

As for the artistic work, the work of Nathalie Heinich (1996; 2005) is important to consider when investigating the passage of the street artist to the contemporary art world and its market, particularly the concept of artistic singularity and the processes of recognition and celebration of artistic careers and the “rules of the game.”

Raymonde Moulin (1997) is also a valuable reference, specifically the way she conceives the roles of the several different actors in the art world that contribute to its transformation: state, market, museums, galleries – and also, evidently, the artists and the artistic movements. Moulin traces social profiles and exposes the mechanisms through which artistic careers are built.

Therefore, the study of the forms and contexts of production of street art allows the formulation of another set of themes. These include: from the perspective of the institutions, the control of public space and the promotion of a certain image of the city - the urban marketing of cities in a context of touristic competitiveness; from the perspective of the artists, the contextualization of a set of practices and the representations and expectations that connect with it, how an artistic career is built, what strategy there is in the choices artists make when collaborating with public institutions, and how this reflects the insertion of street art in the contemporary art world and its markets.

4. Methodological approach of a street art research project

It is important to clarify the methodological approach that underlies this research, which is inherently sociological approach, as the influence of the ethnographic perspective was crucial.

If the anthropological knowledge structures itself around the micro scale of daily life and the personal contact between the observer and the observed (Agier, in Cordeiro, 2003:15), for a sociological research project a certain connection to the macro level of reality is also unavoidable. While transversal to daily life and human interaction, both levels of analysis are important to contextualize approaches to urban

research. Therefore, the first level of approach for this research is the representations of the street artists and their creative expressions in the walls of the city; the second is an intermediate level, that of the producers of street art and the agents that mediate their practices; the third level is that of the organization of urban space by its institutions, the images of city that underlie their approach towards street art, and also the contemporary art world and the relation street artists have with it.

The general approach for this research relates to what Pierre Bourdieu (2001) called participant objectivation, which differs from the participant observation, that assumes the researcher can simulate a momentary affiliation with the group that is the object of research, to better understand it. On the other hand, participant observation considers the rupture with the subjective aspects of the proximity with the object. The challenge this perspective presented was of constant rupture with the eventual impulse of the researcher to arbitrarily judge and attribute value, objectifying instead her role within the research.

Concerning the techniques that were used for this research, these were necessarily flexible, as, during the course of field work, some adaptation and experimentation is paramount. However, engaging in the collection of a set of interviews was soon determined to be a fundamental aspect for a qualitative research approach.

Due to the specificity of the context of research, and the multiplicity of actors involved, the collection of personal testimonies was considered adequate. Because it is also in the form of that speech and the singular manner in which each individual articulates it, that a researcher can understand which aspects the interviewee attributes more or less importance to, in a process of “sociological intelligibility centered on the subject” (Conde, 1993: 207). Therefore long interviews with each of the subjects were privileged, resulting in detailed information.

The collection of testimonies of the several actors involved in the production of street art in Lisbon, in the form of semi-directive interviews, was a valuable moment in the field work. The amount of information obtained through these extensive interviews was considerable, allowing the researcher to clear their research doubts and to dissipate assumptions held prior to the field work, as well as to determine the future directions for the research.

Therefore, interviews were conducted with two sets of actors: on the one hand, who creates street art, that is, the art-

ists in their diverse profiles; on the other hand, who produces it, that is, actors connected with associations and collectives that promote street art in legal contexts, as well as the municipal institution through Galeria de Arte Urbana.

Testimonies were, therefore, collected from a significant group of street artists, which allowed the researcher to trace their individual – and diverse – paths in the construction of an artistic career, to understand their perceptions of street art, and how its growing visibility is interpreted and sometimes taken as strategic by artists in the building of their career. On the other hand, the interviews with the actors involved in the production of street art, namely members of associations, organizers of events and institutional representatives, allowed an understanding of how these mediating agents position themselves in the field of street art, and how they represent the role street art might have in the construction of public space in a contemporary and global urban context. Another aspect of the methodological approach for this research is the one that concerns the collection of media data. The researcher's attention to the several entities and artists making or promoting street art in Lisbon allowed her to be aware of the events, initiatives, inaugurations, exhibitions and interventions throughout the city.

Therefore this was an invaluable way of finding moments for the observation of these initiatives, which also demonstrated the intense activity around street art-related activities – concerning the period between 2010 and 2014.

In a first moment of familiarization with the subject, it was particularly relevant to explore websites that could show what was being currently done in terms of street art, and also who was doing it. Reference to magazines about street art was also important, such as the collection of online articles, in this early familiarization. Some of these articles soon revealed a media trend about street art, namely the “rankings” of the “best cities to watch street art.” This stimulated a reflection on how street art could be accredited with a role in media constructions for the marketing of cities. Another aspect to emphasize derives from the preponderance of articles about Banksy that were noticed, which contributed to a reflection about the role of media ability for some street artists, and how the choice for anonymity, or the use of a personal name or a street name, is a very eloquent aspect of how the artist conceives his or her construction of an artistic career.

The Portuguese press was also an important resource, both online and in print form. This was not only a complementary

way of taking notice of the several initiatives, but also a way of being aware of the impact that street art has on the media.

5. Creating routes through Lisbon's street art: a methodological approach

Aside from the media resources collected and the group of interviews conducted, there were other processes of data collection for this research project: The collection of visual data and the keeping of a field diary were also important aspects of the field work.³

Recording annotations, questionings and interrogations that the observation suggested to the researcher, the field diary proved to be a valuable resource, particularly in the moments of indecision between several possible directions for the research route. These notes also included the first impressions and spontaneous thoughts that the moments of observation of moments of street art pieces – completed or in the process of making - suggested to the researcher, concerning the pieces, the artists or the reactions of the passers-bys, for instances.

Throughout the initial stages of the field work, the option to make routes through the streets of the city with the purpose of observing became obvious, assuming the public space as a central element to this research.

The act of walking through the city, as a methodological approach, was pointed out by João Teixeira Lopes (2008; 2013) as it allowing allows one to trace a proximity portrait of the city, and as it permits the researcher to observe it from within, through her senses. This is the core of the methodology of the walker, (Lopes, 2008 e 2013), in which the act of walking through the streets of the city summons the reflexive thought, creating “«practical poetics of the space»” and corresponding to an intensive learning process in what concerns the interaction in urban public space – simultaneously, that which observes and integrates ephemeral communities, in his/her encounters with others (Teixeira Lopes, 2008).¹ op.cit.). Hence, it is important to highlight the considerable amount of learning potential through the observation that is stimulated by the incursions of the researcher within urban space, as it allows him/her to unravel an analytical process of the elaboration of relations between the several aspects of the research object.

This methodology of the walker became an essential methodological approach for this research. In order to comprehend the visual specificity of this research context, the street art of Lisbon, several incursions through the streets of the city were necessary.

Walking through these streets, in order allowed the researcher to observe street art pieces of which that the researcher she either already knew about – from word-to-mouth, or having seen images in the internet, magazines or newspapers – or didn't had been previously unaware of, in which case she intended to find out. .

There was not the intention of following a random order in these routes, but of trying, non-exhaustively, to cover several areas of the city of Lisbon. From these routes resulted hundreds of photographs that constitute an invaluable part of the visual data collected, as they document the observed production of street art in this city, in its expressive diversity and contexts of production.

It is also important to emphasize the several moments in which the researcher could observe the elaboration of street art interventions, namely in programmed contexts.

These moments of observation happened either by mere chance, or because the researcher had been informed, through social media or through the very artists involved.

These were naturally very rich in terms of the information that they provided for the research, in what concerns the different techniques of making street art, their specific use, the craft of creating an artistic intervention, and also, interestingly, the interactions and the momentary sociabilities that take place within the moment of the intervention, between the street artists, the passers-bys and the observers.

Another observation concerns how the space surrounding the street art intervention can be momentarily transformed, namely through the placing of objects or grids, and how this creates situations that somehow resemble a stage, delimiting the space of the artist and the public that observes what is, in fact, a strongly performative situation. Equally interesting was to note that some of these intervention moments might attract media attention, with photographers and interviews for magazines or online publications, for example. This suggests a reflection about the multidimensionality of an object that assumes forms of expressive and artistic intervention in the public space that can be illegal and spontaneous,

but can also be performative, fully exposed to the look gaze of the passers-by.

6. Conclusion

Street art involves a diversity of circuits with a diversity of protagonists that constitute key -elements into the production and practices of street art in Lisbon. Therefore, the researcher opted to trace a topography, not only of that included, but was not limited to, the perceptions and representations of each of the different actors involved – the street artists, the producers, and/or the institutions and entities involved. The mapping of these inter-relations became the starting point for understanding the process of social construction of public space (Low, 2014) through street art in the urban context of Lisbon.

As a final thought, it can be said that the role of the researcher while discovering this particular art world (Becker, 2010) was one of observing the circumstances, people, places, and meanings that contextualized and interacted with the object (Costa, 2001), in order to unveil the complexity of the processes that underlie the production of street art in Lisbon, as well as its actors.

A multi-methodological approach, including interviews and a vast set of visual and bibliographic resources, was a complement to the development of an intensive period of field work, in which several moments of observations, the creation of a field log, and the creation development of walking routes were crucial aspects to the understanding and conceptualization of this object – . Particularly, how street art, as an artistic expression in the public space of the city, can be expressive of appropriations, uses of space, processes of transgression and legitimation, and also dynamics of identity and memory.

Notes

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2 - OSGEMEOS: Pra Quem Mora Lá, O Céu é Lá, Centro Cultural de Belém, from 17/05 to 19/09/2010; Alexandre Farto aka Vhils: Dissection, Museu da Electricidade, from 05/07 to 05/10/2014.

3 - For the visual dataiary, a competent photo camera – although technically unambitious - was an indispensable item for the researcher. The field diary took the format of a notebook, another presence in the “field work kit.”

4 - Loosely translated from the portuguese «metodologia do andante».

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