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The Invisible City: Collaborative Artistic Practices in Historic Public Spaces

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Abstract: This contribution aims to share and discuss different forms of intervention in public spaces relating art to the transformation of contemporary cities. The analysis of several emergent forms of creation allows discovering, through the artistic field, various ways of expression and socio-economical dynamics shaping and modifying the contemporary urban landscape. The paper introduces a study related to the creative spatial practices which detonate processes of empowerment of communities by means of recovering the memory and the dominance of the place. Through the case of the International Urban Art Exhibition, an ephemeral and open air festival based on the outskirts of Barcelona this paper shows different practices of re-appropriation that encourage creative participation of several social agents by collaborative and site-specific projects in some public spaces (public washing places) with different communities.

Keywords: Public Art, Public Space, Spatial Art Practices, Cultural Heritage

“To start with, then, there isn’t very much: nothingness, the impalpable, the virtually immaterial; extension, the external, what is external to us, what we move about in the midst of, our ambient milieu, the space around us”¹.

GEORGES PEREC DESCRIBED space from its discontinuities, transitions, changes and ways to inhabit it, invest in it, travel across it. Referring to him, the subject of this paper focuses on this framework, the invisible spaces, spaces in-between or ‘off-spaces’ that evolve from the relation between space and people by means of an artistic community-based project.

The project described in this paper is a case study that aims to explore the possibility to rethink the condition of the use and production of some historic public spaces—these invisible ‘latent spaces’—thanks to different critical spatial practices during a site-specific urban art show.

This project is called International Urban Art Exhibition (MIAU)². It defines itself as a culturally dynamizing event that expects to encourage creative participation of several social agents by collaborative and artistic projects in public spaces. It fosters the use of some old public washing places thus promoting that people, collectives and the space itself find new

¹ Perec, 1997, p. 5.

² ‘MIAU’ is actually the acronym for the original title of the show, either in Spanish and Catalan: ‘Mostra Internacional d’Art Urbà’, which in English is translated to ‘International Urban Art Exhibition’. This show begun in 2008 and it’s organized by the municipal Thermalia Museum and curated by Vicenç Sabotatge, Helena Pielias and Marta Serra. The art show is financed through a grant program created by the municipality in order to foster cultural reactivation of the historic core. For further information visit the link: www.miau-termal.cat

uses, new proposals and new outlooks for these so specific places that many women are still using nowadays.

The event takes place in the ancient roman village of Caldes de Montbui (Spain) located on the outskirts of Barcelona. The town is characterized by its hyper-thermal springs (68°C) and several facilities and old traces related to the use of water, especially public washing places and thermal baths. This historical and cultural axis of the town has prompted a sort of management of the heritage which has given priority to the protection and promotion of those spaces that are supposed to be attractors of financial activity. Therefore, policies of beautification and certain signs of gentrification have begun to become clear in the core of the historic city center where all the facilities of thermal springs are located. Flows of tourists visiting the private facilities have generated on the one hand a hegemonic domain of spas and hotels related to spaces for consumers of wellness values to the detriment of the real necessities and uses of the citizens themselves. On the other hand they have left in abandon those thermal spaces which are not 'officially' considered to be producing economic benefits, such as some public washing places where the MIAU projects intervene. The areas that have been left apart, the back of the official space, are what might be named the in-between spaces, the invisible city.

Despite the poor relation of the inhabitants with the thermal springs, there are still some reduced communities who are using the historic public washing places for a very specific purpose: washing clothes.

The goal of the Urban Art Show is to set other standards for understanding the city and its spaces. Its main topic is linked with thermal springs, and projects must deal with thermals, be it symbolically or conceptually, involving the use of these waters as an everyday practice. This committed art promotes coexistence in public space, enhances memory as cultural heritage and fosters inclusion from the topic of the otherness showing how critical and ethnographic art intensifies the interaction between space and people, trying to return the 'use' to some abandoned places that exist only as memories and returning to the inhabitant the role of producer instead of the spectator's one.

The Public Washing Places and Some Precedents

The case of the public washing places opens up a feminine and everyday life domain where, traditionally, the working class women found a shelter, a space for socializing and communication away from their domestic space. This has been described in many occasions by the 'realism' literary movement belonging to the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century.

For example, in 1902 Victor Català³ published *Drames Rurals*⁴ (Rural Dramas), a compilation of narratives and short stories describing the conversations and contacts between women who used the public washing places in the town where the author was born. Born in an exiled republican family, Catarina Albert Paradís aspired to write about the non bourgeois atmosphere. She was concerned about human conflicts, the individual fights against de divi-

³ Victor Català is a masculine pseudonym for her real name: Catarina Albert Paradís. Using this pen name the writer was hiding her identity (her genre condition) in order to succeed as a novelist and poet. She was born in 1869, in l'Escalà (Catalunya, Spain) and died in 1966. She's the author of many published books and also experimented from theatre and cinema language.

⁴ Català, 1902.

sion of power that hinder its realization, and specially concerned about the rural condition of women. She re-established collective behavior of women in common spaces such as public washing places and river-sides where tens of women met daily to share their emotional spaces, their invisible spaces.

Those physical spaces were placed in the margins, within undefined spaces of the periphery, within the limits of a city, as well as in the non-definition of their own satisfaction or the limits of their dreams. In those hidden spaces the archetype of the ‘water woman’ was born.

The ‘water women’ myth was linked to natural forces and natural powers as being the carrier of knowledge and creativity. Hiding in forests, close to the lakes, sources and wells, these archetypes are still associated to quacks, vitality and capacity for change. Their stories fill tales and legends that appear in the daily routine of the contemporary woman who launders at the public washing places today. The repetitive body exercise of washing has contributed to make a public space for being together and meeting, a way of encountering that was brought forth by their presence and the invisible image of their loneliness shared in common.

Émile Zola portrayed a similar context in *L’Assommoir*, a novel that describes the experiences of *Gervaise*, a washerwoman working and living in poverty in Paris in 1877. The experiences about the public washing places along the XIX century in France are well described by Michelle Perrot, showing the transition of different ways of space appropriation by men and women.

From the beginning of the XIX century and even before, space wasn’t segregated by gender and women used to participate in almost all the same practices as men. From the middle of the XIX century

At the beginning of the XXI century other public washing places are still alive and other women keep on using them. They are not Gervaise or the friends of Catarina Albert. Today, one of them is Juanita, another is Mariétou. Juanita arrived in Caldes during the sixties from the south of Spain. Mariétou arrived just three years ago from Mali. They are all still using these spaces for the same reason: to share a common place for sociability.

Some site-specific and community-based projects in this art show set the conditions to interact between these users (women) and these spaces (public washing places) by means of a wide range of professions drawn together such as architects, anthropologists, poets, dancers, media artists, performers and creative agents among others. Within this context these collaborative artistic practices unveil the potential of these invisible spaces as public spaces, spaces where unfamiliar stories collide with stories about intimacy. With reference to the point of view of the geographer Edward Soja, public space is created as a place in which we act and interact because “life stories are as intrinsically and revealingly spatial as they are temporal and social”⁵.

How to Avoid Sinking into Obscurity

Abandoned and unused spaces such as the public washing places in Caldes de Montbui are bearers of past. They hold experiences belonging to other lives, those of previous users who once gave meaning to that space. The means of listening to the space are the ‘resonances’⁶, echoes or interferences that are unveiled through the experience of the place, through re-

⁵ Irish, 2010, p. 12.

⁶ Hunter, 2005.

searching as the first step for producing, and the first act of listening to the space itself, that is to say, a way for perceiving. If space is a practiced place⁷, then the site-specific intervention becomes the intersection of these resonances, a re-writing of space:

“Each occupation, or traversal, or transgression of space offers a reinterpretation of it, even a rewriting. Thus space is often envisaged as an aggregation of layered writings—a palimpsest”⁸.

If forgetting is a function as important as remembering, then the memory of a place can be woven as a narrative, a sequence of collective experiences. This cultural landscape, this social geography of our life itself, becomes the memory. De Certeau defined memory as the latent state or potential to be changed, displaced, and re-invented: “*Latent Memory is the capacity for a place to be performed, altered, transformed*”⁹.

Managing the obscurity, trying to avoid forgetting the micro-scales in a city, shows that spaces for shelter are as necessary as the ones of exile. Reclaiming artistic practices as a means of making room for counter-history, for those invisible histories, might be a tool for projecting and for subverting the structures that are currently legitimated. Projects giving voice, delegating and giving intervention to the inhabitants can avoid losing the voice and the life of this kind of spaces too often left apart.

The three examples presented in the next section of the show focus on different methods by which women intervene in public landscapes in terms of gender, this also happens in the public washing places where geographical issues are linked to common behaviors and hierarchies of use, where hidden power games and relations used to be unanswered and normalized. In these projects the factor of uncertainty plays an important role as nobody knows what the result will be and the reaction to or consequences of these ways of encounter are completely unpredictable: “*It’s difficult to find a common ground on which to come together, creating enough trust to hold and to keep that space open, while recognizing at the same time that substantial differences exist*”¹⁰.

Traveling within the expanding self might be a way to avoid sinking into obscurity. Referring to Lacy, the ‘expanding self’ is a metaphor for the process of removing the limits of one’s identity in order to span and engage other people. This process of involvement allows ‘others’ to recognize the liminal space where one becomes aware of one’s multiplicity and possibilities of being. The word ‘traveling’ is used by María Lugones to describe “a person’s movement among different social groups or worlds”¹¹ and this concept is repeated in each project presented at this show.

Traveling Among the Public Washing Places

This trip amongst and along the public washing places can be illustrated by some examples that took place during the International Art Urban Exhibition during its last three editions from 2008 to 2010.

⁷ De Certeau, 1996, p. 129.

⁸ Turner, 2004.

⁹ De Certeau, 1996, p. 92.

¹⁰ Irish, 2010, p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 13.

To begin with, ‘*Lavadero Público*’¹² was a project that reported the everyday life conversations of some women while doing the route from their homes to the washing places. The artists first met the group of six women who met each morning to go washing together. Once localized, the artists began to interview them. After compiling different aspects of the practice of hand-washing, the team decided to focus on the body routines during the journey from their houses to the washing places while displacing the usual context of their body memories and physical labor. Even though they have washing machines at home, hand-washing becomes an excuse to meet together and share their chats, gossips and familiar lives. The artists decided to make a video¹³ of their conversations and their specific body movements when washing or functioning in the street, along the daily route they do to arrive to the basins and acquiring the postures of certain occupations of their workplace (*image 1*).



Image 1: Training for ‘*Lavadero Público*’ Performance. The Group of Washerwomen on the Street. Photograph: Vicenç Sabotatge



Image 2: Atsuko Arai Showing the Portraits of the Washerwomen during the Process of Collaboration. Photograph: Helena Pielias

¹² “*Lavadero Publico*” means ‘Public washing place’ in Spanish. That was a project run by Corpusdeleicti during the edition of 2009. Corpusdeleicti is a collective based in Barcelona and it is composed by Judit Vidiella, Desiré Rodrigo, Elena González and Patricia Fuentes.

¹³ The video is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/videosmiau#p/a/f/1/qIKoxmyNzh8>



Image 3: The Group of Washerwomen Running the Workshop to Make Soap in their Traditional Way. Photograph: Vicenç Sabotatge



Image 4: Finiko Project: The Malian Women and their Child during the Interviews and the Realisation of the Video. Courtesy of the Authorship: Maite Marin and Jordi R. Renom, MilNomades Productions.

Many other projects have been carried out with these women and with the participants at the show. For instance, during the edition in 2008, the Japanese artist Atzuko Arai made it possible to celebrate a party-breakfast where the washerwomen ran a workshop with participants of different ages. The goal of that event was to recreate the relationships that used to be characteristic of that public space at one time. Sharing their tips and passing on their knowledge the washerwomen shared their sphere of domestic work again, enabling everyone to get involved in a space that was recovering its use. All these projects have in common a process of production, narration and participation that try to incorporate the artistic action into a participative process to further the symbolic action (*image 2*). The process of the project and the approach to the women through several interviews when washing were repor-

ted by a video-documentary done by the artist¹⁴. After the success of the encounter the women proposed another workshop edition run by themselves. It was celebrated to show the way they produce soap and all the tips and methods they use to do hand-washing in such hot water (*image 3*).

Dealing with life stories another project concerning the community was ‘Finiko’¹⁵. This word means ‘hand-washing’, and this time a group of Malian women who had recently arrived in Caldes was interviewed by an anthropologist and a photographer. Stories about their daily life concerning the exile conditions were explained by a group of six women from Mali, and overall, they shared experiences related to water in both places, Caldes and Mali. They explained the procedure that encourages the respect of washing in rivers and public washing places and the memories they have about the spaces for washing in that country (*image 4*). Thanks to the project the African women in Caldes were given the opportunity find new places for washing and new people to meet with. Many town residents didn’t even know about the existence of the public washing places and of the different communities who use them, and therefore the event was indeed a way to visualize the reality of this space, its complexity and all the conflicts between people and the space related to its use.

The project of Finiko produced by the team Maite Marin and Jordi R. Renom and the collaboration of the Malian women living in Caldes, was shown in a documentary screened on the walls of the washing place during the opening day of the urban art show. From that day on the project continued and became an exhibition and brought about a second round of interviews. The women from Mali demonstrated a range of experiences, images, traditions and rituals sharing their voice, creating empathy and rebuilding their present, thanks to their ability to make use of the space by means of their own memories:

*“Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we have come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the stories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities”*¹⁶.

The Dialogical Experience and its Effects

Grant Kester defined this way of doing as ‘dialogical art’, that is to say, an approach to an art based on exchange and process, much more a long term way to consolidate networks than a way to get immediate results. Persistence in time becomes a basic element when trying to get any change in its multiple scales as G.Kester describes in this quote: *“We need a way to understand how identity might change over time—not through some instantaneous thunderclap of insight but through a more subtle, and no doubt imperfect process of collectively generated and cumulatively experienced transformation”*¹⁷.

¹⁴ The video of the artist Atsuko Arai for the project “Vine a fer safareig” is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/videosmiau#p/u/27/eJTik5zVkqY>

¹⁵ This is an on-going project run by the anthropologist Maite Marin and the photographer Jordi R. Renom, with the collaboration of Aissata Traoré, Marietou Kanouté, Oumou Traoré, Fatoumata Sanogo, Goundo Dougara and Cumba Sow. All of them reside in Caldes de Montbui and Sant Feliu de Codines (Barcelona, Spain). I’d like to thank all this team for their generosity in sharing their experiences and knowledge about their project. For further information about their projects visit the website: www.nomades.tk

¹⁶ Hayden, 1996, p. 9.

¹⁷ Irish, 2010, p. 16; Kester, 2004.

Dialogical art is based on the conversation, the dialogue and the exchange between the different agents belonging to the system of any place. The show becomes a contextual and dialogical practice because it is done using the specifics of the place and it involves discursive interaction in terms of empathy and participation. It concerns the sociological and cultural environment: its inhabitants, users, silences, secrets, dynamics, tensions and balances.

One of the main effects of these encounters was the appropriation of the space through the cooperative construction of an alternative and collective imaginary area. The interaction among the participants was intensified and that provoked some other effects such as their re-discovery of a new space (public washing places and their latent memories) and a growing awareness of their ability to act for themselves and interfere in the definition of their environment and lives. These interventions played a significant role by producing collective spaces and places shaped by desires as inventors of new perspectives and lifestyles that were really welcomed by the citizens. Everything put together became a collective self-organized project that managed to have some multiple effects still alive today.

Conclusions

In conclusion these collaborative artistic practices are just creative processes, a tool for projecting, a tool working from different fronts that should be considered, among them: 'Resilience' or the capacity for a space or community to be adapted slowly to new changes; 'transition' or the process (the way) to set up new possibilities; and 'inclusion', that is to say, everyone (group or individual) is needed during the process.

Ilya Kabakov wrote in 1977 in *The man who never threw anything away* that a simple sensation, just an emotion, can give the whole importance and meaning to everything that surrounds us. In our memory all the recollected experiences are linked and these chains of connections ultimately produce the stories of our lives. These kinds of artistic practices based on symbolic action, the ritual and the testimonial, might contribute to intensify and emphasize the values of new models for coexistence, that is, the power of the place.

In response to the effects of the show and its projects, it can be easily said that the point is not about recovering old uses for abandon spaces but giving the community the chance to define the uses of their own spaces thanks to experiencing them and the active and creative listening to the space and its memory. The dialogical and collaborative practices extend the identity of the participants through situational encounters and memory becomes just a strategy to recover and foster public history, an important but underutilized resource for creating public space. As Dolores Hayden states, the place memory "*is the key of the power of historic places to help citizens define their public pasts: places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present*"¹⁸.

In our contemporary cities, where public spaces are too over-designed and subsequently difficult for appropriation, a micro-architectural and informal urbanism regarding all these silent layers could be useful (such as memory) to give space for everyday practices and finally, for life and spontaneity. These artistic spatial practices might give some other tools and methods that could be applied to the process of making the city. They offer some different

¹⁸ Hayden, 1996, p. 46.

approaches when researching the constant dynamics of urban change, always focusing on the subject of sociability or, what is the same, the result of people's interaction.

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Marta Serra Permanyer (Barcelona, 1981) is an architect and PhD student at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia (ETSAV-UPC), Spain. She combines a research fellowship at the Department of Urbanism and Regional Planning with some teaching training and several art-related projects dealing with public space. She's writing the thesis “Latent Spaces: Artistic practices and production of public space” interested in the relationship between art and urban change. She's currently coordinating the course “Life and The City: Ideas and Interventions towards an Informal Urbanism” and running a local public art exhibition that encourages artists to collaborate in urban space in order to re-activate abandoned places related with thermal water (www.miau-termal.cat). She also belongs to the collective Raumarbeiten: dance, architecture and spatial exploration. Blurring the limits between the architecture and participatory artistic practices with ‘real’ citizens provides the chance to become progressively aware of how these practices can actively shape everyday life. She has participated to some conferences and publicated in journals about research-action projects related to art and public space.

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