

Contemporary Popular Arts and Urban Dynamics

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Urban Arts

Cities are alive. They change, evolve, produce new initiatives and leave others to disappear and perish. Cities are dynamic systems in constant becoming, as new cultural movements join the ones already established to transform, modify and exceed them in order to implant new forms.

The artistic movements, as part of the culture, follow the same principle. **Most are born outside institutional settings and appear as reflexes of new social conflicts and tensions, out of the need of expression felt by dissident communities.** Youth movements are commonly the *avant garde* in renewing popular artistic languages. But they are not the only ones: we must count on those generated in times of political agitation, social struggles, injustice and migration.

The creative result of such renewing *stir-ups* are what we call Urban Arts. They do not participate from the dominant culture and they do not use the channels that society provides for its own movements. Instead, these dynamics develop their own means and are an echo of what we could call street cultures. In countries with a friendly weather, these movements emerge and develop, metaphorically and factually in the public space, the only common sphere at the reach of all.

Actually, in Europe, we may find these emerging movements in the walls of constructions, in train or subway wagons, in the suburbs of the great cities, where most of the immigrants dwell, as well as in social movements of struggle, social actions supporting peace, etc. Each country generates its own tensions and its escape through artistic creation. Graffiti, Hip Hop, music, juggling, acrobatics, dances, Capoeira, performances, percussion, anti-system groups, squads, are the embryo of new cultures materialized in different artistic proposals that challenge the established order.

Street arts pertain to street cultures. They use the public space and, above all, they live in thorough and direct communion with the public. They are movements of artistic occupation of public space that establish a different relationship with the public. As there is no distance between the artist and her public, as they look at each other in the eye, the spectator feels part of the artistic process and participates in it.

Popular Arts Today

Urban street arts may be understood as contained in the spectrum of contemporary popular art. Although the qualification of “popular arts” has a diminished value due to the fact that most conservative social sectors have kept them away from “artistic creativity”, they are the result of creative processes grown in the heart of the population. It was just afterwards that “popular arts” fell under the stereotype and “uncreative” impression of repetitiveness of established languages and aesthetic forms. For popular, urban and street arts to be considered part of the artistic spectrum, they should contain the following characteristics: creativity, quality, innovation and diversity.

The most conservative sectors of the art world appropriated them and kept them from evolving, leaving it as pure and simple folklore and tradition. The most talented artists, capable of leading their renewal, were absorbed by an “elitist” official culture and locked in closed premises. Popular art, hence, fell to discredit and immobility.

Cultural Action in the Public Space

Public spaces are places meant for the gathering and creating of social bonds. Are we to consider them places for creativity?

Creating in public spaces entails their transformation as imagination and sensibility are applied to them. People feel how everyday life codes are transformed as endless possibilities in their surrounds are opened.

Public spaces are privatized every time more. The plazas, which used to produce relationships amongst people, have been replaced by shopping malls, spaces meant basically for consuming and not for relating to others. Rich societies design their public spaces for consumption and leisure, always in a “safe environment”. Public space is thus controlled and tensions they generate are expelled.

Artistic mixture. The influence of immigration in the evolution of arts in Europe.

The phenomena of immigration in Europe is intervening the cultural scenario in each of its countries. Those coming from abroad introduce differential features in the culture that embraces them. The transformation starts in the streets in such a way that urban cultures are integrated little by little by national mainstream culture. Though cultural mixture, in this sense, may take time and even generations, is unavoidable.

The artistic response to mixture modifies the established culture in more or less degree depending on however much the latter is open to contamination, on however much it is open to the questions steaming from society. When the official culture is closed, sect-like and corporative, the influence of different cultures may take some time to be recognized and often develop in a marginal way.

Cultural democratization and politics of proximity

One of the greatest worries of Public Institutions when it comes to planning cultural policies is how to make cultural consumption reach most of the population. The audience in theatres, the sells rates of books, the public flow in museums are considered the main indicators of the success or failure of the cultural policies. Disappointment comes every time these data vary little from one period of time to the next and, in case the numbers increase, it is because the same people more often attend the spaces provided. More than 50% of the population in Europe are excluded from the cultural offer.

Huge cultural layouts and circuits to introduce the cultural offer have been implemented in order to bring artistic creation to those who already “consume” culture. Seemingly,

the strategy has been to convert these premises into attracting poles for those who do not. Such criterion has proven wrong and the public actors are at pains to figure out why their cultural policies have failed and react in an effective way.

The proposals contained in great cultural layouts, dissociated from most of the population, and tied to the enormous cultural premises, counter the idea of “proximity culture”, which takes place where people lives, in the neighbourhoods, the suburbs or the towns, with the participation of people. And which main manifestation is what we call URBAN ARTS.

The concepts of “culture” and “cultural offer” must be redefined to connect the artistic work to a politics of proximity so that creativity emerges through collaboration among contemporary artists emerging from popular movements and spreading out, back to what is taken as “culture”. Parallel to that, we need to give a different meaning to “quality”; a significance that is more related to concrete processes of creation, and leave behind schemes predefined by small groups of critics and art theoreticians.