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STREET ART. DRAWING ON THE WALLS

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Simon Jung and Paul K. Hwang: Schweizer, The Corallo of Stampa Naples, September 2008. Cover image edited by Igor Tolosa.

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Experiences of anamorphosis between poetry, architecture, and social context: interview with Boa Mistura

The paper presents an interview with Boa Mistura, a multidisciplinary Madrid art collective that works all over the world and creates urban works based on the use of anamorphosis and the visual perception of urban spaces.

The Boa Mistura projects are “site specific”, they are designed for a specific space and place. In the interview we explore the relationship between urban art and physical context, the way in which the works adapt to the surfaces and volumes on which they are made.

The physical support of the works of Boa Mistura is often made up of separate and not coplanar surfaces and of volumes, sometimes disjointed, on which the murals recline. The same historiated surfaces determine the three-dimensional effect of the vision and condition the construction of the image in space.

Anamorphosis generates an effect of astonishment when, after observing an apparently chaot-

ic and meaningless composition, it is discovered and recognised, observing it from the correct point of view that has preordained the whole. In this way, the final image is perceived as unitary and continuous, even if composed on discontinuous surfaces.

The Boa Mistura projects also aim to involve entire communities, often vulnerable and at high risk of marginalisation, in the creative process and in the transformation of common spaces through painting. The artists come into contact with the communities through participatory dynamics that reinforce the sense of identity and belonging.

In the interview, Boa Mistura tells about some artistic experiences that have changed the perception of places and triggered processes of urban regeneration and social change.

Keywords:
Boa Mistura; anamorphosis; street art; urban regeneration

The image of the contemporary city is continuously renewed by visual manifestations that are, by their nature, temporary. The surfaces of the city are large canvases in progress in which are represented works that change the perception of places, whose image therefore becomes changeable. All over the world, street artists communicate through representations that are often vehicles of meaty meanings, critical elaborations of mental images.

Boa Mistura, a multidisciplinary Madrid art collective has made the word its stylistic code and entrusts it with positive messages to communicate universal values. The collective was born in 2001 and since then has been operating all over the world, creating urban works based on the use of anamorphosis and the visual perception of urban spaces [1].

Boa Mistura's projects are "site specific", they are designed for a specific space and place.

The physical support of the works of Boa Mistura is often made up of separate and not coplanar surfaces and of volumes, sometimes disjointed, made of materials of different nature, on which the murals recline. Art is combined with architecture, placed on its elements, incorporating them in the narration. The same historiated surfaces determine the three-dimensional effect of the vision and condition the construction of the image in space.

Anamorphosis generates an effect of astonishment when, after observing an apparently chaotic and meaningless composition, it is discovered and recognised, observing it from the correct point of view that has preordained the whole. The spatial complexity is simplified by the representation on different surfaces, sometimes even distant. Anamorphosis requires great control of spatial perception to guarantee the continuity effect of graphic signs. In this way, the final image is perceived as unitary and continuous, even if composed on discontinuous surfaces.

The unveiling of the correct vision occurs as a result of the observer's movement in the space of the work of art and requires that he actively and physically participate in the artistic operation. In seeking the point of view to correctly read the work, the observer is led to cross it. The work of

art therefore extends to the entire route that must be made to find the correct point of view. The work of art has a theme and sub-themes: the theme is the correct vision from the main point of view; the sub-themes are the context, the route, the colour, the formation and deformation of the work, the direction of the gaze and therefore the changing perception in space and in the action of crossing. On the occasion of a workshop conducted in Cordoba in 2013, the collective carried out six

anamorphosis interventions *Azul sobre blanco* (Blue over white) [2]. On the surfaces of small white houses, which are arranged between narrow alleys, six words materialise, blue like the colour of the sky that stands out on the white walls. *Sosiego* (quietude), *Serenidad* (serenity), *Calma* (calm), *Remanso* (haven), *Claridad* (clarity) and *Luz* (light) are the six words that summarise the life of two communities of Cordoba affected by the artistic intervention (fig. 1).

Fig. 1 - *Azul sobre blanco*, Cordoba, Spain, 2013 (by Boa Mistura).





Fig. 2, 3, 4 - *Pensar/Sentir*, Panama City, Panama, 2014. (by Boa Mistura).

Pensar/Sentir is an intervention carried out in 2014 at the Ciudad del Saber (City of knowledge) in Panama City [3]. The artists worked with the students of the School of Architecture Isthmus using their signature anamorphic style. The chosen building is the Ecumenical Temple, turned today into an exhibition centre. In this case Boa Mistura intervenes on the building in two opposite directions, mixing on one facade the two words *Pensar* (think) and *Sentir* (feel) which can be correctly read, one at a time, from the two opposite ends. The words are two key elements in obtaining knowledge and wisdom (figs. 2-4).

Lugar/Tiempo (place/time) are two concepts closely related to architecture [4]. In 2018 Boa Mistura conducted a workshop for students at the Efimeras Master, in the School of Architecture in Madrid. In a long corridor the two chosen words were painted in cross anamorphosis together with the students, using two colours, warm for *Tiempo* and cold for *Lugar*, which overlap and mix. The

Fig. 5 - *Lugar/Tiempo*, Madrid, Spain, 2018. *Lugar* (by Boa Mistura).



words are revealed by traveling through space in the two opposite directions (fig. 5).

Boa Mistura's projects often aim to involve entire communities, sometimes vulnerable and at high risk of marginalisation, in the creative process and in the transformation of common spaces through painting. The artistic action shared with the neighbours produces an aesthetic and perceptive improvement of places. Artists come into contact with the communities through participatory dynamics that reinforce the sense of identity, belonging and a new conscious link with the space they live in.

In 2012 and then in 2017, the collective made the street art and social regeneration project *Luz nas vielas* (Light in the alleys) in the favela Vila Brasilândia (northern suburb of São Paulo, Brazil) [5].

Involving the residents in the realisation, seven words were painted in seven alleys, between the buildings, according to the rules of anamorphosis, so as to be clearly readable from a precise point of view. If you look along the alleys, they appear deformed and as broken graphic signs. The words are white and each one stands out against a background of a different bright and saturated colour (figs. 6-13). The chosen words - *Beleza, Orgulho, Amor, Firmeza, Doçura, Poesia* and *Mágica* - (beauty, pride, love, strength, sweetness, poetry and magic) express the essence of the favela, in the experience lived by Boa Mistura who, during the realisation of the project, was hosted by a family from Vila Brasilândia. The meaning of this artistic operation is to change the perception of spaces,

to bring beauty, amazement, colour to the alleys that are the connection and crossing systems of the favela, to give the inhabitants the pride of living in a place that they themselves helped improve.

In 2017 Boa Mistura intervened in Mexico, north of Guadalajara, in an area with a high population density and in a very difficult context, negatively marked by the sale of drugs. *Nierika* is an intervention that covers an area of approximately 4500 square meters [6]. The project involved the residents with the aim of consolidating the sense of belonging and the desire to regain possession of the space in which they live. Again, the chosen words *Fuí, Soy, Seré* (I was, I am, I will be) want to represent the importance of the identity of the Mexican people (fig. 14).

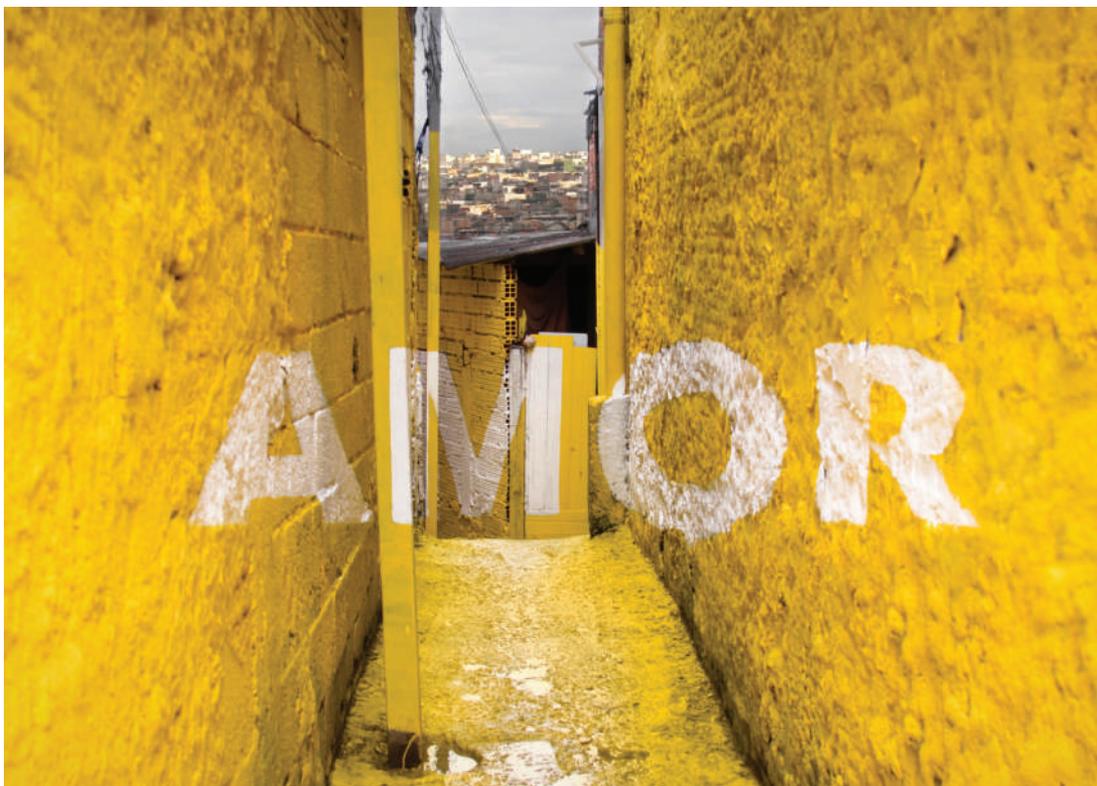


Fig. 6 - *Luz nas vielas*, São Paulo, Brazil, 2012. *Amor* (by Boa Mistura).

Anamorphosis is also used in the case of museum installations, as in the project carried out in 2018 at the MAXXI National Museum of Rome, in the context of collective exhibition “La Strada: dove si crea il mondo” [7]. Walking through a museum ramp it is possible to read three words from three different viewing spots, made with overlapping colors, through crossed anamorphosis (figs. 15-17). During a workshop given from Boa Mistura, the choice of the words *Cultura* (culture), *Svegliata* (wake up), *Popolata* (people) came from the answers that the participants gave the question “If the entire city of Rome

were listening to you, what word would you shout? “. Boa Mistura uses the anamorphosis technique also on temporary supports. In fact, between 2016 and 2017 the collective realised *Laberintos Liricos*, an ephemeral and itinerant installation in 15 Spanish World Heritage cities, based on the arrangement of 15 triangular-based wooden prisms on which the verses of a poem are painted using the technique of anamorphism [8]. In each city the prisms had a different disposition and a poem by a local author. Words could only be read from a few specific points of view (fig. 18).

In 2018 Boa Mistura also dealt with environmental issues with the realisation of the giant mural *Soy Porque Somos* (I Am Because We Are) in Mexico City, in which the anamorphosis technique is not used (fig. 19). The mural is inspired by the tree of life, traditional clay sculptures from central Mexico. It is located in an area with high vehicular traffic density. “This privileged spot in the center of Mexico City, located at Paseo de Reforma, was the perfect occasion to express powerfully that we are like leaves from the same tree, with our unique nuance, but with the same root. We are joint by a robust and firm trunk, which root is common to everyone. An individual is such a thing because it is part of a greater thing” [9]. The mural is created with a special paint that emulates the process of photosynthesis when it comes in contact with the light.

Among the most recent works *Más allá de los muros, the calle* (Beyond these walls, there's the street) was realised in 2019 in Barcelona [10]. The site of the intervention is a former penitentiary, a panopticon, in operation until 2017, an iconic site that in the future will be transformed into a public housing complex and public park. The anamorphosis intervention is located in a corner of one of the external courtyards and invests the walls and the floor overlapping the perspectives generated by three different points of view. The work can be observed through some windows that have been practiced in the external fence wall (fig. 20). From every window, changing the point of view, you read a part of the work, you recognise some words of the verse that gives the title to the artistic work and that is taken from the poem “Tarde de domingo” by the writer Josep Domènech i Avellanet which was executed in the penitentiary by Franco's regime in 1942.

The analysed works render graphically the concepts and messages with immediate expressive power and often contribute to defining a new image of the urban landscape.

The artistic operations have a very high value that involves many aspects, especially when they perform poetic requalification in some very difficult social contexts and in situations of urban and human neglect. Boa Mistura's work brings light and



Fig. 7 - *Luz nas vielas*, São Paulo, Brazil, 2012. *Beleza* (by Boa Mistura).

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pure oxygen in contexts otherwise destined for total degradation.

In the following interview, Boa Mistura tells about some artistic experiences that have changed the perception of places and triggered processes of urban regeneration and social change.

The relationship between urban art and physical context, the way in which the works adapt to the surfaces and volumes on which they are made, the use of anamorphisms and colour are explored.

V.G.: What inspires you in choosing a place and a surface? How does context guide or condition your expression?

B.M.: The context is everything. It inspires the surface and, in consequence, the expression, or vice versa.

To start the design, we go to the site and try to deepen as much as possible in the community, its culture and its artistic manifestations. We like to design from those roots and pass everything through the filter of our aesthetic line.

Depending on the project, the surface could be given or not. Sometimes we have a stunning façade to work with, but others we should look for a perfect spot /spots in a community that have a meaning somehow (a place where everyone passes by, an important building, a common urban space, etc).

But the most important is the human factor. The people living there are the ones who are going to coexist with your work. You can't just go to a place, put your meteorite with no reflexion there and leave. One important step that we made since we started the Crossroads project is to involve the community in the creation of the work, because if they change their environment with their own hands we feel more proud about it, and they are going to respect more and take care of the place where they live.

V.G.: How do you choose your subjects and how to represent them?

B.M.: As we explain, every project has its own creative process. After choosing the surface, we start looking for elements, words, symbolism...a narra-

tive that fits with the context. The final message, born from this creative discussion, will also guide the way of representation.

In conclusion, our work is the result of a decoding of the areas, habits and ways of living of each place. This can be translated into images, colours or words.

V.G.: In your works you often use the anamorphosis that generates a great visual impact. How did the intuition to use this technique come about?

B.M.: Anamorphosis in the end is nothing more than the answer to some supports of special characteristics. Our projects are "site specific", that is, they are conceived for a specific place within the universe, and no one is going to move them from there, so each project is the best solution we have found for that particular place.

The first time we used anamorphism in the street was in 2012, in Brazil. It was in Vila Brasilândia, a favela northeast of São Paulo. As a result of self-construction, the narrow alleyways that give access to the houses in the favela (vielas) have a winding and labyrinthine configuration. This made it difficult to make murals that generated an impact, since there were neither large vertical supports nor perspective to face them. So, we decided to play with that complexity to our advantage and use the entire streets as a single support, flattening and homogenizing the space with a single colour, and writing words.

V.G.: Anamorphosis requires great control of spatial perception to ensure the effect of continuity of the graphic signs. Can you tell us how the process takes place, from conception to realisation?

B.M.: In our work, architecture has always been very present, both when decoding spaces and in the tools, we use in many of the phases of the process. With creativity, we have learned to use all those processes, those tools and the technology that architecture offers in favour of an artistic work, something that is very interesting because it allows us to explore artistic places that, without this



Fig. 8 - *Luz nas vielas*, São Paulo, Brazil, 2012. *Firmeza* (Boa Mistura).

Fig. 9 - *Luz nas vielas*, São Paulo, Brazil, 2012. *Firmeza*: left, work process; right, perception of the work along the way, outside the point of view (by Boa Mistura).

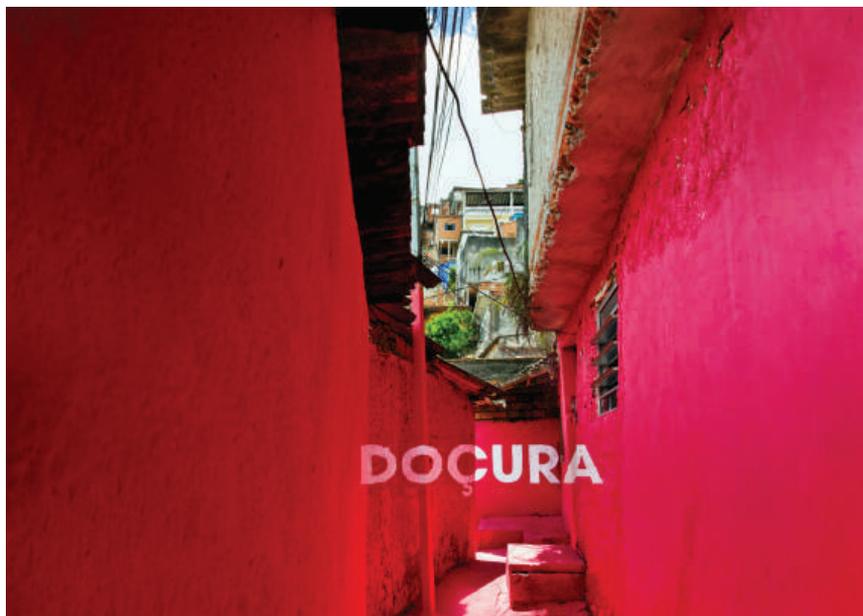


Fig. 10 - *Luz nas vielas*, São Paulo, Brazil, 2012. *Doçura* (by Boa Mistura).

baggage, would be impossible to intervene. It is beautiful that such a technical and mathematical process produces such a magical result.

V.G.: When you apply anamorphosis, the correct vision of your work requires a specific point of view that does very well through a photographic reading. As soon as you exit from the point of view, the work deforms, becomes incomprehensible and loses its perception. The choice of that point contains the sense of the work and is the unique point of view for its reading that fixes a perspective, a glimpse. The artistic work is a route that takes place in a context and culminates when the privileged point of view is reached. What is the process by which you determine these three aspects: choice of the context, choice of the route in the context and choice of the privileged point of view in the route?

B.M.: The technique of the anamorphosis allows us to create a game of perspectives, playing with the walls of the courtyard with an optical deformation. We divide the line into three parts and overlap the perspectives generated by the three points of view.

In the first place, the context is the one that allows a concrete art technique. As we told before, in Luz Nas Vielas, the anamorphosis was a response to the topography of the place, formed by narrow streets known as «becos» on the flat areas and «vielas» on the stairways. Also, they both are the real articulators for life inside the community.

In the second place, the point of view is chosen in a natural way. To make anamorphism work, the different planes must be arranged without cracks. If any gaps appear, anamorphosis does not work. That is why there is a millimetric task looking for that specific point where everything is arranged, where anamorphism works and the succession of planes generates an interesting deformation in the original work.

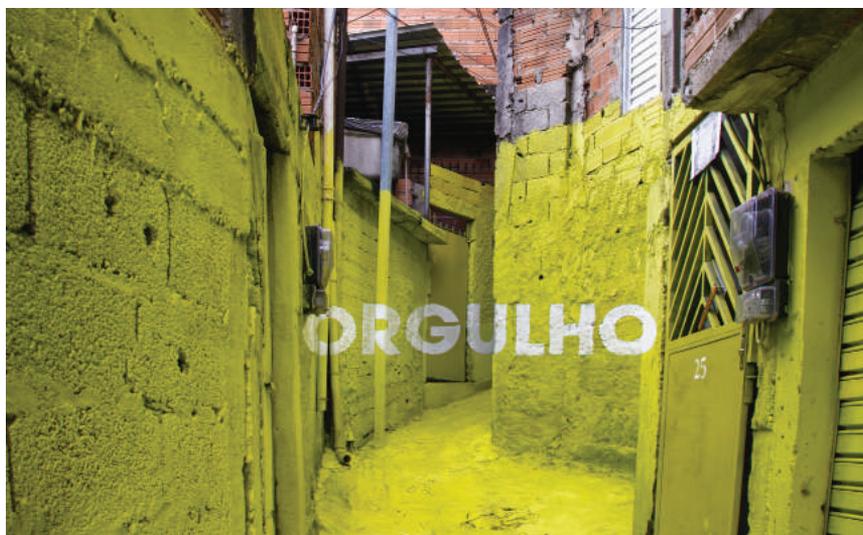


Fig. 11 - *Luz nas vielas*, São Paulo, Brazil, 2012. *Orgulho* (by Boa Mistura).

V.G.: If the route is reversed, the perception is completely distorted. Is there a mechanism, a trick through which you induce the observer to



Fig. 12 - *Luz nas vielas*, São Paulo, Brazil, 2017. *Mágica* (by Boa Mistura).

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rotate 180 ° or what is necessary to read the privileged point of view of the work?

B.M. We like to develop an art that sometimes is not so obvious but, at the same time, that can be easily understood. Because of this, we try to establish the reading spot in a usual and natural perspective, for example the end of a street, or the entrance of a tunnel.

Part of the magic of anamorphosis is that the receptor stops being a mere observer and becomes an accomplice. They are playful works that generate a journey and, with this, a world of different artworks. To us it is equally suggestive the concrete point in which everything is ordered, as the abstractions that are generated when you leave that point.

V.G.: You are promoters of urban regeneration projects. Tell us about the most significant experience, the one that made you understand that it made sense to continue on this path.

B.M.: All the experiences we have had are so significant, that we believe that each one of them have taught us and fed us to follow this beautiful path. However, the first experience we had at South Africa in March 2011, in which we had the opportunity to work with the boys of a cyclist club in the Khayelitsha Township, was the one that gave us the methodology and energy that still beats for Boa Mistura in the present.

There, we realized that, when the local neighbours transform their space, they begin to feel more proud of it, so we learned that in this type of projects there is an important human factor.

After that one, others came to keep the flame lighting. The Brasilândia favela where Luz Nas Velas was born, will always be our second home for the wonderful people who welcomed us as one of the family. In the Nierika project, in Guadalajara, Mexico, together with the neighbours, we managed to transform the use of a square so that it would stop being a drug selling point and begin to be used by the children and elders of the community; in Buenaventura, Colombia, in the houses of this humble coastal community we could see the marvellous style of



Fig. 13 - *Luz nas velas*, São Paulo, Brazil, 2017. *Poesia* (by Boa Mistura).

hairstyles that the locals had passed down for generations; in the Cañada Real, in Madrid, we talked to hundreds of neighbours to write the powerful lyrics of a song over 10 miles of homes. In the Ritsona refugee camp in Greece, we painted a public meeting space for the hundreds of people who have lived there for months and shared their stories with them. We've kept all those amazing adventures and the people we've found on the road, and all of them give sense to our work.

V.G.: How does the local community react to your art when you intervene in difficult social contexts? How do you overcome initial distrust? What is the perception that people have of works of art? Do they recognise it, do they feel represented? Do they participate in the realisation of these works?

B.M.: As we have been talking before, we believe there is a process to make people feel part and

understand an artwork.

In Velokhaya, we started painting by ourselves. People looked at the work and were curious and attracted by the colour, but as the neighbours joined as participants in the execution process, the attachment to the place grew and their self-esteem and empowerment also, for having been part of such a change.

They stopped by to see it as the coolest place in the neighbourhood.

It is certainly a project that helped to revitalize the school, but the most important thing was the seed of change that we left there. Those days artists and neighbours were at the same team, networking, and cooperation and energy were generated.

We realized that involving local people means recognizing them as co-authors of the work, making them feel proud and able to change their on walls, communities and even lives.

V.G.: If culture influences our ability to see and interpret, how are your works read from different cultural and social contexts?

B.M.: The works are made to be local and at the same time we believe they could be understood globally, but not isolated. They have a context, that is what makes them understandable. In conclusion, the main purpose when we develop an artistic project is to create something that involves and represents the communities, the villages, the culture of the place we are intervening.

Art is nothing more than an expression of culture, a tool to communicate what we are and our roots, that is why it is so important to keep our identities alive. We like to think that with our work we are bringing something positive to the cities. There's a friend from our neighbourhood who once told us "Doctors heal, mechanics fix cars, and artists move, touch people's hearts". For us, that is the

Fig. 14 - *Nierika*, Guadalajara, México, 2017 (by Boa Mistura).





Fig. 15 - *Cultura / Sveglia / Popolo*, Roma, Italy, 2018. *Cultura* (by Boa Mistura).

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most important thing, to agitate those who live with our work. This is the greatest improvement we can bring with.

V.G.: Your art and Urban art are redrawing the image of cities. Can it also help to change it, to change its perception or is it already doing so?

B.M.: Painting has a wonderful thing: it is quite quick to apply and quite quick to create a change, and that also happens in public spaces. Nowadays, this process is getting more and more complex, and we can eventually count with economical resources to hire neighbours and also give them basic training, not only in an artistic way but also from a moral aspect. Even some of those people have become professionals and now have another way to earn a living.

We think about the job we are doing and we do feel a strong responsibility for the things we bring up, the places where we do it, the moments... When we draw a black heart with a white message inside that says "breathe" in Madrid, it is true that the mural may be beautiful, but it involves a hard thought. Why it was put there and not in the Amazonas is because here we have a lack of oxygen. Most of our projects are focused in this way, but as we use a "good-looking language", it has been said that we just send a positive message (a mistaken point of view, in my opinion). With the messages, we try to show that every person has an incalculable value, independently where he was born or what his circumstances are. We all carry a big diamond inside.

V.G.: Your works are colourful. What meaning is behind the choice of colours?

B.M.: Colours are part of the essence of an artistic work. In itself, they can express feelings, stereotypes, traditions, etc., but also challenge these meanings. It also slightly transforms people's emotions.

Making something "prettier" could give communities a different mind set, or work as a first step for change. This is the power of urban art. However, using one colour or another is part of the investi-



Fig. 16 - *Cultura / Sveglia / Popolo*, Roma, Italy, 2018. *Popolo* (by Boa Mistura).

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Fig. 17 - *Cultura / Sveglia / Popolo*, Roma, Italy, 2018. *Sveglia* (by Boa Mistura).

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gation process, as we've already talked about.

V.G.: You often work with words, which you use in the language of the country hosting your works. These words often express universal concepts and very strong messages. What determines their choice?

B.M.: Our experience has told us that art is the only capable of getting into the invisible places of the human being: the sensibility, the soul, the hearts. Art is what makes it easier getting through the days. Is not only beautiful but it helps to decode the times we live in.

For us the word has a special force, it is like a punch, something direct and that everyone understands. We write in the language of each place, and the words, phrases or verses only make sense in the place where they are: "Beleza" or "Firmeza", this is how they greeted in the favela, and we found it beautiful, "Somos Luz", in El Chorrillo (Panama), is a cry to the city of human value that is within many of the people of the neighbourhood, "Nobility", written in Arabic on the walls of the Algerian Kasbah, is what we perceive from Muslim society... Every word has a place and a why.

V.G.: In this period, Covid19 is the subject of many street artists, to encourage people to protect themselves or for artistic, educational, or political ends. Are you thinking of communicating in your own way useful contents to inform or give your reading of the emergency?

B.M.: From Boa Mistura we consider this situation an opportunity, artistically speaking. As an artistic collective, this forced pause forces us to look back and take some critical perspective on what we are doing and to look ahead and open up lines of research that we have not been able to investigate in the past. We don't know where they're going to take us, not even if they're interesting, but we're trying. In addition, we believe that urban art will be altered in some way by the Coronavirus and our streets will continue to provoke conversations that leaders don't want to have. This critical global sit-

uation should change our understanding of society. We hope that this will be the case, and this fall, so strong that it will have consequences at all levels, will become a zero point on which to begin to redefine the role of the human being as a community and its relationship with the environment. We can't go on like this. It's absolutely unsustainable.

V.G.: What will be the first project you want to carry out at the end of the emergency?

B.M.: We dream of one project in which all the things we've talked about, all the layers we've been adding to our work over the years confluence, on the largest surface possible ... a whole neighbourhood, an entire city...On that perfect project, the paint would be only a node within a transforming network, an excuse to revitalize and improve the life conditions of an area.

It could be really nice to develop a project in which we can reflect the "new normal". A critic artwork to start building a new society after the pandemic. But, even if the project is simple, it would be really nice to start painting again.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Author is truly grateful to Boa Mistura for granting the interview and for what the collective does through its art with deep sensitivity. All images courtesy of Boa Mistura.



Fig. 18 - *Laberintos Líricos*, World Heritage Cities, Spain, 2016-2017. Left, *Ocupando*, Mérida; right, *Los finales*, Úbeda (by Boa Mistura).

Fig. 19 - *Soy Porque Somos*, México City, México, 2018 (by Boa Mistura).





NOTE

[1] The term “Boa Mistura”, from the Portuguese “good mixture”, refers to the different background and skill of its members, among which there are an architect, two graduated in Fine Arts, an illustrator, a civil engineer. See www.boa-mistura.com (retrieved April 2020).

[2] <http://www.boamistura.com/#/project/azul-sobre-blanco> (retrieved April 2020).

[3] <http://www.boamistura.com/#/project/pensar-sentir> (retrieved April 2020).

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[10] <http://www.boamistura.com/#/project/mas-alla-de-los-muros-la-calle> (retrieved April 2020).

Fig. 20 - *Más allá de los muros, la calle*, Barcelona, Spain, 2019 (by Boa Mistura).

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