

Why can't our wall paintings last forever?

The creation of identity symbols of street art

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Abstract

The concept of ephemerality has been used in the last decades as the opposite of memory preservation. In this article, I seek to understand the valorization of street art as cultural heritage, as well as the strategies that have been adopted for its preservation in a non-institutional context.

Keywords: Public Space, Preservation, Authenticity, Graffiti, Cultural Heritage

1 - This article was based on a communication held on June 16, 2016, at the Lisbon Street Art & Urban Creativity – International Conference, at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Lisbon. Later, a proposal for a deeper reflection on this subject came out, within the scope of the International Conference – Public Art in the Digital Creativity Era, organized by the Catholic University of Portugal – Porto, on April 28 and 29, 2017, which resulted in an article written in Portuguese titled “Efemeridade vs. memória – Novos processos de patrimonialização da street art”. Given the initial context of these reflections, an English version of the same text is published in this journal.

1. Introduction

The concept of ephemerality has been used in the last decades as the opposite of memory preservation. In fact, the first works carried out in this context intended to fight the eternalization process that is typical of museum objects. However, we have been witnessing the failure of this concept, leading to the risk of disappearance of the material memories of contemporary art, which often hides behind this principle of ephemerality because of the difficulties associated with the material preservation of its conceptual ideas.

Contemporary mural paintings, which proliferate on the walls of our cities, are an example of this reality. Whether they are done in a marginal or in an institutional context, we note that many emblematic examples, executed by internationally known artists, are gradually disappearing. These events are mirrored in newspaper news, and they are also the target of numerous comments in the internet social pages, where ideas and principles related to the concept of cultural heritage can be perceived. In some countries, legal measures have already been taken to protect works seen as symbolic by local and international communities (Schilling, 2012; Rayner, 2008).

A careful analysis of some paintings done in a marginal context, which were recognized for their artistic value at an institutional level, shows us that there are parallel processes of symbolic identification that culminate in the preservation of these paintings. Despite the non-compliance with the normal procedures used in the western context, the process of turning these elements into heritage, as well as the measures taken to preserve them, end up guaranteeing the symbolic permanence of the painting in the wall. Their value may be defined due to their existence as elements of historical memory, representing the first manifestations of graffiti in Portugal, due to their connection with important artists or, even, due to their origin as monuments erected in memory of someone who died unexpectedly. We are witnessing a process that, in its genesis, follows international definitions of the concept of cultural heritage, in which the community is responsible for identifying its symbolic elements and for their management and preservation.

2. Cultural heritage and identity

As we analyze the international charters, as well as the numerous publications and reflections on the subject, we witness the evolution of the concept of Cultural Heritage throughout the 20th century. It started by the individual element valuation, attributed by a given social class, within very defined parameters, but, gradually, it opened to the concept of “good” identified by a community who enjoys it and gives it a very specific symbolic meaning related to an Identity value. We are still trying to understand the difficult resolution problems associated with this change of direction, especially in what concerns the preservation of these elements.

Among the various international regulations, we can refer to the Charter of Krakow 2000 – Principles for the Conservation and Restoration of Built Heritage, where we find the following definition:

Heritage is that complex of man’s works in which a community recognizes its particular and specific values and with which it identifies. Identification and specification of heritage is therefore a process related to the choice of values.

(The Charter of Krakow 2000)

Far from a set of previously defined attributes which dictated the values of an object granting it the status of heritage, this identification is now governed by much larger concepts, resulting in an increase of objects or events to which this status can be attributed. Cultural heritage is now seen as the reflection of a community, with the mission of taking the past to future generations, in order to explain to them their present time (Avrami et al., 2000: 10); We no longer select objects only from the past, but also those of the present. We are the ones who define what will represent us in the future, and what is the best image for our descendants to know who we once were and to understand themselves:

This state of affairs is the postmodern context, where today’s “lifestyle” is being transmuted into tomorrow’s “cultural heritage,” and it prompts the identification of a number of interesting themes that are potential sites for the invention of new heritage (Pearce, 2000: 63).

This extension of the concept and, especially, of the temporal spectrum in which these goods are to be kept, raises new questions to be solved in terms of their preservation. The interventions’ modus operandi has changed and will continue to evolve (Avramamon et al., 2000: 7), as does society, which values goods and has different expectations about their symbolic message. This results in an arbitrary object of interpretation and changes the criteria for an eventual restoration intervention. We mark the object with our version of the future, where it will be interpreted considering its transformations over time, and depending on the social and cultural context of those who were previously responsible for its maintenance. This valuation can be positive or negative, and it will be the resultant version of this interpretation that we will pass onto our successors, whether it may be one of preservation or of degradation (Lowenthal, 2000: 23).

According to François Hartog (2006), this urgency to safeguard as many elements from our presence as we can, as if we were afraid of losing our collective memory, or even our individual one, is the result of a confusion of times. In fact, this vertigo in taking measures for the preservation of the objects that represent us may be related to the rapid social and technological evolution of the last decades. “The past has become much closer and the future is tomorrow” (Alves, 2014: 22).

Gradually we are witnessing the appearance of new types of heritage, designated as “Emerging Heritage” by Marie Berducou (2013), including industrial, technical and scientific heritage, in which contemporary art should also be integrated.

The preservation of contemporary works of art is not a recent concern. Since the 19th century, when technological practices began to change, artists have been expressing their concern about the maintenance of their works. Duchamp himself is a good example of this. Despite the apparent contradiction in his production methods there is a reflection on this subject, which led to the use of more durable materials and techniques (Pohlad, 2000). On the other hand, the dematerialization of art has caused several problems in its preservation, not only because of the prevalence of the concept over the form, but also because of the poor quality of its materials.

As ephemeral art seeks a transient state, a birth and a death, it opposes itself to the concept of a museum object, for which preservation is a top priority – as if the piece could become

“frozen” for the enjoyment of future generations (Alves, 2014: 22). However, and despite these creators’ will, we often see objects of ephemeral art entering this “institution”, even with the permission of the artist, and this new framework creates numerous problems for those responsible for their preservation within the Museum.

Recently, street art has joined this group. Its multiplication throughout the streets of the city, as well as its symbolic importance within a marginal group, results in the assignment of new values that led to the development of many studies, with contributions from various areas. In a different paper, we established a parallelism with the principles enumerated by David Throsby (2000: 29). At the time, we highlighted the aesthetic value, related to the development of a new taste, identified by new generations; the spiritual value, attributed through the symbolic identification of the elements that are represented and the messages they carry; the social value, through which a connection with the “other” is made and a sense of identity can be found; and the symbolic value, because it reflects a generation’s sense of identity (Alves, 2014). This last aspect results in a historical valuation within the group, as we will see later.

The ease with which the image of these artistic manifestations circulates in the virtual world results in a new aesthetic taste diffusion, defining new contemporary artistic movements that, when separated from the marginality, enter the art market, where they end up achieving the status of an artistic object and, thus, acquire an economic value.

By achieving this status, the ephemerality of these objects becomes an abstract concept. In fact, the very identification of these objects as perennial can raise questions. Fernando Saavedra advocates that:

El carácter efímero que se asigna al graffiti de modo general es una convención social heredera del concepto de infamia y que se proyecta, hoy por hoy, para fortalecer esa férrea dicotomía entre arte de calle y museo-mercado del arte. (The ephemeral character attributed to graffiti in general is a social convention inheriting the concept of infamy and it is projected, today, to strengthen that iron dichotomy between street art and the museum-art market.) (Saavedra, 2015: 10).

Concealed behind this question, the lack of responsibility for the preservation of street art prevails.

However, identity bonds quickly begin to develop leading

to the need for the preservation of street art. We come to regard these elements of street art as our patrimony, and, by becoming symbols of our identity, they cannot be in any way devalued. On the other hand, within the very hierarchical “graffiti community”, there is an overvaluation of certain individuals, as leaders or as representatives of the first manifestations of this type of artistic expression in Portugal, leading to the exaltation and desire for permanence of their testimonies, of their contributions to the definition of the city image.

This different approach in the process of valuing our assets is explained by Ulpiano Meneses. This author draws attention to the multiplicity of values attributable to a monument. Not only from the point of view of those who change over time (Alves, s.d.), but in the different values given by those who enjoy a different aspect of this same heritage, at the same time. In fact, the way we interact with a monument is different when it is part of our day-to-day life, our history, our identity, or when we are the “other” who visits it, who comes from outside and who will understand it, obviously, in a different way (Meneses, 2010). This question is fundamental to understand the reflections that will be presented next.

There are two possible approaches regarding street art. On the one hand, we have an institutionalized point of view, on the other, a marginal one. The first case and some of the strategies that have been developed all over the world, have already been studied previously (Alves, 2014), although our approach lacks an obvious and necessary update – if we go through the internet pages, we will find new interventions for the protection of contemporary mural painting that have been carried out everywhere, everyday. As for the marginal question, there is still much to understand. The close observation of the reality that surrounds us, as well as the contributions and opinions that we can find on the internet, are essential tools for the social study of contemporary communities. This allows us to make some reflections of extreme relevance for the modern understanding of the concept of heritage and open a way to the acceptance of other non-institutionalized models of preservation.

3. Different ways of safeguarding identity symbols

Despite the marginal character of the “graffiti community”, within which there are special rules and code systems, studied by anthropologists (Campos, 2010), and through the analysis of paintings that have been maintained (or not) and

the reactions aroused by these processes, we can perceive the existence of a tendency for the preservation of paintings considered as symbolic by the community.

Actually, and despite the fact that the ephemeral character of these paintings is absolutely evident and accepted by all, when some symbols begin to be at risk, we see the creation of movements to defend them or to lament their disappearance (when it is already too late). In some cases, we can observe their preservation in situ or their continuous symbolic re-creation. Far from the ethical principles around the preservation of an ephemeral work of art (Gay, 2015: 99) which dictate the work of professionals in conservation and restoration, in this case the community takes up the responsibility of maintaining its own symbols.

This type of identification is related to the contemporary definition of heritage mentioned before. In this case, the community identifies its symbolic/patrimonial elements, and manages its preservation. This process is accelerated because the generations succeed one another very quickly, since this is a predominantly juvenile movement.

In this paper, I reflect on three distinct valuation processes. The first is related to a historical memory that justifies the community's identity.

A good example of this is the well-known boy, or "snotty boy" from the Amoreiras hall of fame in Lisbon. This painting was made in 1996 by Uber and has lasted until the present day, something that is extraordinary in this context. Around it everything changes, the wall is painted and repainted, but there, in that corner, the figure of a child's face is always present and marks the identity of the city. The layers of paint overlap one another, preserving the older paintings underneath, away from our eyes, but keeping the memory of this artistic movement in our country.

This piece is important because it was carried out by an element of the first "generation" of Portuguese graffitiers, in a non-institutionalized context, and it was intended as a social criticism of the economic center existing in that area of the city. On the other hand, it is one of the first Portuguese portraits painted in this way (some claim that it is the first).

Although there were changes in the elements around the boy's face, until 2010, the original image was kept. Only in April that year was it covered. This event caused a great impression on the community. Because of this, the first recreation, in a different version, the Ranhoso v.2.1 (Snotty

boy v. 2.1), was also performed that month, accompanied by praise for its original author. On the internet we can find a testimony left by the authors of this second version, dated April 23, 2010:

OUR TRIBUTE TO OUR TRIBE. and friends.

O RANHOSO V.2.1

Uber painted this kid face more or less 14 years ago.... Amoreiras Wall. Many many people had paint in this wall and always had respect or some kind of special feeling on this kid face. also respect for the writer...more or less one month ago it was crossed with a throw-up! ;(and after that more writers went over the spot... normal. Painting don't last forever... we know that and that's why we take pictures! but in the last 2 years we have been losing part of our culture.... so many cleaned walls.... Ice-Tea, Abraço, BAIRRO ALTO..... and..... "o Ranhoso". for many of us this was a masterpiece stopped in time. cross overs I understand! in the bombing mode or it the fame mode.... and they are different. In a place like Amoreiras if you go Over some painting you must do it BETTER AND BIGGER!!! we made our tribute..... "O RANHOSO" v.2.1 and the most amazing was that when we were painting there were common people coming to us and sending real props and telling that they were missing that kid..... he was always there not only for the graffiti community but for all Lisbon... a SYMBOL. RANHOSOS É O QUE SOMOS! ;) Respect History and Make it Real MAKE IT ALIVE. BIG BIG UP ARM we ARE (ARM, 2010)

In this text, we can identify several elements that fit perfectly into the concept of heritage, and we verify the historical importance of this painting within the graffiti community, as well as within the city.

After this event, the painting was painted over again by an unknown person, taking the original artist back to the wall, 15 years later, to make a new version of the little boy who had been inspired by the cover of a magazine in the nineties.

Later, the painting was covered with the figure of a new boy. This time in a modernized version, holding a spray can. However, this version did not please the community, and after a short time, Aspen reconstituted the "Snotty boy" again, in the version that we can still observe. There are no

visual records of other actions between these two paintings, but this hypothesis should not be discarded.

Although the original painting was not kept, the theme remains. Failing to recover the original materiality of the object, the community took care of the preservation of its symbolism on the same wall, guaranteeing the existence of this identity element, at that emblematic site.

Another example of the cultural importance given to this type of art was shown in the reactions to the disappearance of a Hazul Luzah painting. In this case, there is a valorization of the artist that begins at the final moment of his work (Diógenes, 2013), painted three years earlier. Due to the initiatives of the Municipality of Porto, in 2013, this painting was “erased” with yellow paint (Martins, 2013). This practice was generalized in the city, but it was not exclusive of this place, or even of our country. In Brazil these actions were the target of much criticism.

In the present case, the act was photographed and published on the web pages by the author himself, leading to a great debate about the difference between art and vandalism (Diógenes, 2015: 691). Again, in addition to the sentence later written in the same place: “Aqui morava um “grafito”. Que descanse em paz” (Here lived a “grafito”. May it rest in peace), we find other comments on the internet, where the concept of cultural heritage can be perceived, as mentioned before, in a general way.

Primeiro apagam o Hazul
Depois, a memória,
A seguir, a liberdade
E por fim, a cidade

First they delete the Hazul
After, the memory,
Next, the freedom
At last, the city

(A Agulha Inquieta)

In 2016, the artist painted that wall again to celebrate the third anniversary of the first painting's disappearance. Although the theme is not the same, we witness a symbolic identification of the place.

There is a different case we may identify, which is the one

related to a painting done in memory of the prematurely deceased MS Snake, by Sam the Kid in Chelas / Lisboa. This death has been shrouded in controversy, and for this reason this work remains in place, and is respected by the community. We could attribute an intentional memory value to this painting, according to Riegl's definitions of 1903 (2013), because, in this case, the goal is to keep the original image related to a specific event.

The other important aspect, which we can also find in this theorist, is related to the issue of degradation. In fact, as ancient works displease recent manifestations, in contemporary works degradation is understood as neglect (Riegl, 2013). For this reason, when we approach contemporary art, we always hope that it is as if it had just come out of the artist's hands. That's why we tend to stop the natural evolution of the works over time, fighting against their natural degradation, and thus “...modern murals may be in danger of being permanently caught in the present” (Brajer, 2010: 94).

4. Authenticity questions

All these questions, which result from the repainting and re-creation of the pieces, can raise problems related to their authenticity, considering the Western meaning of this term. This concept is still being discussed by several people, and it led, at some point, to the definitions found in the Nara Document of 1994. This international charter is entirely dedicated to issues related to authenticity, marking the cultural diversity that all sought to highlight at the time. It defines the end of a universal heritage concept. In fact, it was concluded that different communities identify and value their monuments differently, and there can be no single way of intervening to ensure their preservation. It is necessary to perceive which are the most valued aspects, and what gives them their symbolic character – their authenticity – to justify their preservation and transition for future generations. In Western societies we tend to favor the work's original material, but in the East the image is more valued. When we define our preservation strategies, these aspects always restrict us.

Isabelle Brajer defends that the adaptation of this concept to contemporary art is based on new values: shape and design, location and settlement, use and function, as well as spirit and feeling. According to the same author, other issues contribute to the overestimation of the image. On the

one hand, the fact that the works are often not executed by their own authors, on the other, the aggressiveness of external conditions, which accelerate the original materials' degradation (Brajer, 2007: 94).

We may conclude that the evolution of the referred heritage concept had repercussions in the alteration of our concepts of restoration and preservation, opening space to a more multicultural vision. Several types of preservation strategies, related to the way patrimonial objects are identified by each community, and their authenticity criteria (Jokilehto, 2006), are now being accepted.

5. Final remarks

The patrimonial identification of the symbolic elements of a given community seems to be an intrinsic process. Also in this context, apart from what is happening in the institutional context, preservation strategies are created by elements of those communities with the aim of keeping their identity memories alive. In this case study, and taking into account that the price of a professional intervention is a problem, this is usually done by the works' original authors or by the local community. Thus, it often results in complete repainting or aesthetic updates (Shank, Norris, 2008: 12), which can reflect the constant evolution of the community that may consider the original work as outdated (Weber, 2004).

Several authors argue that the preservation of these artistic manifestations is accomplished by digital means, but that does not seem to apply in these cases, where the importance of the original site prevails over all other factors, being fundamental for their symbolic perception. In the case of the boy, the work is located in an emblematic place in the community's history, and on one of the main roads that access the city, where many people pass by daily. The location of the painting in memory of MS Snake, which is in a very wide space, allows us to see it from a long distance and from several different places, reinforcing its awesomeness and the impression that it gives us, and it also defines the physiognomy of the place.

It is evident that this type of artistic expression has a meaning in its original location, being decontextualized in the photograph, where there is an obvious limitation of the impression that can be perceived in the street (Sanchis, 2015: 4).

The physical removal of pieces of street art and their transition to a museology context, as a form of preservation, have also been carried out in many situations. This type of procedure breaks the link between the art and the life of the place where it is located, where there is a relationship that gives it meaning (Bengtson, 2016: 423). In fact, through the analyzed examples, we identify an undiscussed will in the permanence of the symbolic object in its original location.

On the other hand, as a protest against the gentrification of sites, as well as against the removal and sale of street art pieces without the permission of the authors, we also witness a process of painting overlaying carried out by the creators themselves. This is what happened on two occasions with the artist Blu, in Berlin and in Cologne, where he covered paintings as a means of setting a position (Cordero, 2015). In this case, the author himself determined the end of his work (although it continues to exist under the monochromatic repainting).

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