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Vhils mural in tribute to Marielle Franco | Brave Walls initiative | Scratching the Surface project | 2018
Photo by Felipe Cammaert | Panorâmico de Monsanto, Lisbon

INTERTWININGS: PERIPHERAL ARTS, *ARTIVISM* AND POST-MEMORY

Fernanda Vilar

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The urban spaces of major European capitals encompass people of diverse geographic origins, who mainly inhabit these cities' peripheries. These unequal social and geographical relations produce demands that must be urgently met to avoid (re) producing new forms of coloniality.

In contemporary Europe, artists whose families come from formerly colonized territories reject the subaltern ways they are treated. I am talking, here, about the generation of post-memory: the generation that carries the inheritance of family histories from periods they themselves did not live



through. The artists of this colonial post-memory express themselves in different ways and by different means, but the politically engaged art today finding new modes and platforms stands out. We might call this artistic practice “artivism”.

The neologism “artivism” was coined in the 1960s to describe demonstrations against the Vietnam War, as well as student movements and counter-culture. The *situationist* Guy Debord theorized this conjuncture in his book “The Society of the Spectacle” (1967), in which he argued that it was necessary to overcome existing modes of politics and art, to sabotage the demands of capitalism and to find new modes of art and life. The term reappeared only in the mid-1990s, with the internet revolution, as part of a critical lexicon to describe not only the practice of political art, but also to interrogate what counted as politics and art. In that context, the fundamental question was the transformation of capital into a spectacle, and subsequent artistic problematics.

The activist artist finds themselves in a relationship with the social as part of which both recognising the ‘Other’ and criticising the conditions that produce contemporaneity are fundamental. In the duality between art and activism, the relation between ethics and aesthetics expands. The use of new methods of collaboration and dissemination allows new subjectivities and political discourses to emerge. This *modus operandi* allows issues not normally high on European states’ agendas to enter the public debate, such as structural racism, urban gentrification, the fight against precarity, housing, and welcoming immigrants and refugees (1).

Artivistic projects engage with the political dimensions of art and wander into the territory of social protest, informed by the belief that art is only valid if it is capable of meaningful social and historical transformation. This is the case for slam poetry, the urban and democratic art practiced in various parts of the world. If many non-Western societies have thriving cultures of oral poetry, it is through slam that many Western urban artists express their political commitments. The first performance of the Belgian poet and collage-maker Lisette Lombé came after she suffered a racist assault on a train: “Dirty little girl, go learn to write.” Lombé, a French teacher, made a weapon of this wound. Drawing on Patrice Lumumba’s well-known independence speech, she wrote her slam poem “Qui oubliera?” (2) (Who will forget?). At that moment she did not only give her own suffering a voice, but spoke on behalf of a broader diaspora, who, at the end of her performance, replied with “Pas nous!” (not us!). Slam allows one person to speak on behalf of a group, based on personal experience, and to share, in the present and in public, issues that need to be discussed.



Despite their indiscipline, artivists know that they can change individual consciousnesses, not the world. They know too that changing day-to-day behaviours can change the habits of a society. This is why artivism generally offers spaces of creation. Currently, along with writer and slammer Joëlle Sambi, Lombé [offers slam writing workshops](#), particularly for women, as part of an artivist gesture that brings together feminism, anti-colonialism and LGBTQ + voices (3).

In this contemporary urban context, art and activism meet to challenge dominant narratives and occupy spaces that make room for marginalized groups' desires for social and political change. By making space to amplify, sensitize and problematize their causes and social demands, artivists create new possibilities for enjoying, participating in, and creating, art. For example, the Portuguese mural artist [Vhils](#), excised by the displacement of vulnerable communities in Rio de Janeiro in the name of "revitalization" work, posted portraits of residents set to lose their homes on the walls of Morro da Providência. This artivist protest sought to engender compassion by making visible the faces of the people who were going to be thrown out. More recently, the same artist, responding to the brutal murder of councillor Marielle Franco and her driver in Rio de Janeiro, created a mural from her portrait in Lisbon. This was part of Amnesty International's "[Brave Walls](#)" project, in the hope that the crime is not forgotten and that the perpetrators do not go unpunished.

The connection (4) between art and activism offers stigmatized sectors of society the possibility for creative, poetic and sensual political intervention. Going beyond traditional forms of activism and disobedience, artivism challenges our understandings of what art is in terms of its circulation, visibility and participation in the public sphere. To deal with the problems of artistic circulation, due above all to the racism of omission, artivism uses numerous languages and resources such as street art, video, music, performance, poetry, net art and intervention not only to represent reality, but to engage in transformations, mobilizing and inspiring the viewer.

Mobilizing the knowledge of people looking at paintings in a museum, two French painters of Algerian origin, Sophie Anou and Dalila Dalléas Bouzar, have (along with the painter Picasso and the writer Assia Djebar) made work responding to Delacroix's "Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement". The artists scrutinised the painting and gave it new meaning. Sophie Anou staged a performance "[Beurettes d'Alger dans leur appartement](#)", which interrogates the colonial



fantasies that still persist in society as well as problematizing the word *beurette*. Bouzar has made Delacroix's painting [an obsession](#), revisiting it almost twice a year as a way of thinking about the place of these women today, between North Africa and Europe. In these two examples we see how nineteenth century Orientalist paintings, especially by Delacroix, are part of the construction of our present. As such they must be re-examined by the gaze of that same 'Other' that was pinned up on the walls of history. The artists' interventions must be understood as part of a broader effort to decolonize the arts, that is, as part of an ongoing process of questioning colonial practices and re-evaluating them in the present context (5).

Artivism, then, is an expression that extends the meaning of citizenship. In the French and Belgian cases I have mentioned, these artists are not routinely seen as European. Their works express this malaise and question the viewer's gaze from the point of view of heirs of a Franco-Algerian memory. By questioning the colonial ghost evoked by Delacroix, the artists both represent themselves and question their place in society. Lombé's text challenges the racist construction of the 'Other' and of black and mixed-race women in Belgian society, where the colonial history of the Congo has only begun to be debated in the last twenty years.

In the context of postmemory, artivism is an instrument with which to decolonize the gaze and the arts. It is also a space makes new debates possible, from the point of view of subjects who demand visibility and recognition. Not all art made by artists with colonial post-memories is artivism. Several artists of African descent, however, have made manifestos of their art. Artivism establishes the field of combA[r]t and demands that we update our discourse about the past and then define a future with more inclusion and more respect.



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- (1) It is worth emphasising that the genealogies of several artistic traditions do not fit in this framework, such as Austrian and French performance, all the work of New York and Californian avant-gardes as well as New York choreographic postmodernism.
- (2) Poem translated in supplement to the newspaper *O Público* produced by MEMOIRS. It can be read in Portuguese [here](#).
- (3) LGBTQ+ themes are a particular theme for Joëlle Sambi, who is currently crowdfunding and producing a documentary about the Belgian African LGBTQ+ diaspora.
- (4) Connection is a key word for these creative practices that take place not only in the physical world, but also in cyber spaces, which offer numerous possibilities for almost free and cross-border interventions.
- (5) As part of this discussion of decolonial and anti-racist action, it is worth mentioning the work in France of the foundation created by the former member of the French national football team, Lilian Thuram. One the foundation's initiatives takes place in museums and aims to question exhibited works from the perspective of their audiences. For example, in the Delacroix museum, Thuram was part of putting together an exhibition "Imaginaires et représentations de l'Orient" ['Imaginaries and representations of the Orient'], in which the paintings were hung differently in order to examine how they construct the 'Other' from a Eurocentric position. High school students were invited to the museum to make interventions based on their interaction with these artworks through a decentred gaze. As such the decolonial perspective the project facilitated opened itself up to the world of artivism.
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Translated by Alexandra Reza

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