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The Dissolution of the Cognitive Empire: Brazilian Street Art During the Pandemic and the Urban Landscape as a Medium for Decolonial Poetics

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The Dissolution of the Cognitive Empire: Brazilian Street Art During the Pandemic and the Urban Landscape as a Medium for Decolonial Poetics

Abstract. This article aims to discuss the urban art actions implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and their relationship with the decolonial turn in the arts. By examining the examples of the projects “Vozes contra o racismo” (Voices Against Racism) and the CURA (Urban Art Circuit), which carried out numerous artistic-urban interventions in Brazilian cities involving Afro-descendant and Indigenous curators and artists, we propose a reflection on how urban spaces can enhance the city as a site of visibility and affirmation for marginalised groups and the political struggle in Latin American countries. With the closure of museums and other cultural institutions during the pandemic, cities became the epicentre of artistic and political expression. This coincided with the emergence of the decolonial movement in Brazilian arts and the social movements that fought against the obscurantist regime of the extreme-right government led by former President Jair Bolsonaro. While urban art has been traditionally analysed from the perspectives of art theories and cultural studies (e.g., through discussions on the divisions between the cult, the popular, and the mass), we argue that contemporary analyses require new parameters for an effective approach to this phenomenon, bringing together Latin-American studies and decolonial perspectives.

Keywords: urban art; contemporary art; street art; decoloniality; decolonial art; Brazilian art.

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Resumo. A proposta deste artigo é discutir as ações de arte urbana implementadas durante o período da pandemia de Covid-19 no Brasil e sua relação com a virada decolonial nas artes. A partir dos projetos Vozes Contra o Racismo e CURA – Circuito de Arte Urbana, que realizaram inúmeras intervenções artístico-urbanas em grandes cidades brasileiras, com o envolvimento de curadores e artistas afrodescendentes e indígenas, propomos uma reflexão sobre como os espaços urbanos podem potencializar a cidade enquanto lugar de visibilidade e afirmação de grupos minorizados. Com o fechamento de museus e outras instituições culturais no período da pandemia, as cidades voltaram a ser o epicentro da expressão artística e política, o que ocorreu paralelamente à emergência do movimento decolonial nas artes brasileiras e dos movimentos sociais que lutaram contra o regime obscurantista do governo de extrema direita do ex-presidente Jair Bolsonaro. Se, até recentemente, a arte urbana vinha sendo analisada do ponto de vista das teorias da arte e dos estudos culturais (por exemplo, por meio das discussões sobre as categorias divididas entre o culto, o popular e o massivo), entendemos que na contemporaneidade serão necessários novos parâmetros para uma abordagem efetiva deste fenômeno, unindo estudos culturais e perspectivas decoloniais.

Palavras-chaves: arte urbana; arte contemporânea; arte de rua; decolonialidade; arte decolonial; arte brasileira.

Resumen. El propósito de este artículo es discutir las acciones de arte urbano implementadas durante el período de la pandemia de Covid-19 en Brasil y su relación con el giro decolonial en las artes. A través de los ejemplos "Vozes Contra o Racismo" y CURA - Circuito de Arte Urbana, proyectos que llevaron a cabo numerosas intervenciones artístico-urbanas en grandes ciudades brasileñas, con la participación de curadores y artistas afrodescendientes e indígenas, proponemos una reflexión sobre cómo los espacios urbanos pueden potenciar la ciudad como lugar de visibilidad y afirmación de grupos minoritarios. Con el cierre de museos y otras instituciones culturales durante el período de la pandemia, las ciudades volvieron a ser el epicentro de la expresión artística y política, lo cual coincidió con la emergencia del movimiento decolonial en las artes brasileñas y los movimientos sociales que lucharon contra el régimen obscurantista del gobierno de extrema derecha del expresidente Jair Bolsonaro. Si hasta hace poco tiempo el arte urbano había sido analizado desde la perspectiva de las teorías del arte y los estudios culturales (por ejemplo, a través de las discusiones sobre las categorías divididas entre lo culto, lo popular y lo masivo), comprendemos que en la contemporaneidad serán necesarios nuevos parámetros para un enfoque efectivo de este fenómeno, que combine estudios culturales y perspectivas decoloniales.

Palabras clave: arte urbano; arte contemporáneo; arte callejero; decolonialidad; arte decolonial; arte brasileño.

Introduction

Brazil faced the COVID-19 pandemic in a doubly perverse context. In addition to dealing with the consequences of the health crisis, the country was experiencing a political landscape characterised by a far-right government under the leadership of President Jair Bolsonaro. This period was marked by hostility towards groups on the political left, the disintegration of cultural, scientific and educational efforts, the promotion of violence and the exacerbation of structural financial problems. In this context, artistic expression was a potent means through which Brazilian artists challenged the undemocratic administration, bringing art's potential as a catalyst of social change to the fore.

Due to the closure of museums and other cultural institutions, a significant number of artists have taken to the streets to present their work, using urban art techniques such as graffiti, tags, audiovisual projections and stickers. In this context, street art in Brazil has acquired unique features during this period, which are attributed to the “decolonial turn in Brazilian art” (Paiva, 2022), a phenomenon distinguished by a notable rise of Afro-diasporic, indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ artists and curators. If previously the Brazilian art scene was mainly filled with white individuals such as artists, curators, museum directors, and academics, there has been a notable shift during the pandemic, indicating the rising prominence of the decolonial movement in the country.

This article provides an analysis of Brazilian urban art during the pandemic, with a specific focus on two significant events: “Voices Against Racism” in São Paulo and the “CURA – Urban Art Circuit” in Belo Horizonte. The goal is to illustrate how these initiatives facilitated partnerships among Afro-descendant and indigenous artists and curators through urban artistic interventions. The proposal adopts a case study approach, acknowledging this research strategy's ability to provide in-depth insight into a critical issue - the infiltration of decolonial aims in Brazilian urban art. Focusing on two specific cases, this analysis establishes the groundwork for future explorations of the same topic. Our chosen pair of large cities, both with an established Brazilian urban art tradition, provides a vast sample size suitable for qualitative analysis of this phenomenon. The choice to study these two events is based on their innovative approaches to tackling decolonial issues in Brazilian urban art. The inaugural *Voices Against Racism* event in São Paulo exclusively addressed racial issues,

while the established CURA festival presented works that focused exclusively on racial, ethnic, and gender issues in both of its pandemic editions (2020/2021).²

We will use art criticism methods and a decolonial studies theoretical approach to conduct this analysis. The terminology *decolonial* and *decoloniality* is in accordance with the nomenclature established by the Modernity, Coloniality, and Decoloniality (MCD) group, which is predominantly comprised of Latin American researchers. This group maintains that coloniality is a phenomenon that transcends the historical period of colonialism and is a pillar that upholds the dynamics of asymmetrical power relations in the present day. According to Catherine Walsh (2009), a researcher associated with the MCD, eliminating the *s* in the word *descolonizar* (the Spanish and Portuguese word for *decolonize*) does not imply the adoption of an Anglicism. Instead, it indicates divergence from the Spanish prefix *des*, as the intended meaning is not only to *deconstruct* or *disarm* the colonial paradigm. Therefore, the MCD believes that colonization is an ongoing and continuous process with specific points of disruption. This perspective also originated in Latin America as a response to "post-colonialism" theories developed in the post-Cold War era, which were associated with African and Asian studies.

Decoloniality as a theoretical category has paved the way for understanding the impacts of colonialism in contemporary political, cultural, and intellectual realms. Aníbal Quijano (1992), one of the main authors of the MCD group, introduced the concept of "coloniality of power" to define how the colonialist-capitalist system is kept through strategies of controlling the economy, nature, gender, sexuality, subjectivity, and knowledge. Art can be considered as one of these elements of modernity in correlation with other hierarchies, such as the international division of labour and issues of social class. From a decolonial perspective, art history was constructed through discursive that have historically classified European art as superior to arts from other origins, such as in non-Western societies.

From a decolonial standpoint, we understand urban art as a part of a cultural system that can reveal the tensions generated among power, subjectivity, identity, representation, and knowledge. As a participant in the symbolic production of urban space, street art - understood in the structure of social relations and not reduced to its aesthetic dimension - echoes the contradictions and conflicts under colonial relations. Through the examples *Voices Against Racism* and *CURA-Urban Art Circuit*, we aim to scrutinise how urban spaces can serve as platforms for amplifying the city's role as a locus of visibility and empowerment for marginalised communities. Moreover, we illustrate how

² <https://iree.org.br/o-festival-cura-e-os-desafios-da-arte-urbana-no-brasil/>

Brazilian cities have regained their significance as epicentres of artistic and political expression, particularly in the face of pandemic social restrictions. This resurgence occurred parallel to the rise of the decolonial movement in Brazilian arts and the strengthening of other social movements that confronted the obscurantist regime led by Bolsonaro, criticizing its deliberate disconnection from issues central to the decolonial agenda.

The Decolonial Turn in Brazilian Art: A Brief Overview

In recent years, numerous events have confirmed the decolonial turn in Brazilian art, which signals the possibility of a new paradigm based on experiences and epistemologies historically excluded from dominant frameworks, especially artworks that address ethnic, racial and gender issues. Here are a few examples: exhibitions curated by Indigenous; the Pipa Prize, the leading contemporary art award in Brazil, which has predominantly recognised decolonial artists in recent years; the representation of decolonial artists by major galleries; and numerous publications in specialised press and books. In 2023, the Sao Paulo Biennial featured a highly skilled curatorial team with a decolonial focus, comprising Grada Kilomba, Manuel Borja-Villel, Diane Lima, and Helio Menezes. Indigenous artist Glicéria Tupinambá will be the first to have a solo Brazilian exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2024. Gómez (2015) argued that these actions establish opportunities for art produced on the margins by artists historically excluded from dominant cultural spaces. At the forefront of this movement are artists such as indigenous Denilson Baniwa, Gustavo Caboco and Kadu Tapuya, whose works combine traditional culture with modern artistic strategies. b) Afro-descendant artists Ayrson Heráclito, Aline Motta, and Paulo Nazareth, whose works explore Afro-diasporic. c) Transgender artists such as Ventura Profana, Jota Mombaça, and Castiel Vitorino Brasileiro, whose works intersect race, class, and gender.

Despite the underrepresentation of individuals of African and indigenous descent in significant roles within the artistic system in Brazil, those with these backgrounds have created a significant and impressive body of theoretical and artistic work. This emphasises the need for remediation in response to the systematic deletion of their experiences and memories from Eurocentric art history. This phenomenon is recent in Brazil, where the number of Afro-descendant and Indigenous individuals in curatorial roles has always been

minimal compared to the number of white men.³ As pointed out by Ribeiro (2020a), the São Paulo Museum of Art Assis Chateaubriand (MASP), founded in 1947, only hired its first Black female curators, Horrana de Kássia and Amanda Carneiro, in 2018, and its first Indigenous curator, Sandra Benites, only in 2019. While these structures have been changing more intensively in Brazil in recent years, the historical reflections of inequality and racial segregation persist in cultural institutions. A study by Ariê (2020) demonstrated that out of over 600 artists represented by galleries in São Paulo, only 5% were Black or mixed-race. The São Paulo Pinacoteca, one of the most important museums in Brazil, only incorporated artworks produced by Indigenous artists into its collection in 2019 (Simões, 2019).

Despite significant changes during the pandemic, when the decolonial discussion made significant progress in Brazilian arts, preceding historical landmarks can be identified. One of these milestones is the “A mão afro-brasileira” (The Afro-Brazilian Hand) exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art in 1998, curated by Emanuel Araújo and assistant curator Carlos Eugênio Marcondes de Moura (Oliveira, 2018). The establishment of the Afro Brazil Museum in 2004, helmed by the vital Emanuel Araújo, was another pivotal moment. The museum hosts a collection of about 6,000 pieces. The museum even produced the exhibition “A nova mão afro-brasileira” (The New Afro-Brazilian Hand), curated by Emanuel Araújo in 2013. This title referred to the earlier exhibition (The Afro-Brazilian Hand) to define a new generation of Black artists. Bispo (2020) argues that the period between 2016 and 2019 was crucial for these developments, as several exhibitions showcasing works by Black artists suggested an unparalleled moment in Brazilian culture. The change proposed by the author is believed to have resulted mainly from the crucial push by Black artists' organized network, primarily within the theatre community. From the 2010s onwards, the Brazilian cultural agenda has undergone a significant shift. Examples include exhibitions such as "Histórias Mestiças" (Mixed Race Stories), curated by Adriano Pedrosa and Lilia Schwarcz at the Tomie Ohtake Institute in

³ Several studies indicate that the Brazilian quota system, which has been in place since 2012, resulted in an increase of 47% in overall enrolment from public schools in federal universities, alongside a 73% surge in Black student enrolment numbers from public schools. Additionally, university education has enabled minorities to access job opportunities, allowing them to make a more remarkable and influential presence in the arts industry. This broadened educational access not only enables economic opportunities but also acts as a stimulant for diversification and inclusion within the artistic field. By means of the arts, these formerly marginalised voices can discover forums for disputing stereotypes, communicating genuine stories, and making a significant impact on cultural discussion. <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/educacao/noticia/2022-04/lei-de-cotas-ajuda-reduzir-desigualdades-diz-universidade-americana>

2014, and "Territórios: Artistas Afrodescendentes no Acervo da Pinacoteca" (Territories: Artists of African descent in the Pinacoteca Collection) at the Pinacoteca art museum, curated by Tadeu Chiarelli in 2015. Additionally, "Missing Dialogues" was curated by Rosana Paulino and Diane Lima at Itaú Cultural in 2016, and "Afro-Atlantic Stories" was curated by Adriano Pedrosa, Ayrson Heráclito, Hélio Menezes, Lília Schwarcz, and Tomás Toledo at the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) in 2018.

Examining this timeline shows a steady rise in the representation of Afro-diasporic individuals in prominent curatorial roles, including Helio Menezes, Ayrson Heráclito, Rosana Paulino, and Diane Lima. These black curators and artists have contributed to numerous noteworthy projects in recent years. A significant accomplishment in this shift towards greater inclusivity was the appointment of Edson Kayapó, Kássia Borges Karajá, and Renata Tupinambá as new associate curators of Indigenous art at MASP in 2022. The data confirms the significant rise of the decolonial movement in Brazil during and after the pandemic, which gained momentum through virtual gatherings that allowed artists and curators to connect despite social distancing measures and the prevailing conservative political landscape.

During the pandemic, there was a significant increase in exhibitions and events focused on decolonial perspectives, especially in digital formats. This amplified the extent of recent changes in the Brazilian cultural landscape. The pandemic served as a catalyst, igniting the figurative powder keg and unleashing the unstoppable force of this discourse in the art realm. "Véxoa: Nós sabemos" (Véxoa: We Know) was the inaugural exhibition at Pinacoteca de São Paulo (2020) dedicated to contemporary Indigenous production in Brazil. Curated by Indigenous researcher Naine Terena, it showcased the work of 23 artists/collectives from various regions of the country, featuring paintings, sculptures, objects, videos, photographs, installations, and a series of activities organized by different Indigenous groups. One of the exhibition's highlights was "Moquém_Surari. Arte Indígena Contemporânea" (Moquém_Surari: Contemporary Indigenous Art), exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo in 2021. The exhibition, curated by Jaider Esbell, marked a significant moment in the history of the São Paulo Biennial, showcasing the works of several Indigenous artists, including Daiara Tukano, Sueli Maxakali, and Gustavo Caboco, for the first time. This accomplishment was a direct result of Esbell's advocacy within the institution, which resulted in this edition being recognised as the "Bienal Indígena" (Indigenous Biennial).

In 2020, the 12th Mercosul Biennial, which usually occurs in Rio Grande do Sul, provides another noteworthy instance of the ongoing changes. Owing to

the pandemic, the exhibition entitled “Feminisno(s): visualidades, ações e afetos” (Feminism/s: visualities, actions, and affections) occurred online. The curatorial team, helmed by the Argentinean Andrea Giunta, comprised three associate curators: Dorota Biczal, Fabiana Lopes, and Igor Simões. It is historic that Fabiana and Igor, dedicated Afro-descendent curators and critics, contributed. It was a singular occasion when half of the curatorial team for a biennial in Brazil were Afro-Brazilian curators. According to Ribeiro (2020b), neither the Mercosul Biennial nor the São Paulo Biennial, the country's two largest exhibitions of this kind, have ever had a black person as their general curator.

During the pandemic, curatorial initiatives led by Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ individuals gained prominence on the Brazilian cultural circuit. Their novel approaches challenged traditional museum structures, theoretical boundaries, and historical records, which had been established over centuries. This led to a shift away from the earlier unidirectional system of legitimisation based on Eurocentric parameters and towards a more inclusive system. These new modes of operation introduce representativeness in visual arts through highly innovative projects. One example is the MUTHA project (2021), which resulted in the book “Transespécie/Transjardinagem” (Trans-species/Trans-gardening), featuring nearly one hundred trans artists, and the digital initiative “Museu Transgênero de História e Arte” (Transgender Museum of History and Art: <https://mutha.com.br/>). The exhibition “Netos de Makunaimi: Encontros de Arte Indígena Contemporânea” (Makunaimi's Grandchildren: Contemporary Indigenous Art Encounters), curated by Ana Elisa de Castro Freitas and Paula Berbert and with the collaboration of the Indigenous Jaider Esbell and Gustavo Caboco, held at the Museum of Art of the Federal University of Paraná in 2019-2020, was another example of an innovative processual and ritualistic intervention in the museum, based on alternative strategies such as plant cultivation and food sharing.

The signs of changes in the Brazilian urban art scene

Amidst the considerable surge in Brazil's decolonial agenda during the pandemic, an intriguing occurrence has surfaced: the rise of Brazilian street art within the decolonial paradigm. Notably, the controversy surrounding the statue of the Bandeirante Borba Gato in São Paulo's Santo Amaro neighbourhood serves as a pivotal point for this discourse. Borba Gato was a well-known 17th-century explorer and settler in Brazil who has received criticism for his participation in Indigenous enslavement and violence. In 2021, Revolução Periférica group (Peripheral Revolution) ignited the statue in a fire in alignment with the global movement to topple public monuments that symbolise historical figures acknowledged as enslavers, murderers, and colonialists. One year before the

intervention by the Peripheral Revolution group, the statue had already been subjected to artistic action, specifically a mapping projection by the Coletores Collective (Figure 1). A recent survey by the Institute Pólis reinforces this point: noting that less than 3% of the over 360 monuments in the city of São Paulo honour Black and Indigenous individuals.

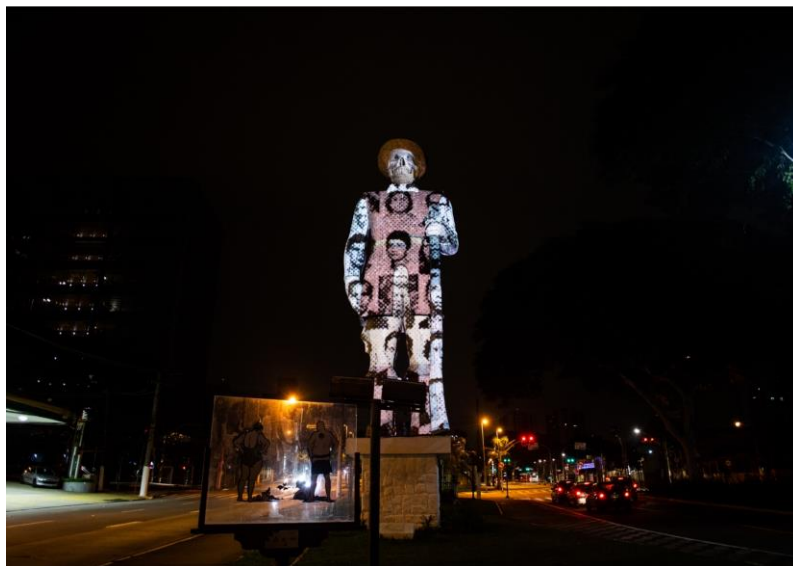


Figure 1 - Pujança editada/Monumento Borba Gato [Enhanced Vigor/Borba Gato Monument], São Paulo, by Coletores Collective (2020). Video mapping technique. Courtesy of Coletores Collective

The action around the statue of Borba Gato showed Brazil's alignment with the global movement to topple monuments, largely sparked by the death of George Floyd in the United States in 2020. Widespread media coverage of Floyd's passing reinforced the shared belief that it is no longer acceptable to venerate murderers, thieves, and rapists through the presence of their likenesses in statues, street names, and other public edifices. Colonialist monuments are unacceptable as they represent “the sculptural extension of a form of racial terror” (Mbembe, 2014, p. 220). Moraes and Anjos argue that burning the Borba Gato statue would be a “terrorist act, a performative act, an act of healing, an act of love” . They further assert that every symbol pays the price of representing something for

many, as "iconolatry is as powerful as it is fragile" (Moraes and Anjos, 2020, p. 1).

This is not a naive endorsement of monument destruction in the name of decoloniality. It is essential to have a comprehensive discussion about monument preservation policies, the influential role of these structures in public spaces, and the means of reshaping collective memory, among other topics that can enrich the debate, given that the toppling of colonialist monuments has become a global trend. Some historians recommend relocating these monuments to museums or creating memorials similar to those established around Nazi extermination camps. These methods may encourage the critical examination of monuments as historical artefacts that require systematic analysis and comprehension so that past errors are not repeated. Nonetheless, these events bear significant symbolic weight, exemplified by the recent destruction of the statue honouring slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, England, and the removal of Christopher Columbus statues in various cities across the United States.

During the pandemic in Brazil, urban art interventions have reignited discussions about the role of art and its institutional context. In this context, art conceived in public spaces has undergone a profound evolution, assuming the role of a strategic tool for anchoring reality and engaging the public. The growing importance of street art is demonstrated by this transformation, especially as the urban landscape has become a concrete space for communal presence and interaction aimed at combatting social isolation. This phenomenon emphasizes the artist's skilful use of this concept as a means of conveying transformative narratives, where the fields of ethics, aesthetics, art, and politics converge seamlessly.

Even in cities further from the busy Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo axis, fascinating events occurred. In Fortaleza, a northeastern country city, the exhibition "Arte de Rua – Transformando Vidas (Street Art - Changing Lives)" also adopted a new format to cope with restrictions. The artworks were displayed in a vast outdoor space, accessible by car or foot (with scheduled visits to prevent crowding). Whilst inside the comfort of their car, drivers could observe a selection of pieces produced by sixty young individuals from outlying areas. These individuals took part in graffiti workshops led by five guest artists, including Laura Holanda, Luci Sacoleira, André Nódoa, Zé Victor, and Daniel Chastinet, held during December in Cucas da Barra do Ceará and Jangurussu. Many panels featured an Afro-Diasporic theme.

We should also acknowledge the emergence of artists in the cultural sphere during the pandemic, who have proposed alternative strategies for artistic practice. Such proposals facilitated effective and activist engagement with social and political struggles, encompassing collective and collaborative creations.

Located in the south of the country, in the state of Paraná, The Kókir collective, composed of Sheilla Souza and Tadeu Kaingang, investigates contemporary art practices and the cosmic views of indigenous communities through collaborative actions. Their initiatives engage artists, non-artists, individuals from various indigenous ethnicities, and non-indigenous participants. The artists also utilise techniques for occupying urban and indigenous territories to discuss rights, ethnography, and the politics of spaces. Also located in the southern region of the country, another significant indigenous artist from this new generation is Xadalu Tupã Jekupé. He incorporates elements of screen printing, graffiti, painting, photography, and objects in his urban artwork to highlight the relationships between indigenous peoples and their territories near the cities. Many of the artist's creations have been executed in Porto Alegre city, indicating that decolonial urban art has a presence in areas beyond the prominent cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Cultural institutions also had to develop alternatives to cope with the restrictions of social isolation. This involved considering alternative actions outside of their premises and engaging with public spaces. The Museu Afro Brasil in São Paulo is a case in point, being committed to the decolonial agenda and seeking solutions to the closure of its space during the pandemic. The museum held a “protest exhibition” on its exterior wall in honour of João Alberto Silveira Freitas, an Afro-Brazilian man who was brutally murdered in 2019 at a Carrefour supermarket in Porto Alegre. The exhibition "Foram os homens e as mulheres negras que construíram a identidade nacional: vidas negras do Brasil" (It was Black men and women who built the national identity) showcased the works of six artists who created graffiti on its external facade in Ibirapuera Park. By addressing racism, violence, and inequalities, the exhibition, curated by Emanuel Araújo, reaffirmed the significance of Black individuals' contributions to Brazilian society.

The decolonial turn in Brazilian art highlights the need to construct a fresh framework in current art that incorporates previous experiences and epistemologies traditionally excluded from the dominant discourse. There is still much work to be done to create a pragmatic insurgency that generates enough pressure to effectively transform the modes of production and circulation of the arts. As per Thea Pitman's statement, “The door to hegemonic art institutions is ajar, but not wide open to a radical change of the status quo” (2021, p.14). Curiously, artists have significantly invested their efforts into producing street art during the pandemic when the doors of art institutions were physically closed, and exhibitions were moving online.

The City as a Stage for Decolonial Art: “Voices Against Racism” and “CURA – Urban Art Circuit”

Between July and August 2020, the São Paulo Municipal Secretary of Culture, in collaboration with the Municipal Secretary of Human Rights and Citizenship and the Coordination for the Promotion of Racial Equality, introduced the “Voices Against Racism” initiative. The project was curated by Amarilis Costa, Hélio Menezes, Ligia Rocha, and Thamires Cordeiro, all of whom were Black employees of the Secretary of Culture. This event represented a noteworthy cultural effort designed to promote awareness and combat racial discrimination. The initiative comprised “Present Culture Dialogues” webinars and artistic interventions, as a unique endeavour solely dedicated to dealing with racism. It was a notable first for the city of Sao Paulo, which is renowned for its high production of street art worldwide.

Spanning five microregions in Sao Paulo, "Voices Against Racism" included more than forty sites and highlighted how the city's segregated construction is intertwined, creating a kind of cartography through marked points that poetically connect each of these artistic urban interventions. Although the exhibition sought to decentralise the city spaces, there was a significant concern in finding formats that would not encourage large gatherings, in order to maintain the necessary social distancing precautions imposed by the pandemic. As a result, the artworks (graffiti and video projections) were created to be viewed while passing by, ensuring compliance with COVID-19 regulations. The project aimed to raise and present objective questions regarding belonging, diversity, identity, racism, prejudice, and inequality. In doing so, it aimed to establish novel concepts for how urban environments are conceived, with symbols representing all social groups residing therein. Hélio Menezes, one of the exhibition's curators, explained that the artists aimed to evoke memories of a city that was highly exclusive and hierarchical and that this was achieved by distributing these bodies across different regions of the city.⁴

The film "Experimentando o Vermelho em Dilúvio" (Experiencing Red in Deluge), created by artist MuSa Michelle Mattiuzzi and projected in buildings during “Voices Against Racism”, provided important arguments for the discussion proposed by the project (Figure 2). In the film, through a ritual walk to the Statue of Zumbi dos Palmares located at the centre of Rio de Janeiro, the artist proposes a reflection on the persisting violent colonial representation, despite attempts to pay homage to excluded groups. This is because the sculpture is a replica of a Nigerian head dating from the 11th to 12th centuries and does not represent Zumbi dos Palmares, a Brazilian historical figure who led a resistance

⁴ Interview in the article: <https://www.archdaily.com.br/br/945660/vozes-contra-o-racismo-outras-narrativas-sobre-o-territorio-paulista>

against slavery in the 17th century and after whom the public sculpture is titled. It is noteworthy that this study examines the utilisation of public spaces by artistic monuments and how it aligns with the purpose of street art, as defined by Riggle, who states, "An artwork is street art if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning" (Riggle, 2010, p. 246). Therefore, the artist employs a metalanguage to produce street art. She positions a publicly accessible monument in her film to scrutinize it, thus returning it to public space through an artistic action.



Figure 2 - Excerpt from the documentary film *Experimentando o Vermelho em Dilúvio* [Experiencing Red in Deluge], by the artist MuSa Michelle Mattiuzzi. Photographer: Matheus Ah. (2016). Source: <https://www.studiomusa.art/performance/experimentando-o-vermelho-em-diluvio/>

As part of the “Voices Against Racism”, Denilson Baniwa, an Indigenous artist, produced a piece entitled "Brasil Terra Indígena" (Brazil: Indigenous Land). The work projected images onto the Monument to the Bandeiras, a prominent statue in São Paulo, dedicated to the Bandeirantes, who were Brazilian historical explorers. However, criticism of this monument has arisen due to its colonial undertones and links to the historical violence and mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. Denilson Baniwa's artwork acted as an intervention and critique, reformulating the monument's narrative to reflect an Indigenous perspective. This project was conducted in partnership with the Coletores Collective. The video

begins with a Portuguese caravel ship facing wind, rain, fire, and sea forces that cause it to wreck, preventing it from reaching the harbour. After the wreckage, numerous animals, plants, and spiritual beings from the Baniwa cosmology emerge, portrayed in neon alongside significant phrases such as "Brasil Terra Indígena" (Brazil Indigenous Land) and "São Paulo Terra Indígena" (São Paulo Indigenous Land). These images can be interpreted as forms of visual scripts (in this case, indigenous scripts), as pointed out by Kozak (2004, p. 12). Thus, Denilson Baniwa and the Coletores Collective utilise the urban surface as a site for visual scripting and intervention, reforming historical and territorial narratives through artistic expression that reclaims and honours indigenous perspectives. In doing so, the discussion surrounding street art, closely connected with the physicality of urban spaces and the decolonial movement's goals, accentuates a lively intersection of aesthetics, politics, and societal alteration.

"Voices Against Racism" project also included the work of the Coletores Collective, a group of multimedia artists consisting of Toni William and Flávio Camargo. Their area of specialization is in digital arts, with a focus on video mapping; a technique that projects visuals onto walls and facades, producing lifelike effects and animations. Their area of specialization is in digital arts, with a focus on video mapping; a technique that projects visuals onto walls and facades, producing a lot of effects and animations. This creates an awe-inspiring spectacle, comprised of lights, movements, and sounds. As part of the project, the pair carried out bright projections on notable sites, such as Theatro Municipal, Roosevelt Square, and Nossa Senhora dos Homens Pretos Church. This event celebrated the International Day of Afro-Latin American and Caribbean Women. It paid tribute to Tereza de Benguela, a quilombola leader whose portrait was projected onto the facades of local architectural landmarks.⁵ (Figure 3).

⁵ The term 'quilombola' refers to descendants of African slaves who escaped captivity in colonial Brazil, forming their own communities called 'quilombos'.



Figure 3: Tereza de Benguela, by Coletores Collective. São Paulo, Nossa Senhora dos Homens Pretos Church (2020). Video mapping technique. Courtesy of Coletores Collective.

The CURA - Urban Art Circuit held in Belo Horizonte in 2020 and 2021 was a highly impactful urban art project during the pandemic. As one of the country's largest urban art festivals, CURA had already conducted eight editions, with the last two during the pandemic dedicated to the decolonial agenda. The acronym CURA is derived from the Portuguese word for "healing" and represents one of the chief slogans of decolonial art, which asserts that art can assuage experiences injured by colonialism. These editions included Indigenous and Black artists as curators, specifically Arissana Pataxó and Domitila de Paulo in 2020, and Naine Terena and Flaviana Lasan in 2021. (Figure 4)



Figure 4 - Retorno [Return], by Lídia Viber (2020). Photographer: Caio Flavio. Courtesy of CURA

The festival promoted political resistance via art and prioritised the well-being of individuals and the environment. The decision was made to curate an exhibition that showcased authentic Brazil beyond the urban, gathering artists from varied regions, each with unique aesthetic perspectives diverging from the customary approaches in urban art interventions. "It is crucial to consider perspectives that suggest alternative paths," stated the exhibition curators.⁶ During both editions amid the pandemic, CURA also showcased works from Amazonian artists, which adorned the walls along Avenida Amazonas in Belo Horizonte, thus fostering a link with the region and its people. This initiative inspired the organizers of the event to launch "CURA AMAZÔNIA" in 2023, in Manaus, the capital of the Amazonas state. This action has confirmed their dedication to expanding urban art into uncharted territories, stimulating collective imagination, transforming urban environments, and fostering social connections through art. In Manaus, CURA revealed two enormous murals and a public art installation that honours the heritage, resilience, and jubilation of the forest's inhabitants.

In Belo Horizonte, CURA presented various artistic works, including sizable panels on building fronts. One work that stood out was the powerful

⁶ <https://cura.art/>

installation by the Indigenous artist Jaider Esbell, showcasing an enormous inflatable artwork named “Entidades” (Entities). This piece intertwined ancestral concepts with technology, featuring two inflatable snakes each measuring 17 meters in length and 1.5 meters in diameter. Designed as a site-specific sculpture for the arches of the Santa Tereza viaduct, the artwork was impressive. The exhibition presented the artist's investigation and poetic exploration of the "Cobra Grande" (Big Snake), a significant matriarchal archetype in indigenous cosmology. The depiction of the snake was a recurring theme in the artist's previous works. In this instance, the artist amplified the image to match the grand scale of the public space. The enigmatic sculptures hover within the area, with the snake's heads facing each other in a state of paradoxical serenity and weightlessness, while also evoking feelings of voracious anxiety and mutual consumption. The snake, whom the artist frequently referred to as the Universal Grandmother, has been recreated as a representation of a cautionary tale for humanity. The act of swallowing can be perceived as an opportunity for transformation and purification, rather than punishment. (Figure 5)



Figure 5 - Figure 5: Entidades [Entities], by Jaider Esbell (2021). Photographer: Bruno Figueiredo. Courtesy of CURA

In 2021, CURA brought Sadith Silvano and Ronin Koshi, Shipibo-Conibo artists, from Peru to Brazil for the first time. The artists executed a large-scale pictorial intervention called "Shipibo" showcasing images related to their songs, customs, language, territory, and healing practices. They created a Kené of nearly 3,000 square meters on the ground surrounding Raulzona. The indigenous term "Kené" denotes a traditional type of visual expression and ornamentation, employed by the Shipibo-Conibo people, a native group from the Peruvian Amazon. Kené patterns comprise detailed geometric designs frequently observed in textiles, pottery, and body art. The Shipibo ritual painting that was enacted during the three-day-long CURA festival breathed life into an Anaconda and is, thus, deemed the most renowned Shipibo artwork globally. The grand scale of this artwork in the cityscape amplified its visual impact and recognised the potency of indigenous art's presence in public spheres. The expansion of the Kené to such a captivating magnitude interweaves its cultural importance with the urban framework, reimagining it as a spirited and authoritative visual portrayal. This impressive sculpture enhances the visual attraction of the urban landscape and highlights the deep cultural legacy woven into the city's framework. It prompts introspection and discussion on indigenous traditions and their relevance in modern-day society. (Figure 6)



Figure 6: Shipibo, by Sadith Silvano and Ronin Koshi. Belo Horizonte (2021). Photographer: Cadu Passos. Courtesy of CURA

The "Bandeiras na Janela" installation, developed by the curatorial team of the 2020 CURA edition, involved five artists and collectives who decorated the former School of Engineering building at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Belo Horizonte with flags. The artworks of Célia Xakriabá (MG), Denilson Baniwa (AM), Randolpho Lamonier (MG), Ventura Profana (BA), and Cólera Alegria (various) were faithfully recreated on a large scale, ranging in size from 100 to 210 square metres. Most of the flags focused on decolonial themes. The installation reflected the pandemic's setting, marked by social isolation, where windows of buildings and homes became the main and sometimes only link to the outside world. It also harnessed the historical use of flags as political communication tools and identity markers. In this case, the immense scale of the colossal flags on the building's façade surpasses the conventional idea of flags as mere symbols, transforming them into powerful visual statements. "Flags at the Window" remained exhibited publicly for 30 days. (See Figure 7).



Figure 7 - Bandeiras na Janela [Flags at the Window], by Célia Xakriabá, Coletivo Cólera Alegria, Denilson Baniwa, Randolpho Lamonier and Ventura Profana, Fotógrafa. (2020). Courtesy of CURA

The festival is well-known for supporting large-scale paintings on the sides of buildings, called *empenas* in Portuguese. In the past two events during the pandemic, nearly all these paintings focused on themes related to ethnicity, race, and gender. The mural *Arada – A Extensão do Me Olhar se Faz Terra* (in free translation: *Arada - the extension of my gaze becomes land/Savoy Building*, 2021) is a significant achievement in Brazilian public art, as it was created exclusively by a team of trans and female individuals, led by the multi-artist Mag Magrela. Within the panel, two Black women who are embracing share their memories of their racialized bodies. Together, they look ahead to an uncertain future for women, empowered by their resilience and intuition to push forward.

In 2021, Indigenous artists Kassia Rare Karaja Huni Kuin (Kássia Borges), Bane (Cleiber Sales), and Itamar Rios, alongside the MAHKU Collective - Huni Kuin Artists Movement, from Alto Rio Jordão, Acre, created a remarkable “*empena*”. The artwork comprises lively and contrasting hues depicting patterns and animals, underscoring the forest's vitality and connection to medicinal properties, as well as showcasing its fight for territorial rights. The intricate details and vivid colour scheme not only grasped the very heart of the forest but also reverberated the unyielding tenacity of Indigenous societies. The mural's vibrant imagery transformed the visual landscape and fostered contemplation on the ongoing challenges encountered by indigenous groups concerning land rights and their relationship with nature. Its visual dialogue acted as a potent communication, enhancing the cityscape.

All the artists, exhibitions, and interventions discussed in this text demonstrate the increasing correlation between street art, decoloniality and social involvement. Street art's potential to rearrange the cityscape has given it the capability to challenge the dominant narratives and encourage debates on race, identity, as well as historical concerns. The art forms found in public spaces convey messages beyond their visual beauty, serving as visual texts that communicate with the city and its residents.

Considering Street Art Through the Lens of Decoloniality

In the Brazilian pandemic context, street art played an important role, closely linked to the burgeoning decolonial movement. As we can observe in the two cases studied, the themes weren't formulated as direct criticisms of the Bolsonaro government. However, deeply rooted decolonial discourse (pertaining to ethnic-racial and gender-related themes) could be interpreted as clear messages to a government openly opposed to minority agendas. It should be noted that the Bolsonaro administration exhibited anti-scientific attitudes, particularly towards COVID vaccination initiatives and healthcare professionals, who faced regular government attacks. These professionals were regarded as heroes by artists, as

demonstrated by Coletivo Coletores' video-mapping projections depicting them. This emphasises the vital part that street art has played in generating substitute political accounts during Brazil's murky and reactionary government induced by the pandemic. (Figure 8)



Figure 8: Cultura para heróis [Culture for Heroes], by Coletores Collective. Cidade Tiradentes Hospital, São Paulo (2020). Video mapping technique. Courtesy of Coletores Collective

This raises some controversial questions about the debates on identity movements and their effective connection to political and social transformation. It is important to note that the decolonial agenda faces the constant threat of being co-opted by an artistic system that is closely linked with the global art market. This has led to the perpetuation of the structural connection between culture and capitalism through the use of "rituals and practices of action or social behaviour,

in which ideologies are imprinted or inscribed" (Hall, 2013, p. 191). One fundamental strategy employed by major corporations is to embrace political agendas that help construct a positive public image, while in reality, the intention is to dilute criticism to the point of rendering it virtually harmless.

Museums and other cultural entities could be another mechanism for regulating societal temperature. Institutions continue to shape the art production and circulation system by legitimising languages and individuals involved based on their interests. It is important to consider whether these institutions promote transformative change within the cultural landscape or simply reinforce the current status quo through the adoption of a decolonial discourse. Thus, critical examination is imperative to understand the decolonial art phenomenon. Investigating the link between art and urban areas can be highly beneficial, as it enables a reflection on the potential impact of artists' use of public spaces as a means of transformation. Riggle (2010) demonstrates how street art exists outside the boundaries of traditional art institutions, embodying a transient aesthetics of everyday life, accessible for experimentation and collectivism.

We hold the belief that, in the middle of the commodified city, street artists can offer an opportunity to inhabit the world in a more meaningful way. Art no longer strives to accomplish utopian realities as the avant-garde movements attempted in the past. The showcased instances demonstrate how present-day art can endeavour to develop collective modes of existence or action models, which can be explained via the notion of "relational art" as "an art that concentrates on human interactions and their social milieu, instead of endorsing a self-governing and personal symbolic zone" (Bourriaud, 2009a, ps.18-19). This could be pertinent to an examination of urban art generated during a pandemic, where street art served as a substitute for the breakdown of public spaces as physical locations for cohabitation and exchange. In the decolonial context, this collection manifested through activities targeted at eradicating racism, intolerance, and their effects on contemporary Brazilian society.

Conclusion

The actions of artists at the forefront of the decolonial movement in Brazilian art reveal their importance in reshaping the cultural landscape. They highlight the idea that understanding public space requires exploring the concept of the "practised place" (Mongin, 2009, p. 36) - one that connects the urban condition to action, conflict and multiplicity. The decolonial standpoint underlines the idea that the arts operate in the sphere of social transformation. They are instrumental in opposing colonial subjugation that the capitalist model perpetuates, as acknowledged by Palermo (2009). Furthermore, Achinte's (2017) observations suggest that the arts encapsulate defiance and the approach of "re-existence".

Abdias Nascimento argues that Afro-Brazilian art serves a crucial purpose, namely, to provide a historical account of the structures of domination, violence, and oppression that are inherent in Western capitalist civilization (Nascimento, 2022, p. 291). The integration of decolonial practice and street art provides a potent platform for fostering critical awareness. In the two cases examined herein, two primary transformations were noted: a) heightened recruitment of black, indigenous and LGBTQIA+ individuals for curator and artist roles; b) the formation of artworks placing minorities at the forefront, but reflecting their own perspectives, rather than exoticizing and stereotyping their identities, as white artists have done historically.

Further research is necessary to fully address the issue of how decolonial art can affect social transformation. In the end, the art with a decolonial theme aligns with the key principles of urban art. Street art has been recognised for its innovative language, political engagement, and reflection of diversity. This has been the case even before the emergence of the decolonial movement within the arts. Canclini (1997) examines graffiti as a prime example of contemporary cultural hybridism. Rama (1984) situates graffiti as an ongoing obstacle to urban order. Therefore, artistic experiences in urban spaces can revitalise individuals' relationships with the environment while simultaneously promoting community participation in reimagining public spaces (Guattari, 1992; McCormick, 2010). Moreover, Mendonça (2009, p. 19) argues that the fight for urban rights has redefined the role of images, and public art presently promotes urban identities, local authorities, and community forces.

The given examples illustrate how the integration of urban art with a decolonial standpoint can amplify the political influence of street art. Such occurrences question the theoretical presumptions upheld by the dominant art system and its "cognitive empire" (Santos, 2020). These events represent not just a representational aspect of reality, but also an embodiment of the relationship between art and life, ultimately being transformative and relational in contemporary art (Mbembe, 2014). Thus, Western culture (including the contemporary art system) faces the challenge of imagining a future that extends beyond its current limitations.

This reimagined urban landscape, shaped by depictions of decoloniality, presents a vision of reality that contrasts with the fictional representations that shape the imaginary determined by the dominant class. In this way, art offers us alternative imaginaries. "In response to the economic abstraction that erodes everyday life, artists enact a resistance through the reactivation of various forms" (Bourriaud, 2009b, p. 110). This new generation aligned with the decolonial agenda now incorporates racial and gender aspects into urban art, which until

decades ago were not significant in the realm of Brazilian visual arts. By appropriating the visual environment, they construct a language of dialogue and resistance. Potentially, this creates a fresh chapter in the history of urban art, with the narratives of marginalised identities. In this new historical perspective, those who have long been silenced will be at the forefront.

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