

“MURALS OF FREEDOM”

A commitment to liberation, conscience and sanitation through mural art for prisons

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The project: Murals of freedom

The project Murals of freedom arises as a initiative of the painter and muralist Alejandro Cruz. Having had an existential approach to this reality, he captured the importance the realization of a mural inside prison could have for Persons Deprived of their Freedom (Personas Privadas de Libertad/PPL). The grey colour of the murals generated depression in him and the improvised murals with religious messages reminded him of blame, punishment and fear.

The first phase of the project Murals of Freedom started in the year 2008 after having gone through a process of fundraising, authorizations for entrance and socializing the project. The pavilions c, b and d of the prison One took part. This first experience took place during four months. For the production of the murals the first step was painting techniques, some of the prisoners already had painting skills and a painting workshop existed. The artists of the project collaborated in the workshop and strengthened certain skills before starting the murals. The process was participatory, the images that were captured in the walls were selected by all, each of the participantes had a sketch, and all sketches went into the murals.

The specific objective of the project is to change the environment in prison, and this was broadly achieved since the beginning of the basis till the work was finished. The atmosphere was festive, all persons of the pavilions were on the lookout of the process, how it was developing, and how the walls were being covered with colours. When finalizing the mural an took place, with an event of presentation of the work, words of thanks to the authorities and musical performances of the groups which existed in the prison and in other prisons of the penal complex, with the attendance of invited guests who came from outside.

During the year 2010 the second phase of the project Murals of Freedom took place, this edition was bigger, it included the pavilions b, c and d of the Prison One, and the Prison Two. The images chosen between all made references to peace, freedom and justice, and were meant to generate a motivation for the prisoners but at the same time questioning the injustice and confinement as punishment. Similar to the previous edition, inauguration events of the murals were realized with artistic presentations from inside and outside Prison One and Prison Two. These were dynamics that belonged to the prisoners. The realization of events was a form of breaking with the monotony of prison, it was a celebration, a moment of distraction and relaxation.

Following these experiences, the project started growing. During the third phase, realized in the year 2012, the three pavilions of Prison One and Prison Two were included again, as was the Prison for Women. The initiative of the murals was and is well accepted by the prisoners but not so by the guards and authorities who in many occasions, due to their lack of understanding of the project's objective, put obstacles to the entrance of artists.

The fourth edition of the project took place in the year 2014, once again the pavilions b, c and d of Prison One, the Prison Two for Men, and the Prison for Women were included. Unfortunately this work was realized some months before the transfer to the new facilities at Latacunga. The pieces of art were abandoned, in perfect state, in Prison One, Two as well as in the Prison for Women. In the same manner, as had been the case in the previous editions, an inauguration event took place in each of the spaces with performances of music, dance and theater. A very nice habit in the events was bringing artists of other prisons of the city to share the moment of happiness and motivate them to continue improving their skills.

The last edition of the project Murals for Freedom took place in the years 2015 and 2016 in the new regional rehabilitation center for women in Cotopaxi with the support of young artists recognized in the sector. Being a new prison, the walls were intact painted in blue and white. Their immaculate aspect represented the vision of the new penal model, homogenous, tidy, cold, technical and dehumanized. A modern device which sets out and activates specific processes of subjectivization.

In spite of all the support which the project has from the side of women prisoners and of the personell inside the center, there were obstacles and inconveniences in the process of entrance, production and even after the inauguration. With the new facilities the new Penal Model comes into force in which there are no mechanisms established for this kind of interventions.

The last edition is extraordinarily enriching. The processo of realization of the murals in the new center of Cotopaxi, in the frame of new management policies for the prisons, has elements which demonstrate the conditions and techniques of control which are being implemented and at the same time delivers information about the impact of popular mural art in these new situations. For this reason a colective reflection, both theoretical and methodological, which helps to strengthen the basis, and to generate a continuity of these practices and to deepen the critical and political contents which might allow the experiences to be indeed processes of resistance.

New meanings of the spaces

Nothing exists beyond the walls in a confinement, you cannot go through them, and they cannot pass unnoticed, always present in the daily routine of prison like a big notable monster which has the function to remember the limits and the imposition of the prison sentence by force. The wall as a part of the device has much more than an architectonic function of confinement in a physical space, it fulfills a specific role in the process of subjectivization: demonstrate the confinement continuously and remind the prisoner of the condition of prisoner.

The grey and white tidy walls which are normally part of the infrastructure of the confinement institutions prove the focus of the treatment. The seriousness and necessary concentration for the production process are concrete values established and necessary for the reintegration of the PPL to the labour market once their prison sentence, or their “treatment”, has ended.

In this sense, we propose that the power exercised by the control of a body and the technical administration of the subjectivization is supported by the painful vacuum of the walls, to limit any attempt to escape even if it were imaginary. It maintains the body within a physical space, separated from the rest of society, and its soul imprisoned within the own conscience which is not independent from this power but a product of the exercise of power. The significance of the walls in the configuration of the subjectivization of the prisoner is transcendental in the ex penal as it is an element of the device that permits the exercise of power when the framework of relations that are being shaped is of broad complexity and includes tensions, cracks and dislocations of the devices, through a homogenization of the PPL which is fundamente in the Stigma. In this sense, the walls which are the sole landscape for the prisoners have the function to remind them continuously of their condition and demonstrate their stigma.

Once this is understood, it is possible to deliver the courage of the project as it enters the prison to organize people and paint walls, filling them with colour, to capture in them the diverse emotions which were meant to be administrated and homogenized by power. All of a sudden some “crazy people” enter, with long hair and differentiated aesthetics, informal language, “that of the people”, with great empathy towards the prisoners, and propose to change the significance of the walls, make them who, communicate and demonstrate not only the hard reality in prison but the expectations, hope and strength of the participants. The grey wall that meant oppression all of a sudden is transformed into a mural that represents freedom.

The entrance of the artists puts pressure on various elements of the device, authorities and guards are attentive and observative, waiting for a minimal mistake in order to exercise power and coercion in front of the threat. While in the painting workshop and in the courtyard, where the project activities take place, the atmosphere is that of joy, humor and solidarity as we saw previously. Each participant engaged with the own sketch, including the invited artists, who capture their emotions as well in the walls of the prison, generally empathy and solidarity. It is a moment of collective and individual reflection about the reality and the life of each of them. It is the moment in which the subject re-thinks himself/herself and the environment. Looking at himself/herself subjectivized, and at the same time seeing himself/herself as a subject of his/her own history, not in the marxist sense, not yet. They see themselves as deprived of freedom, a subject retained in the collective reflection, they see themselves as prisoners who reclaim themselves as individualities blocked by power relationships in front of which su reclaim has an organizational potential, and they see themselves as human being, and in this imaginary they represent their ethical codes as a potential of spiritual transformation.

Popular muralism and freedom as methodological foundation

“Art opens a door to a distinct dimension, it is an escape to the reality of that situation, a liberation. In situations of confinement art is a way of connecting with yourself, approaching yourself in a different level, reclaim yourself with your being, getting to know your potentials in order not to get lost in this injustice, and not to fill yourself with resentment. (...) Art is a door of liberation of the conscience which makes ver de una manera distinta como una experiencia, sacar algo positivo de esta historia. El arte te va a liberar por eso no les interesa a las autoridades.”

The process as we saw starts with drawing and painting workshops, knowledge about colours, the perspective, the human figure and faces. The objective was to assist participants to improve their technique, realize sketch and agree on a form in which they will display on the wall. It is spaces of horizontal meeting, and at the same time it is spaces of introspektion. During the elaboration of the sketches and murals as such, the prisoners focus on the painting and on the idea they are representing, and – though with consensus – the mural is composed of proper ideas of the participants, each of them has transcendental significance in the life of the person who paints, and a significance for the persons who will admire the murals.

The fundamental core idea of the methodology implemented in the project is freedom, each participant feels in freedom, it is a space of free expression of their ideas and emotions. This freedom is not just an individual freedom, it is a collective freedom which only is possible in a collective process, the freedom of all makes the freedom of each of them, and vice versa. The agreements are fundamental, as is the horizontal dialogue, respect, solidarity and empathy, to give light to this collective freedom.

Popular muralism and political subjectivization

We can imagine that the process previously described has effects on the subjectivization. Primarily, we can describe it as a tension between the mechanisms of the device, such as the wall for example, and the re-significance the wall is given, but as well the “subject” who realizes this re-significance. The wall that reminded before of the condition of confinement, I am a prisoner and hence I am guilty, now reminds us that it can be something more, that I can identify myself with other things. The white calls for neatness of work, the colours call fro joy of life.

Since the first entrance of the artists who collaborate, the mechanisms of the device are active, in some moments they enter in situations of tension or even delocation. And generate a political subjectivization of the PPL, in the sense of a situation in which “the subject” is understood as subjected, and enters in confrontation. In disagreement, qhich is expressed through the wording, the no-parts taking the word, in this case taking the word leads into taking the wall, the taking of the significance, as we have seen. As participants of this process, a political subjectivization is generated, not constantly but sporadically, in which the mechanisms enter in conflict with the mechanisms of the subjectivization of the device.

For the political subjectivization to have a certain length in time, and win space and dislocate each time more the subjectivization from the device, a process of creation has to convert into a process of popular organization.