Favela Painting Project, Cultural Invasion or Cultural Synthesis: When Art Decontextualizes Community

Luenna Kang

Abstract

Places are not neutral and oftentimes turn themselves into a powerful ideological tool. When art is installed in public spaces, such as squares, it leaves a huge impact on the local community, being integrated with its identity. The community-based arts can be exercised by the local people; oftentimes it also can be done by outsiders, who do not belong to the place originally. Albeit the outsiders enter the community, the power relation naturally takes two forms, one of cultural synthesis and one of cultural invasion. Borrowing definitions from a social revolutionary perspective, I examine the dynamic reciprocal action between arts, places, and power relations in this article. I take a theoretical approach to the Favela Painting Project in Rio favelas as a case study, with special attention to two essential aspects: the presence of dialogue and the role of residents in the project. Moreover, in the expansion of my analysis on the Favela Painting Project as cultural action, I examine the premise that community-based art projects hold and the danger it imposes.

Places are not neutral and oftentimes turn themselves into a powerful ideological tool. In other words, places are an indivisible, integral and also contradictory set of systems of objects and systems of actions, not taken in isolation but as a unique scenario in which history unfolds[1]. Therefore, when art, being made of the same material as the social exchanges[2], is installed in public spaces, such as squares, it leaves a bigger impact on the local community than artworks that meet people in the art gallery. When art is directly installed amidst the community's place, it is inevitable the artwork integrates with the community's identity and turns itself into a part of the community. And this process, driven by the social transparency of art, influences the whole community and has a potential to initiate bigger social changes beyond the local community. The community-based arts can be exercised by the local people who were originally living there; oftentimes it also can be done by outsiders, who do not belong to the place originally. They come to the community and install the artwork, often aiming at positive social change. While doing it, the interaction between the locals and the outsiders naturally forms the power relation. In some cases, the power relation takes the form of

[1] Milton Santos, A natureza do espaço: *técnica e tempo, razão e emoção. 2. reimpr*, (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo 1, 2006), 63.

[2] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Collection Documents Sur L'art. Dijon]: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002), 41.

a simulation, having the outsiders and the locals as co-creators of their cultural action. In other cases, it puts the outsiders in a higher position whether it was intentional or not. The Favela Painting Project, a project that was conducted by two Dutch artists in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, provides a case study for this dynamic reciprocal action between arts, places, and power relations.

Favela is a Portuguese term that refers to unplanned, informal settlements self-built by their residents, who, for the most part, tend to be low-income and often migrants from impoverished rural areas[3]. Since their origins, the favelas represented a problem for the elites and city-planners and raised multiple concerns[4]. Sanitation, public security and aesthetic issues are some of the common arguments raised in favor of removing favelas. Shortly after FIFA announced Brazil as the host of the 2014 World Cup tournament, the attention of the international media was brought to Rio de Janeiro. And favela was one of the topics that caught the foreign reporters' attention, especially the Favela Painting Project that was conducted in two Rio favelas. True to its title, Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn's team, that goes by Haas&Hahn, painted parts of two favelas, Vila Cruzeiro and Santa Marta, in vivid colors over four years from 2007 to 2010. Despite their last project in Santa Marta being completed in 2010, they received unexpected attention from international media in 2013 along with the attention brought to Rio de

Janeiro from two worldwide events, the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics.

Although the collaboration of visual art and favelas is not new, the *Favela Painting Project* gained extra attention from the international media thanks to its uniqueness of its co-leaders being foreigners. Although the project was not covered by the local media like it was internationally, the Favela Painting Project became one of the most popular topics in the discourse surrounding favelas around 2013. The colorful rays on the favela community quickly put Haas&Hahn on the map. International media talked highly about the project, referring to it as the official disclosure of what can be perceived and represented as precarious places[5] and as opening the door to global networks via social platforms[6]. However, in their report, favelas were still associated with "violence or drugs", "Sites of drugs/gang activity" and "Sites of violence"[7].

In this study, I use Paulo Freire's definitions of "cultural synthesis" and "cultural invasion" in a theoretical approach to analyze the *Favela Painting Project* as cultural action, taking two unique conditions of it into consideration: two lead artists being foreigners and the project itself being the community-based art project installed in the midst of the public. Furthermore, I build my analysis on two essential aspects: the presence of "dialogue" within the project and the role of residents, spectators and co-creators. Moreover, in the expansion of my analysis on the *Favela Painting*

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[3] Luisa Cafe Figueiredo Façanha, *Vidigal: Favela Fad? A Case Study on Gentrification in a Favela in Rio de Janeiro*, University of California, Davis, 2018, 1.

[4] Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, R*io De Janeiro: Favela Policies and Recent Social Mobilizations* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research Guastadalléen 21, 2013), 9.

[5] Katarzyna Kosmala and J. Migual Imas, *Favela Is Painting: An UrbansparkZ/art Installation of Social Commitment and Organisational Change.* Cadernos EBAPE.BR 10, no. 2 (2012): 468.

[6] Ibid, 467.

[7] Catalytic Communities, *Favelas in the media: How the global narrative on favelas changed during Rio's mega-event years*, 25.

Project as the cultural action, I examine the premise of community-based art projects when they are conducted successfully and the danger imposed when they are not, referring to the disciplinary and performative nature of cultural display. In addition, my study counters the perspectives that praised the Favela Painting Project solely based on its aesthetic merits.

Paulo Freire, an esteemed Brazilian educator and philosopher, states in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that, in cultural invasion, actors who come from the outside world draw the thematic content of their action for their own values and ideology[8] on the "new" world that they invade. In other words, the starting point of cultural action in the cultural invasion is the "invader's own world". They bring their predetermined module of belief to impose on the world that they invade. In contrast, in cultural synthesis, actors do not come to teach or to give anything, but rather to learn with the people about their world. In this form, actors admit their invasion but become integrated with the people from the local community and build cultural action together with the people. Thus, in cultural synthesis, actors invite the local people as co-authors of their action, co-creating the guidelines of their action instead of imposing predetermined beliefs on the world around them by themselves. Having been integrated with each other, the actors and the locals become mutually identified as co-creators of their cultural action. With cultural invasion, the locals are relegated to mere observers; they are assigned the role of spectators that rarely go beyond the module imposed by the invaders. Lastly, Freire emphasizes that a critical factor that determines the action as synthesis or invasion is the presence of "dialogue" reinforced by the "investigation."

According to Freire's definition, dialogue, being an existential necessity[9], rests on pre-investigation which entails critical thinking and a great depth of analysis on the site that outsiders, actors, enter. A great level of awareness of the place, obtained by the careful investigation, leads actors to the dialogue that enables horizontal relation between the actors and the local people based on mutual trust. Essentially, thoughtful investigations allow for critical thinking on their cultural actions and invites the local people as co-creators of the action. In addition, since the dialogue should be entailed by careful investigation, the dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's depositing ideas on another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be consumed by the discussants. Thus, it is not possible to instill one's ideas or predetermined module when their cultural action takes the form of synthesis that is supported by critical thinking, investigation, and dialogue.

To discuss the *Favela Painting Project* as a cultural action, applying aforementioned definitions of cultural synthesis and invasion to the community-based art projects, I first discuss the presence of dialogue within the project. As mentioned above, dialogue that is based on careful investigation is the critical foundation of the cultural synthesis. Therefore, dialogue, being the essential initiating point that divides cultural synthesis and invasion, seems to be a good starting point of the discussion. The presence of dialogue in the *Favela Painting Project* can be examined in two different forms: thoughtful

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[8] Paulo Freire and Inc Ebrary, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Thirtieth Anniversary ed. New York: Continuum, 2000), 180.

[9] Paulo Freire and Inc Ebrary, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Thirtieth Anniversary ed. New York: Continuum, 2000), 88.

investigation that comes before the practice of their action and the design of their murals as the outcome of their action.

To first discuss the investigation, it seems necessary to dialogue back with the beginning stage of the project. Before Haas&Hahn started their first project, *Boy with Kite* mural in Vila Cruzeiro, they first visited it as film producers to make a hip-hop documentary. While making a music video, the duo went up to the hill and started to imagine how beautiful it would be if they painted the whole favela in vivid colors. This is the initial motivation for the *Favela Painting Project* that Haas&Hahn revealed at their TED talk. They added that they reached a conclusion to stop thinking and simply start painting. They went down to the Vila Cruzeiro and found three houses with concrete walls that were big and plain enough to paint their first mural. Before starting to paint, Haas&Hahn walked around the area and asked the local residents about their life in Vila Cruzeiro and what they needed to get ideas on the design of their mural. Through conversations, the duo found that the kite was an important cultural component there and reached an agreement to paint a boy with a kite as a symbol of hope. As they communicated with residents before taking off with their project, they kept communicating with the local residents as the project went. By interacting with the local community, Haas&Hahn not just installed their artwork in someone's living place but also invited them to co-create art in their voice. However, Haas&Hahn take a different approach in their second and the third project, the Koi mural in Vila Cruzeiro and the Praca Cantão project. For their second project, Haas&Hahn painted Japanese style Koi on a concrete structure

covering a water runoff system. At the TED talk, they shared that as soon as they saw the concrete hillside in Vila Cruzeiro, they thought they should draw a river and fish. After determining the concept of their mural, they contacted their friend back in the Netherlands, a tattoo artist who does Japanese style tattoos, and asked him to help design the mural. For the following project on the Praça Cantão in the neighborhood of Santa Marta, the team painted the entire community square in abstract colorful rays that became their signature style. Clearly there was not an investigation into or in-depth dialogue with the community beforehand. There were no local voices in their design.

That being said, one might argue that extra investigation was not necessary for following projects since they had already conducted one before their first project, *Boy with Kite*. However, Santa Marta and Vila Cruzeiro are different favelas. Different favelas have different cultures. Every favela has their own unique culture and living environment. Investigation in Vila Cruzeiro cannot be applied to Santa Marta. As Freire clearly stated in his book, investigation that leads to dialogue is not just the pre-stage of the action but should be accompanied by the action. According to Freire, "division would lead to the naive conclusion that action as synthesis follows from action as invasion"[10]. Although Haas&Hahn conducted the first mural project practicing primary investigation and initiation of dialogue, these practices should continue along with the action.

Discussing investigation and dialogue leads to the conversation on the design of the mural. Design is the primary element of

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[10] Paulo Freire and Inc Ebrary, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Thirtieth Anniversary ed. New York: Continuum, 2000), 180-181.

community-based arts. It shows the presence of dialogue on the place and leaves direct impact on its community. Since artworks installed amidst a community's living space directly affects the local community, artists "must consider the character of the surrounding buildings, the type of neighborhood, and the kind of traffic. Therefore, artists of the community-based art projects must arrive at an interpretation of local concerns and find images that are comprehensible and acceptable to a substantial number of people"[11].

Did Haas&Hahn's design embrace local concerns and clearly tell the story of the local people? As discussed above, the design of Haas&Hahn's first mural was the fruit of their interactive dialogue with the local residents. In contrast, the second and third murals were not, which might be a natural outcome engendered by the lack of dialogue and investigation. For the second mural, they painted fish that came to their mind when they first saw the concrete hillside, and for their third project, they painted abstract color rays in Santa Marta. It might have been an easier and safer option for Haas&Hahn to make an abstract design since it leaves room for multiple interpretations. However, it leaves a loophole at the same time. As mentioned earlier, community-based art projects integrate into the community's identity and leave a huge impact on the people living there. Such community arts turn themselves into a powerful ideological tool and carry a power to deliver messages to the outside world on behalf of the whole community.

Simply put, they become the voice of the community. When messages are delivered intentionally or not people from outside of the community believe this to be the community's message or image. Therefore, the design of the mural should deliver a right message from the community. And the artists must arrive at an interpretation of local concerns and find images that are comprehensible and acceptable to a substantial number of people[12]. Otherwise, they deliver the wrong message and manipulate the local community, depriving the community of a medium for artistic enthusiasm.

Artful representations have the capacity to provoke both reflective dialogue and meaningful action and, thereby, can change the world in positive ways that contribute to progressive, participatory, and ethical social action.[13] Additionally, the aesthetic features of a work can also in some cases enhance, but in other cases detract from its ability to convey information, perspective or ideas[14]. Consequently, community-based arts that do not have locals as the main storyteller deliver a misleading message and contribute to the outsiders' perception that the message from the community. When the message is not clear or misrepresented, art decontextualizes the community. Abstract colorful rays of the *Favela Painting Project* might have been aesthetically appealing to attract international media's attention and put Haas&Hahn on the map. However, those color rays do not benefit the community. They do not

[11] Alan w Barnett, *Community Murals : The People's Art.* (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1984), 356.

[12] Ibid.

[13] J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 75.

[14] G. Crossik and P. Kaszynska, *Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture: the AHRC Cultural Value Project* (London: Arts and humanities research council, 2016), 19.

deliver the message of the community, nor invite the locals to tell their story, nor address the local concerns. In addition, in order to deliver the right message, it should deliver a clear message. An abstract design might be an easy and safe option for artists; however, it should not be an option for artists who are working on community-based art projects that should reflect and provoke dialogue and meaningful action.

Community-based art that tells the story of the local community provides a chance for the residents to decide to be a part of the process, to develop their abilities, and to give them a power to choose what is to be done.[15] By this, I do not mean that only local residents can be the artists of the community-based art projects, or that local artists automatically provide an authentic representation. Artists, whether they are originally from the community or not, should create art that embraces the community's culture and the local residents' voice through careful investigation and interactive dialogue. In the appliance of this concept to the *Favela Painting Project*, the design of the murals must have had the local voice in the heart of the clear message it shows rather than abstract color rays. Otherwise, it ultimately reproduces existing power relations in which favela residents are silenced because others do the talking for them[16]. Community-based art projects that fail at addressing the story of the locals relegate people to mere spectators, exploits their community as a tool for the artist's enthusiasm for art, and turn themselves into the cultural invasion. Only co-created arts are truly community-based art. Only when it is premised

on community, can art obtain the potential to initiate the change that centers the community in conversation and that is authentically driven by the community.

Expanding from what has been discussed above, the role of residents is another essential determinant to be considered. It can be examined through looking at the artist-to-resident communication. In the ideal artist-to-people communication, the interaction between them builds the relationship that would place the artist and their art in a position of respect, pride, and dignity, all of which the artist should have[17]. In addition, the artist-to-people communication challenges the power relation that artists naturally bring in as they enter, having artists and the people in mutual position as co-creators. As co-creators, residents should be given a chance to decide to be a part of the process and to develop their abilities and be given a power to choose what is to be done[18]. By having the local residents as co-creators, the community-based art embraces an authentic representation of the local culture. The community is the main storyteller. Living with community-based art that tells the story of themselves, people identify with it as a part of their community. They see their lives reflected in the murals on a heroic scale[19]. Since they co-created it, they speak of it as "ours, " rather than as the artist's[20]. This is true co-creation in community-based art that delivers the message of the locals.

Haas&Hahn promotes that their *Favela Painting Project* is a locally-based, bottom up, communal approach, since they worked with some local residents. In fact, they recruited twenty-five

15 Alan w Barnett, *Community Murals : The People's Art.* (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1984), 374.

16 J. Miguel Imas, "LSE Blogs," *LSE Blogs* (blog), 2014, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/favelasatlse/2014/06/26/a-little-hill-with-big-impact-favelas-art-and-social-relevance/.

17 "The Artist's Statement," *The Artist's Statement* (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971).

18 Alan w Barnett, *Community Murals : The People's Art.* (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1984), 374.

people to paint for thirty days. When they recruited, they told residents that they were going to teach them how to paint and work with them. Yet, those residents who were hired were not invited as co-authors of the action, just hired as painters. An employer-employee relation cannot be interpreted as a completely equal relation. It naturally forms the top-down power relation between the employer and the employee. In this case, the local residents are the employees and the outsiders, Haas&Hahn, are the employers. In this relation, the power flows from foreign artists to local residents who are employed artists to local residents who are employed in a hierarchal relationship.

Some critics devalue the *Favela Painting Project* for not solving other fundamental problems in favelas that have long been discussed, such as, but not limited to, social inequalities, poverty, and drug trafficking. They question what the *Favela Painting Project* means to favelas when the aforementioned problems that directly link to the living conditions in favelas are not solved. I acknowledge that these issues should be addressed; however, Haas&Hahn are not responsible for solving them. I believe that is impossible. I argue that what they could and should have done instead is carefully reflecting on those issues and addressing them in their work. Considering that their work is produced in someone's home, it was their responsibility to have in-depth dialogue with the locals, to understand their concerns, and to address those concerns in their work. Rather than solving

problems, Haas&Hahn were responsible for investigating the place they were going into as outsiders. They were responsible for inviting the locals as co-authors to tell their stories through a careful dialogue in which their voice could be embraced in a true community-based art project. Only when the aforementioned responsibilities are met, the *Favela Painting Project* obtains its premise as a community-based art project and can be understood as cultural synthesis. Only then, it delivers the authentic message from the locals and, going beyond, can be a vehicle for bigger social change truly by and for the community. I do not aim to discredit Haas&Hahn and their team for their effort to try to take a "bottom-top approach" in Hahn's words, by hiring twenty-five local youths out of 499,192 residents. Indeed, Haas&Hahn integrated the local voice on their first mural in Vila Cruzeiro, *Boy with Kite*. They had in-depth dialogue with local residents and invited them as the main storyteller of the project. Nevertheless, the team shifted their approach in their second and the third mural. They did not fully investigate the place, or invite the local residents to tell their story, but instead installed their predetermined module.

In conclusion, the *Favela Painting Project* is not qualified to be titled as a community-based art project and is more of a cultural invasion rather than cultural synthesis. It might have been a very successful community-based art project that may have initiated bigger conversations that truly benefited the local community if it was exercised correctly and the community was given equal creative power throughout the projects. According to Jose Clemente Orozco, a prominent Mexican artist who specialized in political murals, a mural painting that directly interacts with the local community is the highest, most logical, purest and most powerful type of painting[21]. The power it

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[19] Eva Sperling. Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James D. Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: the Contemporary Mural Movement* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 83.

[20] Eva Sperling. Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James D. Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: the Contemporary Mural Movement* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 85.

holds is not simply from its color but from the synergy of the power that the place possesses, people who are living with it, and the conversation initiated by it. Therefore, when the community arts, not limited to murals, are planned, it should embrace the community's culture and be the voice of the community. In addition, community-based artists should work for local audience around issues that concern the immediate community, using art as a medium of expression of, for, and with the local audience[22]. Community-based art projects that fail at involving the residents' voice in the project cannot successfully deliver the right message from the local residents who are relegated as mere spectators. Artworks are not guaranteed to be community-based arts solely because they are located in the community's space. It is built as a community-based art in the synergy of artists who take action to respect the community, local residents who actively share their stories, and the power of place that drives the social transparency of art. The synergy gives the community-based art project the power of initiating conversation that centers community. Art projects installed in the public spaces that fail at embracing community voice and delivering a message are not qualified to be called a community-based art project. It is more precise to say it is art located in a chosen public place.

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[21] Jose Clemente Orozco, *New world, new races and new art* (Creative Art 4, no. 1, 1929), 46.

[22] Eva Sperling. Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James D. Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: the Contemporary Mural Movement* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 30.

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