



# Artistic-architectural micro-narratives in the city

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## Abstract:

In the current 'burnout society' (Byung Chul Han), or 'liquid modernity' (Zygmunt Bauman), or 'red fish civilization' (Bruno Patino), in which the individual finds himself immersed in a diffuse, confused, global, where the boundaries between the private and the public, work and leisure, the specific and the global, the material and the immaterial are diluted, producing a new kind of 'habitat', what role can perform 'artistic installations' and small-scale 'architectural installations' on public space, in the debate about the current society, that is also committed to emerging ecological values?

Taking into account its small scale, economy of materials, costs and reduced times, compared to the 'disciplinary' urban and architectural operations established in city 'design' policies, and above all taking into account its 'power of communication', of more immediate and performative interaction appealing to 'new aesthetic senses' [expanded field of art/architecture], we propose to look at the 70's - decade in which a freer artistic intervention was democratized but also more objective and committed to new ideas about the 'Polis', about the need to reactivate its use value [work] to the detriment of exchange value [profit], producing 'playfully' (Huizinga) and 'phenomenologically' new spaces of interaction (Lefebvre) and the influences they can play today.

Appealing to the 'participation', 'activation' and even 'co-authorship' of the inhabitants, this type of artistic intervention on a 'human scale' in the city acts, either by 'adherence' or even by 'confrontation' – which is also a form of contact –, a dialogue with the public, which is thus involved in the construction of new 'micro-narratives' about the city; awakening new personal critical senses about the 'common space', underlining the importance of the 'micro' in the 'macro' which is, perhaps, a possible way to build a more ecological society.

**Keywords:** Art-architecture Installations in Public Space / Critical and ecological art-architectural practices in the city / Mediation, participation and co-authorship.

## **ART GOES OUT INTO THE STREET.**

Art as a sensitive expression of the individual has always been intersected with another equally complex creation that characterizes the human condition: the city, the place of common life, of the encounter with the 'other'. Living in the city implies sharing, dialogue, freedom, security but also the opposite: affirmation of individuality, territoriality, conflict and fear, as Zygmunt Bauman analyzes in his book "City of Fears, City of Hopes" (2005) thinking about the global city in the information age governed by new spaces of 'fluxes' (Castells, 1989). Bauman associates this new postmodern society with 'liquid' as opposed to 'solid' condition — a condition that, despite the vanguards, especially those associated with the union between 'art and life', pointing to a disciplinary dissolution transforming 'space' and the spectator in integral and founding elements of the work, inaugurating the concept of 'co-authorship' and 'participation' in the artistic object —<sup>1</sup> still characterized modern, rational and functionalist society, supported by great meta-narratives. With the changes of the 60s and 70s — May 1968 and the deregulation of the international monetary system and oil shocks — society worsened the 'crisis', emerging new fragmented readings of history and new convictions based on the affirmation of individual freedom and the criticism of consumerist neoliberal society [pop art, *arte povera*, minimal art, land art and situationism]. Thus, sociological, anthropological and artistic micro-narratives arise in defense of the 'other' [creeds, gender, races, nature, politics] that seek in the 'media space of the city' the most effective way of relating to the spectator — who starts to be a participant and co-author — inaugurating installation and performance art in urban space. Art leaves the 'Museums' and goes out into the streets.

### **Artistic intervention**

This shift is noticeable, although a little later due to the isolation caused by the Salazar regime, also in Portugal in the years immediately after the 25th of April 1974, contributing to the restoration of democracy, showing how art can "help stimulate the public participation in the urgent task of transforming our cities and communities into more sustainable places" (Duxbury, 2013, p.27) contributing to the value of the Pólis, that is, to underlining the "Right to the City" (Lefebvre, 2012-1968).

As Henri Lefebvre states, "the right to the city cannot be conceived as a simple right to visit or return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a right to urban life, transformed and renewed" (Lefebvre 2012-1968, p.119). Art allied to 'play' and 'entertainment' can play a fundamental role in the recovery of the city as 'work' that

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<sup>1</sup> Retrace the firsts examples of Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau space (1927-33) introducing installation art, or Russian Constructivism mixing art and life in opposition to the autonomy of the different branches of art in modernism.

contrasts with its 'exchange' value, forged in the apparently irreversible orientation towards money that is, 'to dehumanize' cities: "By subordinating the city and urban reality, they [money and commerce] tend to destroy them as refugees of use value" (*idem*, p.19).

Urban life presupposes encounters, confrontations and differences, "reciprocal knowledge and recognition (which includes the ideological and political struggle) of ways of living, 'patterns' that coexist in the city" (*idem*, p.19). Installation and performative art on the space of the city can help — through the 'encounter' or 'shock' [which is also a way of getting in touch] — to establish the dialogue between different individuals who thus discover in the 'common' space other ways of looking at the physical and social space they inhabit. This type of installation highlights the right to the 'work' of which Lefebvre speaks, that is, the right to "actively participate" and the right to "appropriation" (quite distinct from the right to property) that are implied in the right to the city (*idem*, p.135). In this context, the "Semana da Arte na Rua" [Street Art Week] held from the 30th of May to the 10th of June 1976 in Coimbra, Portugal, should be highlight as one of the firsts examples that brought together numerous artistic interventions on the portuguese city's public space.

Coimbra, linked to the student world, attracted a 'critic mass' that converged into art and popular culture, highlighting the joinder between 'art and life' and the 'right to participate'. Organized by artists from the Círculo de Artes Plásticas [CAPC], the event involved the participation of contemporary artists, artisans, theater and music groups [vanguardist and amateurs], involving the public in various manifestations. The 'Grupo de Intervenção do Círculo de Artes Plásticas' [Plastic Arts Circle Intervention Group] — GICAP — formed at that time with the aim of approaching the relationship between the collective and the individual, create for the 'Street Art Week' some works of art (fig.1) to dynamize the public space stimulating the participation and interaction of the 'body' [dance] and the 'art' [painting] in movement as the performance "paintings that were dressed," affirming the freedom of artistic action on the polis, with this, informing new artistic expressions in a cultural and also spatial/community environment, subjugated until then [41 uninterrupted years] to a dictatorial, authoritarian and autocratic political regime. These sculptural-spatial-performative manifestations revealed international influences — which reverberated obscurely in the Portuguese artistic culture due to the obscurantism of the cultural policies of the Salazar regime — namely those that established a "transmutation of sculpture into another practice of immersion in real space and, later, in the real body" (Sardo, 2017, p. 155-182). Take as an example the work of the brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica and more specifically — to establish an analogy with the paintings that were dressed by the GICAP group — his *Parangolés* (fig.1), developed in the 60s, referring to the freedom of life, dance and spontaneous events that take place in the free and winding space of the 'favelas' [slums].



Figure.1: GICAP, Instalações na Praça da Republica, Semana da Arte na Rua, Coimbra, 1976. Foto © CAPC;  
Figure.2: Hélio Oiticica, Parangolé P30 Capa 23 “m’way ke” dressed by Luiz Fernando Guimarães, 1965-1972.

Despite its numerous problems, the 'slum' was, for Oiticica, a symbol of fluid urbanism on a human scale, in contrast to the rules of a functionalist modernism that surrendered to the laws of capital that segregates and gentrifies; controls and subjugates the individual to the domain of the 'car' and capital [transports, expressways, skyscrapers, private condominiums, enclaves].

This type of critical intervention on the space of the city and society, regardless of its cultural, social and political specificities, fits into the concept of “critical spatial practices” — a term introduced by Jane Rendell in *Art and Architecture, a place between* (2006) to designate spatial interventions that raise reflections on art, space and society that derive from theoretical reflections — [Walter Benjamin, Edward Soja, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, among others] — that analyze society through a critical reflection that is established in the confluence between these three dimensions that we defend here as being essential to rescue the 'human scale' — their right to the city — that has been lost with the growth and orientation of the city subjugated to the laws of commodification and capitalization.

Therefore, these artistic practices are close to the disciplinary and methodological space of architecture, especially if we understand it in agreement with Josep Maria Montaner who defends an ‘architecture of action’, an architecture that promotes the complexity of living experiences and the intentionality of collective and creative actions that seek a more active and ethical interaction with reality (Montaner, 2017).

### **The expanded field of the confluences between art and architecture in the city.**

During these decades, 'plurality' replaces the grand-narrative and the 'alterity' that comes from the dialogue between 'opposites' emerges as a 'value' to defend. Digital technology, in full development, promises the utopia of total freedom of expression

as well as revolutionizing the concepts of 'space and time', promising the possibility of virtual ubiquity (Patino, 2019) that would allow time for leisure and 'play' — fundamental element of human culture (Huizinga, 2003-1938) — expanding notions of space and time. These ideas will be integrated, for example, in the utopian proposals, negative *per absurdum*, of 'radical architecture' or represented by the 'flexibility' of the architecture of metabolism, suggesting dynamic infrastructures, mobile architectures and infinite cities where the individual would be free to inhabit a nomadic space according to individual and changing needs over time. That is, by superimposing 'small spatial structures' adapted to human scale, needs and taste, on a global scale mega-structure, the individual could be freer and more active in the process of construction of their habitat.<sup>2</sup>

Both art and architecture thus, for these decades, experiment hypothesis that go beyond the disciplinary areas to find their expressions that better communicate the ideas they trace, characterized by what they 'are not' as analyzed by Rosalind Krauss through the concept of 'expanded field'. Krauss explains this concept regarding the sculptural practices that took place after the fifties and especially the 60s and 70s, as objects of 'non-architecture' and 'non-landscape', despite their invasion into the theater, dance, architecture and landscape (Krauss, 1979)— practices that we can make correspond in Portugal, to the performances and installations inaugurated by the 'Street art week' in 1976, in Coimbra.

This 'blurring of boundaries' that is felt at all levels of society characterizes contemporary "Liquid society" (Bauman, 2000) which, contrary to the 'freedom' promised by Silicon Valley technology (Patino, 2019,) has made the individual hostage to a new paradigm of self-imposed 'working without borders' bring forth by the dilution of the limits between private and public, between work and leisure, leading to a state of self-exploration that leads the individual to fatigue and alienation. As Byung Chul Han explains in "The Burnout Society" (2010), in this society without defined limits, the 'other' is no longer 'different', that is, the 'otherness' highlighted in the 60s/70s, the engine of freedom that provokes 'reaction', has been losing strength — it has been neutralized like a virus that gets weaker when exposed to successive reactions. The age of technological information — global and excessive — ended up standardizing the individual, who thus, without reaction, alienated by the permanent reality of digital flows (Patino, 2019), develops a state of 'hyper-attention'. Always alert, like a wild animal, the individual is losing the power of 'contemplation' (Han, 2010) which implies an attentive and present 'look', which can only be rescued by art and culture that put us in contact with the 'others' rescuing our human scale.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenzo Tange, a key figure of Japanese metabolism at CIAM in Otterloo in 1961, writes: "The structural element is conceived as a tree - permanent - with the housing units as leaves - temporary - that fall and the element sprouts again according to the needs of the moment" (Banham, 1976, p.47).

## CONCLUSIVE NOTE

Once the diagnosis has been made, and taking into account the summary that this text implies, we consider that the small installation practices that began to be experimented with in the 60s and 70s and that gradually lost ground as a form of action in the city are regaining expressive force as references to the new 'critical spatial practices' on the city that arises from the architects and artists of the new millennium — see, for example the work *Demo\_Polis* or *Yellow arrows*<sup>3</sup> by the portuguese group MOOV reflecting about the miss-use of the urban spaces, or the 'social projects' developed in participation with the local residents by the english multi-disciplinary collective Assemble as the gás station transformed into a cinema — The Cineroleum —<sup>4</sup>, or de Olafur Eliasson's practice investigating the natural environment and ecolóogical crisis like the project *Ice Watch*<sup>5</sup>, all of them intervening in the urban space, as examples of studios that are concerned with the urgent task of making our cities more human and sustainable. This type of multidisciplinary studios [see also my work]<sup>6</sup> have been reactivating, in all over the world, the urban installation as an artistic-architectonic practice, with the conviction that, by involving the public in the activation [participation] of the work, the individual can be sensitized, bringing him back to the real space, to the space of the city, where environmental, social and spatial issues can and must be put into dialogue: The reaction of each individual catalyzed by art will be at the base of the conformation of a better and more sustainable collective sphere.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.furo.pt/detail.html?2\\_demopolis&lang=en](https://www.furo.pt/detail.html?2_demopolis&lang=en);  
[https://www.furo.pt/detail.html?1\\_yellowarrow&lang=en](https://www.furo.pt/detail.html?1_yellowarrow&lang=en)

<sup>4</sup> <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/the-cineroleum>

<sup>5</sup> <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK109190/ice-watch#slideshow>

<sup>6</sup> <http://isabelbarbas.blogspot.com/search/label/URBAN%20LIGHT%20INSTALLATIONS>

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