

Anonymous Inscriptions in Rio de Janeiro Resistance and informal urban communication on the streets

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Abstract

Parallel to the moment graffiti becomes an integrated component, legal and regular part of the city walls of Rio de Janeiro (mainly owing to the laws and actions that legalize and legitimize a once transgressive practice) a new kind of artistic intervention in the city emerged. Phrases written with spray, stencil or even pasted on the walls have the power to surprise, to question and challenge the townspeople. Interventions that can be comprehended as what Certeau (1994) defines as strange practices in the geometric space of the big cities. Actions that refer to specific forms of operations, which provide new visibility in urban areas. If the space is a practiced place, as the author affirms, the written phrases on the walls transform not only the backing, but also the space in which they are written.

Keywords: Transgression, urban intervention, Rio de Janeiro

Ironic and provocative poetic phrases take the walls in a new kind of action that has intensified in the last years and has become more and more common on the walls of the city. Usually located in places of great movement of people, these phrases evoke thoughts about the daily lives of the individuals in the city. The walls, before covered only by colorful graffiti murals, begin to provide new experiences.

These are mostly anonymous inscriptions in which their authors also prefer to remain anonymous, away from the spotlight, the galleries and the media. A mean of resistance and informal and urban communication that presents specific characteristics and imperatives, which make their intervention a marginal practice that is highly relativized with the place and the moment of their inscription in a territorial correlation (Canclini, 2008). An experience that has the power to change the perception of used spaces as support to amplify its meanings. The space of the flow and the constant transformation becomes a space of renewal of the perceptual experiment.

These are interventions that contribute to defining the urban space of the city, creating new plots between wall and frontages, besides emphasizing new aspects, which until then were not enrolled in those places. The inscriptions contribute to rethinking the meaning of everyday actions, as well as its relations with the city, the architecture and the urban environment. This is a practice that redefines the specificity of these same supports and provides a new kind of esthetic, political, poetic or even ironic experience in the midst of daily life.

These are little actions that generate a kind of dislocation, a light modification in the urban landscape that can become a vector of an even bigger intervention through the reaction of the individuals who experiment with them. Modifications of a static support that facilitates an important dynamic. According to Maffesoli (2005), the post modern rhythm is made of the encounter of these fragments of non temporality, in which the ludic and the imaginary punctuate the daily life.



Fig. 1 Oraculo Project, Foto by Hely Costa Júnior,

“Stop here, appreciate life for a minute and smile”. The phrase of #*oraculo*project, painted inside a square in the ground, through stencil, invites a pause in daily life, a relief in the middle of the city chaos, one minute of leisure in the middle of the way. Oraculo, as the author prefers to be identified, remains anonymous and preserves their freedom of speech. They point out that it is a representation that fits into any citizen:

The stencil “stop here appreciate LIFE for a minute and smile,” represents gratitude for the opportunity to live all this ... In the rush of everyday life, with the amount of information we are bombarded with, we often forget to stop, enjoy LIFE (enjoy what you want ... without moderation, the air, the sea, the people around, etc.) and give thanks with a smile (Oraculo, in interview with the author on November 20, 2015).

Six years later, many are the interventions that were created and spread through the city, usually with versions in Portuguese and English, and using, most of the time, stencils as the vehicle for communication. These interventions open a way to the appreciation of the ephemeral and spontaneous in everyday life, and make it possible to understand the

sense that Holderlin gives the dwelling when they propose that, “the man poetically inhabits the world” (*Apud* Carlos, 2001, p. 216). Unlike contemporary graffiti seeking fame and recognition, it is about a kind of appropriation of the urban space, which implies acting, feeling and understanding the city in a different manner. These are inscriptions that contribute to the formation of identity and visibility in the city, modifying it while humanizing it.

In the same series, there is the “stop here, make a wish, leave and make it happen.” Symbolizing the dreams and the ability to fulfill them, it does not depend on Santa Claus or the tooth fairy, but you, and only you. Serves as motivation, like a push ... Whatever your desire ... Make it happen! (Oraculo, in interview with the author on November 20, 2015).

Among the other interventions cited by Oraculo, can be listed: a star with the phrase “you are a star”, that has the objective to work as a cuddle in the middle of pedestrians, a way to show how each person is unique and special; an “x” with the saying “right place right time”, meaning that all places are right places to be and move forward; the phrase put in the cycle ways “run and never look back”, that at first refers to an incentive to healthy living, but also to forget the

grudges of the past without regrets; the “Déja-vu” painted in public places like crosswalks reinforces the sensation that that moment had been experimented with previously and also the paint, with red ink over tree trunks that have been cut, as if it was blood from the tree, they seek to alert us to the destruction of nature.

In the middle of the hectic and chaotic Rio de Janeiro, the *oraculoproject* seems to show that man is more than a productive being and that our relations go beyond our insertion in the flexible modes of production imposed by capitalism. For the author, it is a transgressive poetry project, which uses the art as so-called urban vehicle and so differs from graphite and graffiti, although using the same space and tools.

I believe that the oraculoproject is located in an art niche where art extends up where you can not measure or imagine. I'm not sure who will go through there, what will this citizen think, if he will be touched or not, if it will make a difference in his life ... or even if he will realize that this is art (Oraculo, Apud Menezes; Mazzacaro, 2016, s/p).

A political action that can be understood as an instance, in its strongest sense, that defines the social life, limiting it, and constraining it while allowing its existence (Maffesoli, 2015). Interventions that provoke ruptures in the mechanical order of the city and that introduce a kind of discontinuity. A small, often fleeting transformation that has the power to change the surroundings and take the question to the irregular rhythm of daily life. These inscriptions are produced from the appropriation of public spaces, involving them with irony, poetry, politics, and so transforming them. An act that moves away from repetitive gestures, standard behavior and reproduction, lifting off the homogeneity imposed by daily life and allowing us to think about the limits imposed by the city space time. As phrases such as “Have you loved today?” spread through streets and avenues, it can be said, as stated by Le Breton (2006), a new emotional culture, averse to the rhythm and values imposed by capitalist society, is under social construction in the city.

In the white walls and forgotten spaces as low walls of gardens, as well as the same walls where authorized graffiti

are carried out and legitimized by society, emerge these phrases that act as a form of resistance, escape possibilities and gateway. Inscriptions that establish themselves from the multiplicity and the social fabric networks as a form of resistance appear in multiple spots, prone to transgress, disobey, resist and rebel. Where there is a relationship of power, there is also a perspective of resistance and opposition (Foucault, 1985).

These are forces that converge to the defense of freedom. Strategic games between freedom and anonymity of who paints them and the alienation of graffiti artists, in which the market and the laws attempt to control their behavior while other people fight to not be dominated. Phrases that can be noticed as a transversal struggle, immediate and questioning of subjectivity that is opposed to the forms of individualization consolidated by economic reason, ideological or administrative, which overlaps the graphite, as well as its privileges.

Thus, these inscriptions are, at the same time, a “subjectivation experience” and a “freedom experimentation” (Proust, 2000 p.21). A proof of an act of vitality, an individual impulse, within the current context of urban art. An urban subconscious, in which a cultural marginality emerges again. As free, ethical, sensitive, and rational beings, in the context of political struggles, the anonymous authors of these sentences, in their daily confrontations, become subjects of their practices, or, contrariwise, of their renounce to practices that are set by the market and, therefore, can reconstruct and retake their place and role. It can be said that the main objective of these phrases is not to attack individuals or institutions. It is a form of resistance that is practiced against the apparatus, methods and artifices developed to meet, classify, regulate and control society.

In short, the sentences are located within a relationship of struggle, a symbolic territory of cultural expression and contrast, generating a non-hegemonic opposition force. They exercise a resistance force, a force that is like power: inventive, mobile and productive, a potency that comes from below and is spread tactically. They have violated the order and can thus reveal the domination and the existing counterdomination in the street art world. They subvert the esthetics of ordered graffiti, legitimized and often under curatorship,



Fig. 1 “não fui eu”, Foto by Hely Costa Júnior,

and replace the ethics of visibility, nonconformity and resistance. A symbolic and at the same time material way to demark spaces in the city that are used by the most diverse subjects, and an appropriation of the urban environment through marks of cultural expression and resistance to power.

According to Mondardo and Goettert (2008), the city is before everything a form of speech, in which the patronization would reveal a supposed harmonic among the individuals: the pattern is present in order that it should not and can not be stained, dirty, scribbled. Thus, the phrases have a game character, a ritual, or even a vehicle of information that disobey a prohibition, be it for the execution of an transgressive inscription or its contents (Leandri, 1982).

Thus, such interventions can be comprehended as political and symbolical marks, a way of popular expression that criticizes the order imposed by the State and the dominant classes (Canclini, 2008, p. 339.) In this sense, the political

can be thought of as a series of inevitable needs that generate conflicts and negotiations, paradoxes and tensions responsible for relations with others. As defined by Rancière (2006), retaking the Foucault perspective, a set of activities that trouble and shake the legitimating interests of the community order by means of the agency of equality. It is in this sense that the practice of writing questioning, political or ironic phrases over the walls can be understood as a practice of dissent.

The dissent has, as a goal, the indention of the sensible and the separation of public and private spaces as well as the actors who can occupy these environments. A conflict about the sensible organization of the world, in which the phrases throughout the city as “Não Fui Eu”, emerge like instruments of these conflicts. The dissent gives subsidy to the resistance, conflict, discussion and argumentation.

According to the artist author to the phrase, who prefers to be identified as *Não Fui Eu* (always written in big letters and with spray) the work started with an

interest in the street as a vehicle of ideas and also in the *pixação*¹ (graffiti). While the graffiti is a signature that claims authorship, and therefore the field of space, his work is a “signature that denies the very authorship – an antithesis of the very *pixação*” (Nã Fui Eu, in interview with the author in January 10, 2015). A poetical potency emerges from this debate and, above all, from the different interpretations and readings that it can have in the urban space.

Given that the politics emerge when the subjects of the dissent, that until a moment have no voice or visibility, break the silence and gain space in the public scene (Rancière, 2004), “Nã Fui Eu” is an action that gets clearly political profiles. It assumes an anti-speech in places and moments when it should not do so, and when it does, it is from there a political action and its creator and author, a political subject. In this context, the phrase rises as a weapon of contestation and transgression.

I am aware that the places that I occupy most part are private property, which can lead me into legal problems. I prefer that my work is known, but I do not - what gives me more independence to come and go and enhances the rhetoric of work (Nã Fui Eu, in interview with the author on January 10, 2015).

These are actions that are capable of creating fissures in the sensible order, in order to confront social structures and their divisions and create new fields belongingness. Pallami remembers, “nothing in itself is political, but it can become political as it operates under the dissensual rationality” (Pallami, 2010, p. 8). Thus, the political subject, *Nã Fui Eu* becomes himself an agent of manifestation through their phrases spread by the city. The political subject is not the one who just becomes conscious of himself but, above all, the one who becomes an agent of the dissent - a declassification operator capable of undoing the police structure that limits the place and the functions of each body inside society.

The political subjects do not exist as stable entities. They exist as subjects in act, as punctual and local capacities to build on its virtual universality, those

¹ Pixação, graphed with the letter x, according to the phrase’s author is a neologism created by the taggers as something that unifies the graffiti culture.

controversial worlds that undo the police order. So they are always precarious, always likely to be confused again with simple plots of the social body that just ask the optimization of you. (Rancière Apud Novaes, 1996, p. 278)

The politics have no determinate place or event predetermined subjects: the dissent brakes the instituted and given as natural organization, in which the domination relations are consolidated and rooted, in order to change the histories and places defined there, in some kind of battle about the sensible. As *Nã Fui Eu* affirms, he prefers to remain isolated from the graffiti artists and taggers groups for the sake of the autonomy of his work.

*I do not classify my work, others ranks it based on their personal experiences. I’ve heard some say that is graffiti and not *pixação* because they like and they think it is beautiful, I think this is bullshit. For me is *pixação* and / or a work of art that speaks to the media that it is made of: *pixação*... I do not belong to any crew nor paint with graffiti or other taggers, despite knowing the media I prefer to keep my job autonomous, without linking me to any “pot” (Nã Fui Eu, in interview with the author on January 10, 2015).*

The policy has an inherent esthetic dimension that emerges in the sensible form, directly related to the sensitive and political, simultaneously.

The system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience (Rancière, 2004, p.13).

Interventions like these fit in what the author calls “share of the sensible”. An action with an ever-controversial character, which affects the ways of being and the ways they divide the occupations of individuals in the ordinary world and its possibilities in a controversial area in which certain presences do not reach the visibility and voices not heard. This share of the sensible constitute an unequal division among equals, which directly relates to the political

dimension present there. It is when “the political denounce is open to poetry and the popular poetry covers itself of political density” (Martin-Barbero, 2009, p.279), the combination and the union of different ways of rebellion configure and register the protest in the urban fabric. Despite *Não Fui Eu* claiming that his work is close to graffiti, it is an action that goes beyond the simple demarcation of space. Thus like the other inscriptions already cited they are different from the graffiti defined by Moura (1990), as language splinters, or even manifestos of those who have nothing to say, because they are strange signs that are installed in the continuum of language from a discontinuity in an ideological and unreadable confrontation. The carioca phrases are interventions that bring to light some kind of conflict. Not a point of view or acknowledgment of conflict, but a shock on the construction of a common world, from the claim of another kind of share from the society, in which affirms a contingency of the social order. Thus, the practice of dissent is an invention that makes you witness both worlds into one, an action that builds litigious and paradoxical worlds, in which they reveal together two cutouts of the sensible world.

From this litigious relation among social groups constitute the political subjects that can be understood as “powers of enunciation and manifestagion of the litigation that inscribe themselves as something more, something overlapped, regarding any composition of a social body” (Rancière *Apud* Novaes, 1996, p. 277).

In general, one can say that the writings on the walls of Rio de Janeiro, are what Rancière (2005) calls models for building a pluralistic world. Models that interpellate the dominant esthetic and activate the participation of an emancipated spectator, who has the ability to manage images produced, as well as creating a regime that resists dispersion and neutralization. Unlike the passive spectator that only consumes and applauds an artistic object, such as a graffiti mural, the spectator or reader that perceives, interacts or photograph the misspelled phrases on the city walls, is able to act, create and build their own maps from their relationship with what they read, poetic, political, social or ironic phrases. Phrases that have no effect, but effect a change of perception, through which individuals can see other realities.

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