

FELLOWSHIP FINAL REPORT

Art and the City: Urban Space, Art, and Social Movements

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of visual practices, engagements, and tactics on the streets and plazas of the cities connect art to the political constitution of local struggles on the one hand, and the global grassroots politics of the social movements, on the other. This project investigates the ideologies, relationships, meanings and practices that arise from the diverse interactions among the three social spheres: urban space, art, and social movements. In an innovative and multidisciplinary fashion, it addresses the pressing question in humanities and social sciences : How does art, as a cultural form, partake in contemporary urban transformations and social struggle ?

The aesthetic dimension in the political and the political dimension in art coincide in the contested terrain of the urban public space. This proposed project does not repeat the exhausted questions, such as whether contemporary art can be an impetus for social change or how much it is involved in politics. Instead, it analyzes how art merges with new political formations and becomes a vital part of the constitution of a new understanding of political participation. It further engages in art's critical, aesthetic, dialogical, communicative and creative powers from the perspective of social mobilization and creation of political commons.

The prolific significance of this project is in its multi-perspective approach to bring together three different dimensions in the intersection of art, urban space and social movements: "art and neoliberal urban transformation," "urban art interventions" and "art in social movements." The contribution that the project intends to make for state of the art is its ability to bring together the theories and discussions on art's twofold role in urban planning and collective resistance, its debated function as an aesthetic intervention in the public space and its envisaged place in urban social movements.

Introduction All artistic practices have a political dimension because they play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order but also creating challenges to it. Art has a long story of standing at the forefront of movements for social justice and political change. By challenging long-held ideas, provoking different perspectives, and inspiring plural understanding, art can affect, influence, and change individuals and society. Art and political action do not exist as two separate social spheres but in fact are

codependent. Articulating different modes of political and aesthetic contestations in a multiplicity of urban public places, this project examines the artistic strategies in social resistance and political strategies in the art in the context of the urban space and social resistance.

Through a multi-disciplinary lens that combines social movement studies, urban studies, sociology, art history and philosophy, this project maps the contemporary landscape of

“art” and “politics” to capture art’s critical place in the urban social resistance.

1- Experimental details

Urban space is a highly complex and multifaceted notion that covers a wide variety of social and public locations, ranging from the street to the squares, from the park to the media, from the neighborhood to global institutions and international markets. The urban space is increasingly defined by a process of exclusion based on race, gender, class, sexuality, age, disability, while it has become increasingly regulated and policed. On the one hand, it is a symbolic sphere for the state to display its power, on the other hand, it is a physical ground for political action as a site of protest for the labor movement, women’s rights, sexual liberation, racial equality, urban justice etc. This dialectics of access and exclusion, law and custom, power and protest is one of the defining features of the urban space.

The space of the city is then a complex territory, a territory of struggle and negotiation, of contestation and reappropriation that happens through the creation of common and shared spaces for socialisation, activism and political action. The contemporary urban space can therefore be defined not just as ‘war over space’ but war over images in that very space—a politics of occupation and liberation.

Art in the urban space manifests the contestations for visibility, theorized by Jacques Rancière in his analysis of the “distribution of the sensible”—which he explains as the political regime of visibility that regulates visibility in public spaces and the regime of art that polices the boundaries of art and artists (Rancière, 2004). Jacques Rancière uses the concept of ‘the police’ to describe the ways in which power is organised in the public space through institutions and the political processes in order to legitimate the roles and subject positions that people are able to occupy. The police order maintains the hierarchical structures of the social order based on assumptions about individuals’ different and unequal capacities. In contrast to the police *politics*, for Rancière, involves a radical dis- or re-ordering of the social world and this is enacted through an aesthetic redistribution which recognizes all

people’s intellectual and creative capacities, and enables different forms of knowledge to be expressed and different roles and subjectivities to be expressed in the urban space.

Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière have discussed art’s potential to reveal the hegemonically-constructed borders of visibility and invisibility. For those two contemporary philosophers, aesthetic practices have a political dimension for their role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order, and the political has an aesthetic aspect because it concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations. This renders the function of aesthetics in the public space in an inherently dialectical position. The aesthetic reconfiguration of the neoliberal city does not only allow for a hegemonic restructuring of the urban environment, but it also facilitates the growth of counter-hegemonic resistance.

Urban space art and social movements are three social spheres that do not often come together in the scholarly discussions. The analysis of art’s role in the urban space of social mobilizations results in a multitude of spatial dynamics and the emotional, communicative and aesthetic interactions, is still academically weak although art is very well recognized to have had an essential part during the Egyptian and Tunisian revolution (Abaza 2012), Spanish Indignados (Ramírez Blanco 2018), Greek Agdesemeni movement (Tsilimpoudini 2016) and the Gezi Uprising (Tunali 2018). It is even argued that the civil war in Syria is triggered by a graffiti work in Dara’a (Asher-Shapiro 2016).

The socio-political character of these movements has been explored extensively from the point of plural resistance against authoritative government, collective identity and a political struggle over public space. It has not yet been comprehensively studied from the point of the intersection of aesthetics and politics of the urban space. On the other hand, most research related to the arts in social resistance—both from a social science perspective, as well as from a community arts perspective—tends to emphasize the therapeutic, unitary or reconciliatory attributes of art in contested public spaces, paying attention to how

art contributes to ease tensions between communities and city authorities.

My research investigates the ideologies, relationships, meanings and practices that arise from the diverse interactions among the three social spheres: urban space, art, and social resistance. In an innovative and multidisciplinary fashion, it addresses the pressing questions in both humanities and social sciences: How does spatial politics of late neoliberalism demand new interactions of the way artist—as well as audiences, spectators, institutions and the art market—approach the common life in the urban space? Could spatial aesthetics be the arena and context within which political transformations take place? What kind of political and aesthetic possibilities could emerge in the intersection of the spatial and dialogical premises of art and the ideological and economic premise of the new urban planning?

Street art is thus always an assertion, a competition, for visibility; all the while urban public space is always a place of competition for power by managing the power of visibility. To be visible is to be known, to be recognized, to exist. Recognition is both an internal code within the community of practice of street artists, and the larger social effect sought by the works as acts in public, or publically viewable, space.

The acts of visibility, separable from the anonymity of many street artists, have become part of the social symbolic world, and finally, of urban ritual, repetitions that instantiate communal beliefs and bonds of identity. Thus, art is a defining element of urban culture through creative dynamics that reflect territorially embedded mechanisms but also particular social and cultural processes that I have investigated and analyzed.

2- Results and discussion

The creative and spatial dynamics of the urban space offer us a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary perspective to analyze how the dominant modes of power are reproduced and how the marginalized are kept outside the spaces of the performance of power. Art can give us answers about the manifestations of

power, shows us its everyday presence and representation, and helps us understand how these play out in our daily lives.

My research demonstrates that art has an active presence in the urban space characterised by a dynamic becoming and a continuous creative change. In fact, it interacts with and draws attention to often hidden features and qualities of the urban space, it appropriates and re-appropriates them and highlights the fact that this is a territory of antagonism. For example, street art interventions can be seen as moments, gestures, acts of fracture and dissent in the everyday life, against a given social, moral and spatial order. They have the potential create an opening, a breach in the 'grammar of power' and new zones for resistance.

My research discusses that street art is an assertion, a competition, for visibility; all the while urban public space is always a place of competition for power by managing the power of visibility. To be visible is to be known, to be recognized, to exist. Recognition is both an internal code within the community of practice of street artists, and the larger social effect sought by the works as acts in public, or publically viewable, space. The acts of visibility, separable from the anonymity of many street artists, become part of the social symbolic world, and finally, of urban ritual, repetitions that instantiate communal beliefs and bonds of identity.

I have come to the conclusion that much of street art practice follows the logic of transgressions, appropriations, and tactics described in Michel de Certeau's, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau discusses how ordinary urban citizens navigate and negotiate their positions in power systems that markup the city space. Breaking up the totalizing notion of those dominated by power as passive consumers, de Certeau shows that daily life is made, a creative production, constantly appropriating and reappropriating the products, messages, spaces for expression, and territories of others. Street art and urban artist collectives are acts of engagement and reorganization, therapeutics based on reappropriations and redeployments of the dominant image economy

and hierarchical distribution of space experienced in metropolitan environments.

This visibility is often conceived of as conversion or reclamation of public space, or as creative destruction, wherein wrongly privatized space is returned to its rightful owners. My research elaborates on the thesis that public art is not merely art in the urban public space, but art that institutes a public place—a place of interaction and common action among people. I have tested the hypothesis that through the establishment of certain type of public spaces, interventionist artistic practices in the streets contribute to the creation of a determined public—a specific audience. This part majorly deals with art's fundamental function as means to creating dialogical and interactive public spaces.

3- Conclusion

In the time of neoliberal urban redesign and restructuring, when commercial interests gain too much influence over public space, the ultimate result is a destruction of the sense of shared ownership of that space (that it belongs to the people) and an erosion of civic identity. Furthermore, public interaction becomes carefully planned, mediated, and commodified.

Urban public space, are areas for interaction and encounter but also for self-expression, symbolic affirmation and collective construction of the commons. The arts present us with the possibility of unmediated social interaction that leads to greater control over the production and use of urban public space. In a world connected through hegemonic discourses that tend to erase the conditions that make it possible to sustain democratic grassroots activity, the anti-hegemonial capacity of urban aesthetics to hold enough ground to become a conditioning factor is a fundamental issue that I have address throughout my work. Central to this discussion are, the production and reproduction of space and time as the base for political as well as social relations. Thus, it is important that either from the perspective of political aesthetics or political theory of the urban aesthetics, the aesthetic dimension of the urban space with multi-dimensional forms, roles, and theories of

art must be incorporated in the critical urban studies.

4- Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory

I would be eager to collaborate with my colleagues from my laboratory CITERES in the future as my colleagues in this laboratory are also specialized in Urban Studies research. I plan to organize a second conference on the same theme next year in another European institution with support and presence of my colleagues at CITERES. My other plan is to collaborate with them for my ERC project application that I will prepare in 2021.

5- Articles published in the framework of the fellowship

« Urban Aesthetics and the Right to the City »
The Journal of Urban Cultural Studies

« Carnavalesque Art Activism of the Recent Urban Social Movements. » In *Visual Activism in the 21st Century - Change and Resistance in An Uncertain World*. Darcy White and eds. London : Palgrave McMillan.

« Humorous Aesthetics in Urban Protests during the Political Ice Age » *International Journal of Humor Research*

« Le nouvel art de l'activisme: Esthétique et politique dans les mouvements sociaux »
» *The International Review of Contemporary Art Criticism*

The proposal for a special issue, based on the proceedings of the conference Rebel Streets : Urban Space, Art and Social Movement is sent to journal *CITY analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, and action*. The editing of the issue is ready. It will be sent upon the acceptance letter of the publisher.

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