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Urban geography of arts: The co-production of arts and cities

Pauline Guinard and Géraldine Molina

Since the end of the 20th century, culture in general (Zukin, 1995), and art in particular (Miles, 1997), have been ever more present and visible in cities. Because they are increasingly understood as an integral part of the urban fabric in a post-industrial era, they are often promoted as key-drivers in urban (re)development strategies (Paddison & Miles, 2007; Zukin, 1995). Consequently, art is not only taking up space in cities all around the world, but its function and its relationship to the urban environment are being redefined. Art is not only conceived as a specific object installed in an urban context, but it is also seen as a tool capable of participating in the making of the cities themselves. In this process, cities are aestheticized or “artialized” (Roger, 1997) while, in return, art is urbanized. Because of its increased spatial and urban dimension, art is thus becoming a subject, as well as an object, and a method of investigation for geographers (see for exemple: Amilhat-Szary, 2012; Blanc & Benish, 2016; Hawkins, 2013; Volvey, 2010), and particularly for urban geographers (see for exemple: Boichot, 2012; Debroux, 2012; Grésillon, 2014; Guinard, 2014; Molina, 2010; Zebracki, 2012).

Nevertheless, as highlighted in previous thematic journal issues, studies dealing with the relationship between art and cities are still fragmented, either by geographical area (primarily North America, Europe, East Asia and secondarily Middle East, Africa, etc.¹) or by type of arts (public art, visual art, music, dance, films, literature, poetry, etc.²). By bringing together innovative and original research which invests different urban contexts – notably beyond the so-called global North/South and East /West divides – and various kinds of arts, the current thematic issue proposes overcoming these fragmentations by building bridges between cities and arts. With this in mind, its aim is to raise epistemological, theoretical and methodological issues, caused by the fact of studying interrelations between arts, cities and societies from a spatial perspective, in order to strengthen the “urban geography of arts” approach.

As such, this issue aims at developing a more general framework for a better understanding of the production of cities – as defined by Lefebvre (2000 [1974]) – *by and through* arts. If this process is

¹ See for example: *Territoires en mouvement*, « Artistes et territoires créatifs en Europe », 2013, 19-20; *Critical African Studies*, "African History through the Arts", 2013, 5 (2).

² See for example: *Arts and Public Sphere*, "Just art, politics and publics: Researching geographies of public art and accountability", 2012, 2 (1-3); *GeoJournal*, "Geography and Music", 2006, 65 (1-2); *Social and Cultural Geography*, "Practice of music and sound", 2005, 6 (5); *The Cartographic Journal*, "Cartography and Narratives", 2014, 51 (2); *Annales de géographie*, « Cinéma et géographie », 2014, 695-696 (1-2); *Territoires en Mouvement*, « Littérature et développement des territoires », 2017, 33.

common to various cities around the world, it is too rarely questioned or at least very often investigated only through the lens of gentrification (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Cole, 1987; Ley, 2003), an approach which has been increasingly criticized (Debroux, 2012; Vivant & Charmes, 2008). This issue is thus an attempt to look at the role and place of arts in cities and their societies without necessarily referring to gentrification, a process that could obscure other phenomena. Reciprocally, it also investigates the consequences of urbanization on arts in order to determine to what extent arts are urbanized and socialized themselves and to what extent urbanization could modify them. The goal of this special issue is therefore to explore the mutual influences of arts and cities, or to put it another way, the co-production of arts and cities.

To do so, the issue includes seven articles examining diverse types of arts (contemporary art, public art, street art, graffiti, performance and literature) in various urban contexts – be they by the size of the cities considered or their location (Berlin, Budapest, Calais, Cape Town, Clichy-sous-bois, Gaza, Grenoble, Johannesburg, Montfermeil, Montreal, Paris, Stockholm, Weston-super-mare). In each study, the capacity of arts to participate, to transform or to contest the way in which cities are constructed, and reciprocally, the capacity of cities to define, to modify or to challenge the way arts are produced, are analyzed. More specifically, the role of arts in contributing to the making of more inclusive, participatory and democratic cities or, on the contrary, in reinforcing and legitimizing the exclusive and selective processes of making cities is scrutinized by all the papers. Depending on the arts considered, on the ways they are produced and on the urban contexts in which they take place, at least three types of interaction between arts and cities are explored in this issue. Some authors stress the mutual influence between arts and cities that leads to a normalization of both arts and cities and to the imposition of a rather elitist arts-based urban model. Others consider the potentialities for some arts and artists to resist the dominant artistic and urban norms by creating disruptions that challenge these norms. And lastly, a number of authors go even further in suggesting that arts and artists can not only contest norms but can also propose alternative ones, be they urban, artistic or research-oriented.

Normalizing cities through arts and arts through cities

Analyzing the development of literature and writing in urban spaces for the last two decades, especially in Europe and France, Géraldine Molina wonders about the functions and effects of that increasing textual presence in modern cities. Focusing on the Oulipo movement, she highlights the potential interactions between literature and urban spaces: by inscribing their literary practices into a specific urban context, by making it resonate with this context and by involving inhabitants in their projects, Oulipians are able – according to Géraldine Molina’s terminology – to both “spatialize” literature and “literarize” urban spaces. Furthermore, the presence of writing and writers in cities, and particularly as parts of urban and architectural projects, does not only act on the material and symbolical dimensions of urban spaces, it also tends to rearrange the stakeholders system and to modify the ways in which these projects are implemented, notably by fostering a more participatory and relational approach. As a result, the integration of literature in city-making modifies the urban spaces produced and the way they are produced. Nevertheless, this trend is not without contradiction. It could indeed lead to the normalization of an art form that was supposed to be subversive, to create a feeling of exclusion amongst those who are not familiar with literature, even if the “spatialization” of literature was seen as a way to democratize it, and, ultimately, to promote an image of cities as (re)creative spaces rather than as spaces of creation (Vivant, 2009). As

underlined by the author, these tensions and disconnections between the stated objectives of a project and its actual results are not specific to literature. They concern other types of arts that had been incorporated into the urban fabric.

Looking at art in public spaces in Johannesburg (South Africa) and Montreal (Canada), Pauline Guinard and Antonin Margier make the extent to which art is becoming an urban (planning) norm in cities from the global North and, more recently, from the global South, evident. Far from being insignificant, this esthetic transformation of urban spaces tends progressively to normalize arts, public spaces, and cities. In that regard, art should not be understood only as a tool to promote social cohesion as it is often claimed (Hall & Robertson, 2001), but has to be analyzed as an implicit means to redefine which art but also which public and which behaviors are welcomed in global urban spaces. The comparison between Johannesburg and Montreal is particularly relevant in that regard since it allows Pauline Guinard and Antonin Margier to highlight different phases in the same process toward the pacification of public spaces through art: in Johannesburg, art is supposed to help secure spaces that are known to be dangerous, even if it is at the expense of the poorest; in Montreal, art is conceived as a means to promote ludic interaction amongst by-passers in the name of participation and, consequently, to ban some behaviors and some art forms that are seen as unfriendly from public spaces. As such, art – or at least this normalized and globalized form of art in public spaces – participates in the reinforcement of an exclusive and selective way of producing cities.

Similarly, by critically assessing the effects of an artistic event – namely *Dismaland*, a temporary art-exhibition initiated by the well-known street artist, Banksy, in Weston-super-mare (England) –, Martin Zebracki demonstrates how a claimed inclusive, participatory and socially engaged art project has in fact been contributing more to the reinforcement of an elitist globalized art public and market, rather than to the redevelopment of the small coastal town. This resulted from several unresolved tensions embedded in the project itself. Firstly, there has been a distortion between the artist's objectives and the urban stakeholders' ones from the beginning: while *Dismaland* was conceived by Banksy as a way to mock the contemporary tourism industry, it was on the contrary seen and used by the local authorities as an opportunity to reinvent Weston-super-mare as a touristic destination. Secondly, the targeted public of this event was not clearly identified. Despite Banksy's ambition to create an event open to the inhabitants leaving nearby, the public was made primarily of international arty visitors and secondarily of social media users. Consequently, the abandoned space occupied by *Dismaland* during the time of the exhibition tends to disconnect itself from its surroundings and from the community. Instead of challenging the exclusive ways cities and arts are produced, this project eventually reinforces these processes.

This is precisely against that kind of arts and cities that some artists and *citadins*³ mobilize themselves.

The art of resisting urban norms

Examining the case of the Cecil John Rhodes statue in Cape Town (South Africa), Kim Gurney demonstrates that its fall, due to students' protest against this sculpture that symbolized, in their

³ In French, the term "*citadins*" refers to all the people living in cities and feeling part of those spaces (Dorier-Apprill & Gervais-Lambony, 2007), irrespectively of their nationalities. Because there is no equivalent in English, we decided to use the French terminology.

view, the persistence of a (white) colonialist era, have opened up possibilities for questioning and reinventing the meaning of both art and public space in contemporary South Africa. Indeed, the presence of the statue, but also its current absence, seem to have acted as a catalyst for various artistic interventions. These interventions intend to create a resonance between the significance of the (missing) statue, especially in terms of power imbalance, and wider social and political issues (inequality, discrimination, decolonization, etc.), which are particularly vivid in South Africa. By creating a disruption in the ordinary course of events, the removal of the Rhodes statue challenges the past and the present of South Africa while questioning its future. The artistic interventions that have been taking place on and around the remaining plinth of the statue can be understood as a response to that open interrogation. What is at stake is thus the capacity of these artistic interventions to re-imagine public spaces and public art as sites of commonality and debate, an issue that is particularly critical in South Africa (Guinard, 2014; Gurney, 2015; Marschall, 2010; Minty, 2006) and beyond (Horowitz, 1996; Iveson, 2007; Lacy, 1995; Miles, 1997).

Following this idea that art – and especially activist art or activism – can disrupt the spatial and political dominant ways urban spaces are produced, Sarah Mekdjian explores the potentials of activist experimentations in changing the representations and places of migrants in European cities so as to contest the urban segregation and political exclusion they suffer from. After proposing a typology of activist interventions that distinguishes *graffiti*, counter-mapping, architecture and performances, she argues that the disruptive and subversive efficiency of all these interventions lies on their capacity to connect with the materiality of urban spaces and on their ephemerality. Alternative ephemeral practices entrenched in the daily life of the migrants could thus be a means to constantly unsettle the urban norms which tend to stigmatize and exclude migrants from cities in order to socially and politically transform (European) urban spaces into places where all users – irrespectively of their statuses – have a right to be and to participate in the decision-making process or, in other words, where all users can claim a right to the city (Lefebvre, 2009 [1968]). Nevertheless, the ephemerality of such artistic interventions can be seen as both an opportunity and a limit since it questions their long-term effects, and thus the possibility not only to contest current urban norms but also to change them and to propose alternative ones.

The art of producing alternative urban spaces, images, and studies

Investigating the case of contemporary art in the Gaza Strip and more especially in the city of Gaza, Marion Slitine argues that art and artists can play a crucial role in the making and imagining of a city, despite of – or maybe due to – a context of war and urban crisis. Even if Gazan artists have to face a number of constraints (blockade, censorship, lack of support), they manage to organize themselves to such an extent that the Gaza Strip appears today as one of the most dynamic artistic spaces across the Palestinian territories. As shown by Marion Slitine, it is a place of artistic experimentation, in terms of forms, contents, and methodologies (especially through the use of social media and digital technology), where artists intent to resist the Israeli occupation but also to provide an alternative image of the Gaza urban spaces. This proves to be especially true amongst young and female artists who tend to distance themselves from explicit political discourse to adopt a more humanitarian and universal position. In any case, all these artistic experimentations contribute to symbolically changing the image of Gaza and to position the city itself as a center – and not a margin – on the international arts scene. Paradoxically, it seems that it is the ongoing persistent political and urban crisis that allows such repositioning. As stressed in other urban contexts like Berlin (Grésillon, 2002) or

Johannesburg (Guinard, 2014), times of crisis – be they political, economical or social – would thus be crucial in the reinvention of arts and cities or more precisely of cities through arts.

But, as shown by Harriett Hawkins (2011), arts and artists are not only able to reinvent urban images and spaces, they can also offer geographers new ways of understanding and studying cities. By analyzing a collaborative project involving one urban planner (herself) and two artists around the issue of creating a public space in Clichy-sous-bois and Montfermeil (two stigmatized popular suburbs near Paris), Elsa Vivant questions the potentialities of arts as a way of doing urban research but also as a way to pass on knowledge. The issue of knowledge production and transmission is particularly sensitive in Clichy-sous-bois and Montfermeil since these two municipalities are saturated with knowledge. Because of their typical socio-economic profile and their history marked by various remarkable events (like the 2005 riots), they have often been chosen as places of investigation by journalists, social workers, artists, researchers, etc. In response to that situation, the urban planner and the two artists involved in the project chose to work on that saturation of information and on its inconsistency: they made it visible in order to challenge it. Arts – and especially writings and performances – were a way of narrating differently all the data already collected about those two urban spaces and, by doing so, of collecting new ones. Despite some challenges raised by the difficulty of adopting shared convention amongst all the participants, arts were nevertheless a means to produce alternative, more subjective and, because of that, perhaps more meaningful knowledge for the people living and working in Clichy-sous-bois and Montfermeil.

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