

Public space as a place for the dispute of power

Levi Martins

Degree in Film Directing (ESTC), a masters in Theatre Studies (FLUL) and a post-graduation in Creative Industries and Cultures (FLUL, FBAUL, ESCS). He directs Companhia Mascarenhas-Martins, a theatre company based in Montijo.

Email: levimartins@gmail.com

In the territory, the power struggle appears between those who live the city as a collective creation and those who want to control their dynamics, as an appropriation of a “geographical and symbolic (space) and as a territory of social practices. (LÓPEZ 1998:188 apud KLEIN 2016:7)

Public space is a place of constant negotiation, a stage for the power struggle that establishes the limits of coexistence – rules and boundaries that do not always coincide with the ones that regulate private space. Since graffiti and street art are forms of artistic expression in public space, they contribute to that negotiation in distinct ways whether they are developed freely (and, in most cases, illegally), or as a response to institutional commissions – often made by public entities. The difference is especially evident in how power is exerted – from the spontaneous decision that arises from the artists themselves to the rules of the contest, or institutional commission, that are determined by political decision makers or representatives, according to the politics they wish to implement within their territories.

Let us analyze, for instance, the general dispositions of the rules of the City of Montijo’s Urban Art Contest promoted by Montijo’s Municipality in 2016:

Câmara Municipal do Montijo [Montijo’s Municipality], in the pursuit of public interest, wishes to dynamize the city’s historical center and strengthen the link between the arts and plastic expressions through creative projects to be applied in public space, arousing the community’s interest for contemporary art and, simultaneously, fighting the disorderly and indiscriminate use of graffiti in the city. (ANON 2016)

The ending of this paragraph is quite clear as to what extent the fight against the «disorderly and indiscriminate use of graffiti in the city» is one of the contest’s aims. In the framework that is presented in the third point of the same regulation, the theme of the work to be created is established:

Floriculture came about in Montijo at the beginning of the 70s. The favourable ecological and meteorological conditions, as well as the short distance to Lisbon’s Mercado da Ribeira, were the basis for the development of this activity. Since then, floriculture expanded remarkably, and currently 70 to 75% of all national production of cut flowers originates in the Municipality, the most produced species being the gerbera, the chrysanthemum, the rose, the carnation and the gladiolus. The gerbera is the dominant species, occupying around 50 acres of greenhouse facilities, which means that Montijo is one of the biggest producers of this flower in the Iberian Peninsula, which confers it the designation “Montijo, the Flower Capital”. Câmara Municipal do Montijo will hold a contest for the painting of an artistic mural, whose objective is to link the importance of the flower to an innovative, urban and attractive identity in Montijo’s historical center. (ANON 2016)

It becomes clear that this contest was meant to be a counterpoint to the disorderly practices of the artists that intervene in Montijo's public space, as well as a way of publicizing one of the city's most important identity defining elements, unsurprisingly connected to one of Montijo's most significant businesses: the cut flower. However innocent this move by local politicians might seem, what transpires is the idea that urban art should serve a public interest that could only be defined by the elected politicians and not directly by the population (the artists). Apparently, everything else is considered disorderly and indiscriminate. This is a potentially worrying step, as it paves the way for the legitimacy of instrumentalizing a kind of artistic expression that is, from its origins, linked to the utmost freedom – even to the extent in which it crosses the border of legality. In other words: it might not be exaggerated to assert that the possibility of a disorderly and even illegal intervention in public space might mean that there remains a certain degree of freedom that is not the one that is preferred by decision makers.

One might thus come to the conclusion that the tension between spontaneous action and whatever is made on order, or due to competitions that are put forward by public administration, might be interpreted as a power struggle between two opposing views of what society should be like: on the one hand, a society that is less based on rules and hierarchy, spontaneous, that doesn't let itself be limited; on the other, a hierarchical model, based upon the imposition of goals by a reduced number of individuals that (supposedly) represent the whole population.

In Montijo, this kind of strategy has been put forward in recent years, and there have been three examples of initiatives conducted by the Municipality, that involved three very diverse artists: Oze Arv, Bordalo II and João Rodrigues. The fact that their interventions have come about due to the Municipality's action, without a specific and adequate exhibition context, dictates that the works in question are foreign to their surrounding reality. This displacement turns them into objects that mainly communicate an affirmation of power (on behalf of the Municipality), placing them closer to public art than to urban art. This tendency for the instrumentalization of urban art by political decision makers might lead, in

the long run, to a status change in what regards these artistic practices – from marginal, illegal practices, to a mere response to institutional commissions. If this is the path for graffiti and street art, it is inevitable to ask the following questions: will this change of status lead to a complete redefinition of what we currently think of as urban art? Might it be possible to keep it as a challenge to the dominant order, associated, as it is, to a need for an expression of life in the public space? Will there be an end to the power struggle that is fought in public space, or will this space remain as a place of confrontation between order and rebellion, spontaneous, free identity, constantly challenging the normalization of life in society?



A work by Bordalo II that is part of the Big Trash Animals series. Avenida dos Pescadores, Montijo. Photo by Levi Martins.



A work by Oze Arv, winner of Concurso de Arte Urbana do Montijo [City of Montijo's Urban Art Contest] (2016). Photo by Levi Martins.



A work by João Rodrigues that was executed publicly in the context of “Festa da Flor” [The Flower Party], organized by Câmara Municipal do Montijo [Montijo’s Municipality]. Photo by Levi Martins.

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