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Understanding drawing in all its forms: a journey through the recent aesthetic commitment to the public, social and political

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Abstract. Drawing could be considered the oldest known art form. However, art and its understanding has come to evolve so much that it has derived a multitude of forms that are almost unclassifiable today. The aesthetic discourses of the public, social and political have also been prejudiced and their true essence has been altered. In the present research work, we explore a series of artists who work with art as a language and tool for change and improvement of public life in general. We analyse the messages they address, the aesthetics and material form they use, the methodologies they practice or the social changes they cause. In this regard, through a selection of contemporary projects, we can identify more effective representative artistic characteristics that are consistent with our current world. In conclusion, we emphasize that the practice of public art is more significant and necessary than it seems.

Keywords: aesthetics, mapping, social commitment, politics, public art.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Iranian-born American artist, Siah Armajani (Chillida [2000]: 73), public art is not about oneself, but about others; it is not about personal tastes, but about the needs of others. He defends the idea around the civic sense that all current contemporary aesthetics should harbour; «it is not about the existing gap between culture and the public, but it seeks to make art public and the artist to be a citizen again» (Chillida [2000]: 73). The history of recent art is full of artists who have been able to capture in their works a strong and powerful social and political activism towards the society of their time. Similarly, Bourriaud ([2009]: 22) argues that «contemporary creators already lay the foundations for a radical art». Acting radically means taking root in our contexts with heterogeneous formats, transplanting our behaviours to exchange instead of imposing, denying the official powers and existing structures in

virtue of defining our own identity (Bourriaud [2009]: 22). As Karl Marx (Marx, Engels [1932]: 667) points out around Feuerbach, the human essence is the set of its public relations.

In the present research work we try to offer a catalogue of possible solutions through the mapping of a series of contemporary art practices that try to act as actors directly committed to the issues of our daily environment. It is an aesthetic and committed exploration of the public in order to achieve, to a greater or lesser extent, a certain kind of social change. Nevertheless, we do not intend to cover the entire wide range of possibilities of what has already been done on this type of art, but rather to observe the panorama in a generic meaning. The goal is to identify certain distinctive features that help us build new strategies or models that increase their effectiveness, humbly inviting the acceptance or recognition of different perspectives or paradigms in the world of contemporary art.

1. THE STIPULATED

From an elaborate sample of current artistic discourses fully involved in the public sphere through their concern for various social problems, we develop our research, following the trail of our study carried out in recent years. As we have already stated, and due to the vast field of productions made around this sort of art, we reiterate that our main objective is not based on its millimetric exploration, but on a generic although deep-enough observation of the panorama to identify a series of constituent characteristics that help us glimpse new strategies or aesthetic paradigms today. In this concern, we focus on a compilation of artists and works of reference and recognized international prestige that are particularly influential, the same criteria used by Mark Tribe and Reena Jana (Tribe, Jana [2009]: 7) in their book *New Media Art*. Nonetheless, in addition, we also base our selection on representative projects of recent years based on their exceptional sophistication and political and social commitment.



Figure 1. Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower seeds* (2010), installation at the *Tate Modern* in London (United Kingdom). Source: Loz Flowers, available on <URL: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/blahflowers/5075468439/>>

We begin by alluding to one of the most controversial artists, considered internationally as a protester or even anti-system, especially in his native China, Ai Weiwei. His works and thoughts arouse such catalysis that he has even been imprisoned. In *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), the artist enfolded the entire floor area of the Tate Modern Museum's Turbine Hall in London, covering a thousand square meters, with one hundred million pipes (sunflower seeds) replicated by hand in porcelain and painted one by one later by hand (Rábago [2010]) (figure 1).

The manufacturing process of these pieces lasted two years and was carried out by around 1,600 Chinese workers from the Jingdezhen region, popular during centuries for its production of imperial ceramics (Vozmediano [2010]). In the installation, the visual and experimental impact of the viewer is overwhelming, especially when the thickness of all the mass of seeds reaches about ten centimetres and weighs near 150 tons (Vozmediano [2010]). The work plays with the effect that the sunflower itself has with the sun, always looking for it, as if each of those seeds represented the Chinese people who impassively contemplate and obey the firm and superior mandate of their ruler.

Somehow, Ai tries to send a message of attention to his people and the political system that



Figure 2. Renzo Martens, opening of *The Repatriation of the White Cube* (2017), in Lusanga (Democratic Republic of Congo). Source: Bozar, available on <URL: https://www.bozar.be/en/calendar/white-cube-renzo-martens#event-page__infos>

represents them, inviting them to reflect on whether the roles they adopt are the most appropriate. On the other hand, by presenting the present work in London, he globalizes his content by expanding it to the international community. He does not only address China, but also the world. We must point out that the artist works at all times in coordination with the people participating in his projects, debating ideas and open to change through collective construction; whether they are workers, collaborators, friends or strangers. In addition, he is a faithful and unconditional asset of digital social networks, which he uses to share and offer his thoughts, opinions, and, even on occasion, to preserve his own physical integrity.

The Repatriation of the White Cube (2017) is a project led by Dutch artist Renzo Martens that takes place in the city of Lusanga, Democratic Republic of Congo (figure 2). The main objective of the initiative is to provide art and culture to the entire neighbourhood with the desire to improve the place in a constructive way, contributing to the economic sustainability of its citizens. It is the public construction of an art centre built in the likeness of the most common galleries or white cubes used for the same purpose.

The centre acts as a central axis for reflection and debate around a culture of self-management that focuses the main economic activity of these

neighbours on the plantations they carry out in the countryside. He questions the mechanisms of power and the resources obtained from the agriculture to convert them into a fair system when entering sales negotiations with its intermediaries, consequently avoiding the exploitation of these workers (Regli [2019]: 51). We must keep in mind that this is one of the poorest parts of the planet, a place where farmers earn about one U.S. dollar a day, which is why the artist is involved by introducing an art centre to revalue its jungle (Jeffries [2014]). Correspondingly, the people in turn become artists, executing pieces that they later market, such as chocolate sculptures (Pangburn [2017]). All the construct is included within the capital activities of the *Institute for Human Activities*, which was started by Martens himself and is dedicated to investigating and correcting economic inequality through critical approaches to art (Regli [2019]: 55). In short, through the present work, Martens involves all local people, while they also make on their own a horizontal and democratic production based on collaborative and cooperative interdisciplinarity of equals, whose expansion is palpable through the construction of a new ecological and economic model based on art and networked both physically and digitally.

The Spaniard Santiago Sierra is another controversial artist, especially because of the way in which he can use people in his creations, paying them minimum salaries while they work the maximum allowed, and he does so precisely to criticize labour exploitation, among other issues. In addition to said labour exploitation versus fair remuneration, the limits of collaborative participation between people and political criticism are the themes that underpin the public work of the artist. Projects such as *Muro de una galería arrancado, inclinado a 60 grados del suelo y sostenido por 5 personas* (2000) or *100 personas escondidas* (2003) emphasize the existing borders between excess and moderation of «the perverse mechanisms of wealth production that govern the lives of the average Westerner» (Albarrán Diego [2011]: 284). Similarly, the artist argues: «talking about prices, I think prices is a way of buying people, it's a way of

telling people “ok, now we are in good relations, so, peace between you and me”. And also it has something perverse [...], it’s like to say “shut up”» (Sierra [2012]: 14’30” - 15’17”).

In most cases, Sierra hires people to carry out absurd and sometimes cruel tasks (Debroise, Medina [2006]: 436), for example having their hair cut, having a line tattooed on their back, or being cloistered in an empty room with just a small hole to receive food. Therefore, much of the production that Sierra develops experimenting with people, always in an exposed way, is based on the clear paradox of public, political, and social vindication against job insecurity and the abuses of power of our current and contradictory socially approved capitalist system. In other words, he needs the almost obligatory collaboration of other people in terms of materializing his ideas, taking the opportunity to denounce what he himself practices, ironically, as we have already pointed out.

The same feature is what happens in the performance entitled *El trabajo es la Dictadura* (2013), carried out in Madrid by hiring thirty unemployed people to do a simple task, writing by hand again and again the phrase «work is the dictatorship» over a thousand blank books to fill them. For the preparation of the piece, Sierra disclosed a job offer through digital social networks specialized in job search. In return, the people hired received the minimum interprofessional salary (Juristo [2013]), stipulated by the National Employment Service in Spain. Here is also a clear example of the use of new technologies through online dissemination, which became viral very quickly due to its provocative initiative, but which in turn makes a dent in the feelings of citizens, providing value to the work and weaving immediate connections between those who devise it, those who work on it and those who participate by visiting it and disclosing it on their Internet accounts. For Sierra, the digital condition is fundamental in his praxis, since what usually remains in the generality of his work is the video-recording of his actions, which he later uses to publish it on the Internet, managing to internationally extrapolate his message towards other homologous contexts, although from different countries.

The anonymous artist known by the nickname of Banksy has also garnered international fame through his controversial and provocative works, mostly working through graffiti murals scattered around the world. Among his themes, there are speeches that range from the abuse of power represented by the authorities on duty to the questioning of the justification of the different conflicts that take place at a global level. Accordingly, he uses a language that is very accessible to the public in general, which is why both his visibility and his popularity, are also increased, gaining followers everywhere.

2. THE CROSS-BORDER

Continuing with the controversy, Malaga-born Rogelio López Cuenca is also considered an agitator of consciences, but he does not always work alone. *Golden Visa* (2018) is a project carried out in collaboration with Elo Vega for the metro service of Barcelona. It consists of placing posters in different advertising spaces with the intention that any kind of public could observe them. The design of the posters tries to launch a reflection to the world on migration and racism, spreading the message to the multitude of international people who visit the subway of a city as cosmopolitan as Barcelona every day. The artist usually works in public spaces, understanding art as an action of constant dialogue between all possible people, getting them involved in one way or another in his constructions and, therefore, social transformations.

Artist Nuria Carrasco, in her artistic project *¡AHLAN!* (2013), stands in solidarity with the problems of the Saharawi people to denounce the violation of human rights that they suffer (figure 3). The name of the project is the literal Saharawi translation of the word “hello” and the work itself is a fake publication of a well-known gossip magazine by which it is inspired (Wert [2013]). The layout follows the reflection of said magazine, underlining the consumerism that this type of general interest magazines propagates and encourages



Figure 3. Nuria Carrasco, front page of the magazine for the project ¡AHLAN! (2013), private collection. Source: ACHTUNG!, available on <URL: <https://www.achtungmag.com/fake-magazines-ahlan-kalas-y-vowei-de-nuria-carrasco-en-13-espacioarte/>>

(Sichel [2020]), except replacing its contents with news of the Saharawi reality in the Tindouf refugee camps, in Algeria.

The most significant thing is that the project could not be carried out without the help and collaboration of all the people involved in the news it reports, managing to generate, in turn, an unusual expectation among the public. Likewise, Carrasco relies on the *Lánzanos* website to collect funds collectively through a digital crowdfunding campaign. The result arouses such success that not only does it get all the capital in a very short time, but it also serves as an advertising platform, being promoted in Spanish media of national scope such as newspapers, radios and televisions, a quite significant fact considering the little coverage of these events. The work, therefore, causes

the message of social awareness to reach larger and divergent audiences. In addition, in order to develop it, Carrasco spends a month in the home of a Saharawi family thanks to an artistic initiative organized every year by the *Association of Friendship with the Saharawi People of Seville – AAPSS* (Cutillas, Fernández [2013]), which offers real experiences to artists so that they can empathize with the problem of a universal nature, which we will develop later.

Another artist, and architect, is Santiago Cirugeda, working among other artists within his collective called *Recetas Urbanas*. From a socializing and participatory intention, their creations focus on the promotion and creation of alternative public spaces that are sustainable with the environment through an urban ecosystem with recycled materials. In the same way, for *Recetas Urbanas*, educational exchange and cooperation between citizens become essential, opening to the realization of joint works as equals, almost in co-authorship. In addition, for their purpose they also use a web portal, in order to share their projects, turning them into a kind of free urban recipe book, which gives name to both their collective and website (2020). «What I do is set up a network, which did not exist, of communication to empower us, to make us a little stronger», Cirugeda explains (Cirugeda [2009]: 4-5). In this regard, works such as *El Niu* (2008), *AAAbierta* (2006) and *La Escuela Crece* (2015), encourage exchange through non-formal education, investigation, development of an autonomous attitude and promotion of critical thinking in community.

La Escuela Crece consists of the construction of a series of modules to expand the spaces of the Higher School of Design in Madrid. Through the present work, the debate on the lack of basic resources of public institutions is contributed, since, for years, both families and teachers denounce the drop in public spending on budget items as essential as those related to education (Marino [2012]). According to Cirugeda (Cirugeda [2008]: 01'20" - 01'34"), everything is caused by the current «hypercapitalist» system in which we find ourselves. *Recetas Urbanas* makes its

knowledge and resources available to the public to transform a widespread concern into a viable and self-managed solution by a group of people who decide to organize and coordinate in an interdisciplinary manner. Each one contributes what they can for the good of the whole community. It is a different process of creating and building, where people are involved from the beginning both in the design of the idea and decision-making as well as in the final urban construction.

With this sort of intervention, *Recetas Urbanas* manages to find chimerical spaces that transgress what is stipulated and seek to awaken the citizenry through illegal, subversive strategies. In other words, they combine art and activism to become an *artivism* which, according to Groys (Groys [2014]: 1), is the ability to perform a double function through public art: as a means of political protest and as social activism. Thus, these alternative spaces of free, open, and non-formal education can become equally valid since they are increasingly having greater social demand (Abad Tejerina [2002]: 421). *Recetas Urbanas* reinforces its discourse even more, assuming, as Alonso-Sanz (Alonso-Sanz [2013]: 117) defends, that the exchange of visions and solutions in teamwork is always more enriching than the absolute and independent. On balance, all «creation is, in fact, a collective process. Other ideas that we take and to which we print our personal note making them different, stories already told that, mixed with others and with our imagination, we adapt and update» (Bravo Bueno [2005]: 21).

In contrast, in 2012, the Swiss artist Marianne Meyer held an open workshop where she invited the entire community interested in making hundreds of fabrics of different colours to cover one of the facades of the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Austral University of Chile, in the city of Valdivia (Valverde Grau [2012]). The mural experience highlights the sustainability of the artisan fabric. A project worked collaboratively in community.

As Ai Weiwei, the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera has also been arrested on several occasions for proposing revolutionary artistic actions (Reyes

[2015]). In her work *Cátedra de Arte de Conducta* (2002), Bruguera posits art as a kind of place to create collectively and develop human social potential and not simply to obtain or transmit simple information (Finkelppearl [2013]: 180). It opens the way to the interdisciplinary horizontality between the artist and the viewer, where anyone from any area or field has a place without discrimination. She herself expresses: «I'm trying to rethink what art is for. What is its function and what is the role of artists in society?» (Bruguera [2018]: 61).

Residente is the name of René Pérez Joglar, an activist musician born in Puerto Rico and internationally well-known. He uses his lyrics and videos to entertain and cause a thought-provoking effect on people. However, what originally characterizes him in our study is the way he makes his web page, as a public meeting place where each user can enter and register both his name and his location, creating a map of people connected to each other that, in some way, come together to claim a world without borders.

Another project that goes in the same direction is the one entitled *Doors* (2015), directed by the Canadian David Bondt and executed in the city of Lubbock, United States of America (pictures 4 and 5). It consists of the intervention of ten doors through ten communities of different people. Each of them intervenes a different door on both sides, symbolizing the inclusion or exclusion around the community itself. In addition, each community uses icons or shapes that represent their own common desires, problematics, successes, and challenges. Bondt manages to involve people from all walks of life, getting them to coexist later in a final exhibition where they all come together without distinction and on equal terms.

Another controversial artist is the Catalan Nuria Güell, who generates works of social reflection to try improving our environment, in most cases always working collectively and getting involved in other problematizations. In the same line of social concern is Al Omari, working on the issue of immigration pictorially portray-



Figures 4 (right) and 5 (left). David Bondt, one of the pieces for the project *Doors* (2015), private collection. Polychrome doors. Left: obverse of the door. Right: reverse of the door. Source: the artist, available on <URL: <https://davidbondt.com/david-bondt-gallery-doors.php>>

ing different world leaders as if they were Syrian refugees (Ruiz-Grossman [2017]). Some of these portrayed characters are the politicians Angela Merkel and Donald Trump. Through his pieces, the author launches a message of awareness that reaches global levels thanks to digital social networks, denouncing the extreme reality of immigrants who are forced to leave their homes due to geopolitical conflicts, in the present case the people Sirius.

Cornelia Sollfrank is an artist who works with New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT). In fact, she develops what is known as “hacktivism”, a union between *hacking* and *activism*, «a type of non-conventional political participation that seeks, through counter-information and subversive practices, to influence the social order, in order to promote a more democratic and open society» (Burgos Pino [2014]: 3). In her feminist project *Female Extension* (1997), in collaboration with various hackers, Sollfrank develops computer software that automatically

generates *net.art* works under the pseudonym of various female names with the intention of participating in a contest, thus achieving, that most of the participants are women. The decision of the jury recognized three winners, none of whom were women (Moss [2009]).

3. THE PERIPHERAL

Like all the creators already described, there are artistic groups that walk in the same direction and that usually work regularly in collaboration with non-profit activist organizations. *Huit Facettes*, from Senegal, is one of them. Likewise, we highlight *Superflex*, a Danish group founded in 1993 and made up of Jakob Fenger, Rasmus Nielsen and Bjørnstjerne Christiansen, whose practice «consists of working from the institution to destabilize it», questioning the system in which their «works of art are articulated through dynamics that problematize the idea of original, authorship and market relations» (Santiago [2013]). The Russian punk rock group *Pussy Riot* is another transgressive artistic collective that questions the status quo of governments with political proposals for subversive feminist action. In fact, some of its components were arrested in 2012 and sentenced to eighteen months in prison for vandalism after they broke into a Christian cathedral in Moscow to ask the Virgin Mary to become a feminist through a rather striking performance, the video of which gave the around the world thanks to Internet social networks (Hidalgo [2018]). As *Recetas Urbanas*, the artistic collective, *Assemble* works through the realization of architectural constructions. According to Guimón (2015), they carry out an architecture «not suitable for the élites», giving as an example a project carried out in collaboration with the residents of a degraded neighbourhood in Liverpool (United Kingdom) and whose execution earned them a *Turner Prize* in addition to opening the discussion about art.

Furthermore, the project *Luz nas vielas* (2012) catapulted the Spanish multidisciplinary artistic group *Boa Mistura*, born at the end of 2001,



Figure 6. Boa Mistura, fragment of one of the murals for the project *Luz nas vielas* (2012), in São Paulo (Brazil). Source: the artist, available on <URL: <https://www.boamistura.com/proyecto/luz-nas-vielas/>>

to fame. Its realization consists of painting on the walls of the houses that make up the different and narrow streets of one of the favelas of the city of São Paulo (Brazil) a series of positive words to send messages of joy, such as beauty, love, sweetness, firmness (figure 6), pride (Gordon [2012]). People of all kinds of ages who live in these favelas participate in the murals, achieving a harmonious collective public work that invites you to visit it live.

Apart from artists and groups, there are also digital platforms, discussion forums, institutional projects or aid programs that work for socially and politically committed public art. Among other digital platforms, we emphasize *Art of the MOOC* (2020), a web space where we can find artists, student works, and global actions, including other categories, all focused on emerging experimental education and social practice. As well, *Animating Democracy* (2020) and *Americans for the Arts* (2020) are two other platforms that offer and publish all kinds of civic engagement initiatives through art and culture, especially focusing on the United States.

Between the discussion forums, we point out the *Foro Arte Relacional* (VV.AA. [2020b]), where all kinds of artists and people interested in culture discuss and exchange positions on the role of art in society, articulating a space for dialogue both physical in Andalusia (Spain) as virtual. The same

purpose is pursued by the open and public online work network called *e-flux conversations* (VV.AA. [2020a]). Here was, for example, where the artistic group *Artists Against Evictions* published their manifesto (Artistsagainst [2017]).

As the institute founded by artist Martens, to which we have previously referred, we find other sort of institutional projects concerned on the same topics. Among others, Kester (Kester [2011]: 14) focuses on *Park Fiction* from Germany, *Ala Plástica* from Argentina, and *Dialogue* from India. In addition, we highlight the *Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts*, established by the Minneapolis Institute of Art with the idea of awakening and promoting empathy through the visual arts and thus building a fair and harmonious society (Cascone [2017]). We should also mention the project *Networking and Initiatives for Culture and the Arts* of Myanmar. More and more educational institutions of different kinds are committed to organizing workshops and courses based on these projects.

Finally, aid programs, scholarships or artistic residences that support a type of art that is responsible for the environment and social response are increasingly abundant, such as the residence of artists that took place between 2009 and 2012 in the current Site of Memory and Museum *La Perla* of Córdoba (Argentina). This place is a former clandestine detention, torture, and extermination centre during the Argentine military dictatorship and has now been transformed into a museum. The residency was organized by the artists Graciela de Oliveira and Soledad Sánchez Goldar through the *Demolición/Construcción* project. Nevertheless, the *Art for Change la Caixa Aid Program* stands out, whose purpose is to support artistic projects aimed at the participation of vulnerable groups in neighbourhoods or people with needs in the same environment, thus favouring processes of social transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance acquired by the artistic productions that are framed in the new current con-

text of the public becomes a fundamental engine of vindication capable of changing society in favour of an improvement based on moral values of justice and universal sustainability. The fight against the serious problems of the world unquestionably requires the attention of solidarity devices that aim to strengthen the relationship with «the most disadvantaged on the planet» (Sobrados León [2015]: 825-826). Therefore, public art practices can vigorously contribute to social improvement through awareness and training of citizens willing to change everything that does not work around them, always with the motivation of managing to coexist with values of the commons as important as solidarity, peace, respect, tolerance, equality and sustainability.

We can state that contemporary art practices in recent years have once again acquired a growing trend in terms of protest and denunciation production rates, positioning themselves as a strong instrument of awareness and transformation in the digital culture in which we meet. The new form of attitude and critical thinking is what lies behind a compendium of works that call for a determined, sensible, reasoned and autonomous rebellion, necessary to mediate before the financial and governmental powers that prevail today in our systems of life, to sometimes immoral and unfair extents. However, the trend is still a minority and has only just begun, showing that there is still much more to be done in terms of effectiveness or success in the results obtained. We cannot forget that most of art today is not related to causing changes in the minds of people, but it is only produced in order to generate divergent or random reactions among the public. In other words, works that are «pure merchandise», objects that are born from the hands of artists and become products for a buying and selling business «that is not in the least interested in the reflection and questioning» that it must have any work of art (Barbancho [2016]).

We claim, therefore, a public aesthetic that is then postulated as another kind of discipline with which to acquire knowledge. Let's say, then, that this kind of art could also serve as a guide

for society in an effective way, launching committed messages of solidarity and alarm against crimes and social injustices. In conclusion, public art practices that act as responsible agents with the contemporary, with new solutions for social change in direct relation to our environment and international socio-political context in a real way.

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