

Destaque Semanal

Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism refers to the conviction that all Africans and descendants of Africans in the diaspora share a common history, common interests and, ultimately, a common fate which thus(...)

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Urban art

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Urban art (arte urbana, urbanografia, street art) emerged as a transgressive art in public space, drawing attention and supporting the existence of 'other' voices actively participating in the city. Urban art signals tensions in society. Artists use their work to place engaging and challenging messages in the public domain, and to create a dialogue with the city. It is a symbolic social action that implies further collective social action.

With linkages to revolutionary art and commemorations, the origins of urban art in the modern era are generally traced to Philadelphia and New York in the late 1960s, to New York City's 1970s subway art movement and 1980s hip-hop culture, and to São Paulo in the 1970s in the context of censorship by the rise of military power. During the 1980s and 1990s, political 'clean up' and aggressive anti-graffiti campaigns, led by cities such as São Paulo and New York City, resulted in many art works - both sanctioned and non-sanctioned - being painted over, with many images lost or irreparably damaged. While anti-graffiti materials and tactics continue to be active in many cities, in recent years, the artistic value of urban art works has been widely recognized and legitimated by visual art world institutions, with many urban artists gaining international fame and cities (such as Lisbon) celebrating and promoting their urban art dimension.

The study of the role of graffiti and street art as a means of political resistance in conflict situations is informed by the research of Julie Peteet (1996) and Bill Rolston (1987), who examined graffiti in the West Bank during the Intifada and wall murals in Northern Ireland during the 1980s. Since the Arab Spring of 2011, the explosion of urban art in the streets of cities in Egypt, Syria, Libya, Tunisia, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia have been the focus of scholarly, artistic, and popular attention as a lens into social change and the voices of the public. These studies

and writings suggest that urban art can function as a means of political resistance by “envisioning competing futures, inscribing memory and critically commenting on political events” (de Ruiter, 2015, p. 582).

Urban art is an important instrument of appropriation, protest, and transgression of established or dominant values and messages, from which new forms of occupation of urban space and artistic perceptions are generated. As an act of claiming public space, it is linked to the ‘right to the city’ and related movements. Through urban art, the city itself becomes the vehicle for urban communication: urban art merges with the life of the city, the street, connected directly with the ‘here and now’, the mutual movements and processes of transformation and identification of its citizens/residents. As an act that can change the signification of public space, urban art can define the city landscape, introducing place-marking/place-making elements into a locality and building points of common recognition and appreciation.

In the spaces of conflict situations and dramatic social change, these roles become sharply evident and vital. For example, in the streets of Cairo, the January 2011 Egyptian revolution sparked a sudden, irrepressible tide of revolutionary urban art. The artworks celebrate and comment on the revolution, revealing a spirit of collective optimism for a peaceful future as well as ongoing resistance. Reflecting the political freedoms won during the first phase of the revolution, the art takes political ownership of the street and becomes a site for criticizing and exposing the regime, for counteracting and offering a counter-discourse to government propaganda, for offering commentaries on the political and social situation, and for mobilizing further protests continuing the demands of revolution.

Urban art has become emblematic of the importance and relevance of the artist to society - highlighting issues of freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and also censorship. In situations where people’s freedoms are restricted, artists take to the street to express the feelings of the public (and their own), intending to have their work displayed for the immediate public and, increasingly, the wider world via the Internet. Urban art offers insightful keys to understanding a city’s living history: its tensions, critiques, struggles, and aspirations. Beyond this, urban art offers an avenue to transform the streets into a space for democratic dialogue and discussion about politics and society, and to foster a participatory and emancipatory cultural environment.

References and further readings:

De Ruiter, Adrienne. (2015), “Imaging Egypt’s political transition in (post-) revolutionary street art: On the interrelations between social media and graffiti as media of communication”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 37(4): 581-601.

Peteet, Julie. (1996), “The writings on the wall: The Graffiti of the Intifada”, *Cultural Anthropology*, 11(2): 139-159.

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