

## The City in Dialogue, Reflections of Lisbon and the Underdogs Public Art Programme [2013-2023] Book Review

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### Abstract

This publication is a celebration of the 10-year relationship between Underdogs, a cultural platform, and the Lisbon institutional dimension of urban art, Galeria de Arte Urbana. It navigates a delicate balance, avoiding extremes and polarization, seeking recognition without fully realizing its potential—a book that, in its compromise, leaves room for a possible 10-year-old paradox to be explored.

The absence of detailed information about the artists and authors is compensated by an innovative fusion of "The Citizens" texts with images, creating a nuanced, non-declarative narrative that encourages self-interpretation.

The book not only serves as a visual feast but also as an exploration of the program's impact on the city's cultural fabric, examining the dynamic interplay between art, societal narratives, and the urban environment. As the final remarks unfold, the reader is left with a resonating appreciation for the Underdogs Public Art Programme's decade-long journey, celebrating its role in shaping a cityscape where art is not merely a visual spectacle but a powerful medium for cultural reflection and societal engagement.

Contents of the book are divided in "Texts", "Artists", "Map" and "Credits".

The Texts are divided in: The Platform , by Pauline Foessel & Suzanne Marivoet; The City, by Galeria de Arte Urbana; The Roots, by Ricardo Campos; The Artists, by Miguel Moore and The Citizens, short texts titled "Lisbon voices", placed between images of interventions (mostly murals and some installations).

The list of artists, compose the section "The Artists": Interesni Kazki, CYRCLE, PixelPancho & Vhils, PixelPancho, PixelPancho, How and Nosm, Vhils, Okuda San Miguel, Add Fuel, Draw, Mar, Miguel Januário, Olivier Kosta-Théfaine, Bicicleta Sem Freio, Nunca, Finok, Sainer,

AkaCorleone & Hedof, André da Loba, AkaCorleone, Inti, Felipe Pantone, Shepard Fairey & Vhils, Shepard Fairey, Shepard Fairey, WK Interact, PichiAvo, AkaCorleone, Wasted Rita, ICY and SOT, André Saraiva, Tamara Alves AkaCorleone, Add Fuel, JonOne, Add Fuel, Mário Belém, Confeere, Julien Raffin, Pastel, Pedrita Studio, Mr. Panik.

Looking at the texts:

### The Platform" text.

The initial text focuses on "The Platform" without prior clarification, leaving readers questioning its significance. The term "platform" needs clarification only from the official website reveals Underdogs as a cultural Platform based in Lisbon. Despite this initial unclarity, the text by

Pauline Foessel and Suzanne Marivoet is comprehensible, outlining key thoughts.

For clarification, it is essential to note that the Underdogs Public Art Program is a core element of Underdogs Gallery's activity. Notably, Pauline Foessel, a co-founder of Underdogs Gallery with the artist Alexandre Farto (Vhils). Vhils is a key figure connecting with many of the invited artists. The statement, "It was unthinkable for us to conceive the Underdogs project without having the means and the structure," implies support from Lisbon city council through Galeria de Arte Urbana. The success of this ambitious and enduring project is credited to a successful effective management of the relation with the city council.

The text discusses the operative logic, emphasizing the role of street art in generating attractiveness for the Underdogs Gallery. Underdogs Public Art Program serves as the branch enhancing the Gallery's visibility in the streets of Lisbon, creating a platform for urban creation. The platform not only showcases art but also contributes to the city, awakening curiosity and questioning societal norms. The effort to include new formats and practices is highlighted, culminating in a description of the program's mechanics, which involves inviting artists and fostering projects with an evolving process.

The concluding paragraph praises the program's achievements, emphasizing its positive impact on the city's symbolic landscape, social engagement, and diversity. However, providing specific examples, addressing challenges more explicitly, and offering deeper insights into participation and appropriation processes would enhance the overall narrative.

### **The city text.**

Galeria de Arte Urbana (GAU), with over 15 years of activity within the Lisbon City Council, shares a brief text that starts by emphasizing the crucial role of the Underdogs Public Art Programme. It is portrayed as a "vehicle for affirming and consolidating a strategy for public space and culture, where artists and the city are the main protagonists." The program's success is evident in the "provocative and reflective" interactions it has generated, fostering a

"culture of proximity and articulation with the territory," as stated by GAU officials, thereby appreciating the capital's intercultural dimension.

In a retrospective paragraph, it is acknowledged that during GAU's inception, confining the status of urban art solely to its vandalistic aspect was a reductive perspective. This acknowledgment reflects the ongoing effort to shift the perception of graffiti and street art from the Urban Hygiene department to the Cultural Heritage Department, a transition mirrored in an uneven budget allocation.

The paradox becomes apparent in the next paragraph, recognizing the central role of street-based transgressive creation in distinguishing graffiti and street art. Simultaneously, there is an acknowledgment that the work promoted by the City Council should be "within an authorized framework, as a strategy for renewing artistic intervention in public space and safeguarding heritage."

The final paragraph maintains a similar tone, celebrating the accomplishments of urban art, particularly its role in "affirmation, socio-community appropriation, generating feelings of pride and appreciation of public space" within the neighbourhood, the city, and beyond. The text concludes with gratitude to "everyone who conceived, participated in, and promoted this program."

### **The text about "The Roots"**

The text about "The Roots" begins by introducing the intriguing concept of: "institutional dimension of urban art". This is done with the intention of highlighting the paradoxical relationship between the institutional and "a set of phenomena that, (...) have developed on the fringes of institutional powers, (...) the practices of graffiti and street art." Could this be a nuanced way of suggesting that the city council is indirectly supporting illegal activities?

Ultimately, it is assumed that "talking about this topic is therefore not simple." Two reasons are given. The first is evasive, suggesting that "you get the feeling that everything has already been said, given the number of writings on the subject from a wide range of academic and professional backgrounds". The second reason, more reasonable, is "it is

impossible to have a closed and unambiguous position on a reality that is constantly changing and appears multiple and, sometimes, paradoxical”.

“Polarisations are not mutually exclusive” is a good attempt to identify the origin of the paradoxical characteristics of the “institutional dimension” of urban art, the integrative institutional relations with the graffiti and street art phenomenon. Unfortunately, the objective is solely to underline the complexity of the topic and justify explaining “how this typically urban language emerged.”

The following paragraphs provide a very concise overview of the origins of graffiti, starting in the USA in the 70s, then tracing back to Rome and Pompeii, and jumping forward to Street Art. From the “I exist, I was here!” to “expressions that tend to form clusters and function in a collective and ever-changing sense.”

It's also mentioned how and when spray-can graffiti appears in Lisbon, covered in two paragraphs with a conventional narrative, lacking in detail. Part of this narrative also includes revolutionary murals as “city’s historical memory,” partially responsible for a certain aura, as “they suggest a more democratic spirit of urban living, demonstrating that its inhabitants can take ownership of the city, making it more familiar by painting murals and inscribing messages of various kinds on a wide range of media.” These assumptions, while plausible, need proper research for validation.

The sense of taking “ownership of the city” is explored in the institutional dimension of urban art, emphasizing “the tensions and conflicts, as well as the negotiations, that are part of the democratic spirit.”

The text’s final paragraphs discuss “a greater acceptance and appreciation of these languages, which brings them closer to official institutions and artistic agents, contributing to their legitimization.” This is a bold observation, and it's only possible because this book is not a non-academic publication with the exclusive objective of celebrating 10 years of relations between Underdogs, a cultural platform, and GAU as an “institutional dimension” of urban art. The text concludes with a (I would say forced) repetition of the

(non proven) idea of relation between “murals and street art” and the revolutionary murals.

### “The Artists” text

“The Artists” text commences with a paragraph echoing themes from the preceding text: azulejo-clad façades, political muralism, graffiti, and urban art, suggesting a linear narrative. This initial section provides context for the Underdogs platform Public Art program.

Following this brief introduction, the text unfolds as a tapestry of artists, locations, and adjectives. In a condensed form, it might read as follows:

- 2013: Interesni Kazki, surrealistic, mural in Praça Olegário Mariano;
- 2016: André da Loba, transformative, mural in Padre Cruz neighborhood;
- 2015: Sainer, enchanting, "The old lady of Olaias" mural on Avenida Afonso Costa;
- 2021: Mário Belém, witty, pandemic-inspired mural on Rua Damasceno Monteiro;
- 2014: Olivier Kosta-Théfaïne, floral, azulejos on Rua Doutor Estevão de Vasconcelos;
- 2020: Pedro Ferreira and Rita João (Pedrita Studio), symbolic, Rita Hayworth tile panel in Palácio Baldaya;
- Felipe Pantone, modern, "Chromodynamica for Lisbon" in Praça Bernardino Machado;
- Okuda San Miguel, surrealistic, Felipe VI mural on Rua de Marvila in 2014;
- 2013: CYRCLE, mythic, cowboy mural in Travessa dos Brunos;
- 2014: Add Fuel, Draw, Mar, and Miguel Januário, commemorative, 40 years of the 25th of April mural;
- Shepard Fairey, sociopolitical, "Peace Guard" mural on Rua Natália Correia;
- 2017: Shepard Fairey and Vhils, collaborative, "Universal Personhood" mural;
- 2020: ICY and SOT, critical, "EU Flag" sculptural work in Praça Europa;
- 2020: Tamara Alves, symbolic, sculptural piece at Panorâmico de Monsanto;
- 2021: Confeere, thought-provoking, "REALITY BLOCKER" at Entrecampos Station;

- 2019: AkaCorleone, balanced, "BALANCE" painted basketball court in Campo dos Mártires da Pátria;
- 2016: How and Nosm, labyrinthine, mural on Avenida da Índia;
- 2018: PichiAvo, mythological, Poseidon mural at Santa Apolónia Station;
- 2013: Vhils and PixelPancho, maritime, collaborative mural at Doca do Jardim do Tabaco;
- 2014: PixelPancho, retro-futuristic, mural in Avenida Aquilino Ribeiro Machado;
- 2014: Bicicleta Sem Freio, vibrant, riverside mural in Cais do Sodré;
- 2015: Finok, cultural fusion, mural on Rua de Manica;
- 2014: Nunca, satirical, Pedro Álvares Cabral mural on Rua do Vale Formoso de Cima;
- 2016: Inti, complex, "La Madre Secular" mural on Rua Veríssimo Sarmento.

As evident, a non-chronological listing was chosen, often connecting through the adjectives provided.

The text concludes with reflections on "this generation of urban-inspired artists." The term "urban-inspired" is intriguingly protective, positioned a degree away from the urban context, street, and paradoxical positioning. It takes a step further into the canonical "art world," seen as a "new form of public art." The conclusion reaches an emphatic, albeit platform-unrelated, statement: "Underdogs have been pivotal in contributing towards creating a new experience of the city."

### **Final remarks**

This isn't a theoretical tome. The "formal texts" merely serve as accessories. Out of its 87 pages, only 13 are dedicated exclusively to text. It doesn't aspire to be a photographic archive encompassing all the works within the program; rather, a selective assortment of images is presented without divulging the criteria for their selection.

While it lacks detailed information about the artists and authors, the innovation shines through in the interplay between "The Citizens" texts and the images of the works. It seems like an endeavor to construct an alternative narrative—an implicit one, fostering self-interpretation.

Amidst the ambition evident in the text's bold statements, fitting for a celebratory decade edition, there's something that somehow passes to the reader that there's much more to share. Still, credit is due; orchestrating the creation of such a publication is an accomplishment deserving celebration.

It's a hybrid document that encapsulates the essence of the decade but falls short of fully representing the profound meaning at its core. The absence of connections with other facets of the local ecosystem is conspicuous, coupled with a certain conceptual instability—from the platform to the project, navigating through the "urban-inspired" designations, and grappling with the notion of public art as a potential dead end.

In essence, it's a publication commemorating a decade of symbiotic relations between Underdogs, a cultural platform, and the institutional dimension of urban art in Lisbon, namely Galeria de Arte Urbana. A book that could have delved into a possible 10-year-old paradox but opted for a middle ground, avoiding polarities and extremes, seeking recognition just beneath its full potential.