

In September 2018, at Nuart Plus in Stavanger, Argentinian artist Milu Correch presented an 'Anti-Ted Talk' talk about street art. This was billed as:

A deconstructive point of view on some street art truths that should be avoided in order to reach wall painting's decolonised potential. The capitalisation of poverty, the new virtual wall, individualist consumption, virtue signalling/merchandising, colonisation processes, hegemonic industry, and other light subjects.

Decolonising Artivism

Milu Correch

Voracious capitalism devours everything. Where there seems to be resistance, capitalism sees merchandise. What the system inflicts on us is a wide frustration, which impels us to rebel. And that's when the system uses its most ingenious trick: with a slight hand movement, it turns the rebellion into something to take advantage of. Many people do not understand the root of their frustration, so their rebellion has no fixed direction. They know they want to rebel, but they don't know 'what they want to rebel against'. Fortunately, the system is able to fill that void by providing them with a long list of stereotyped standard claims against what to rebel – an 'activist kit' (Kaczynski, 2012).

Today, capitalism consists of hyperconsumption, which has reduced all of us to consumers, especially in the territory we could call the First World's Shopping Centre – at the expense of the peripheries. Far from denying its economic disasters around the world, it spectacularises them. It incites (and excites) us to fix our eyes on images where, in monetary terms, a productive use is made out of the very misery that capitalism brings forth (Gonzalez, 2016). A dark desire to consume what is oppressed. The value of products by the green industry or by manufacturers that claim to have a certain morality in their production chain, are increased by the guiltless consumption of the privileged. Capitalism's disasters are normalised through spectacular images, and therefore it is no coincidence that, in general, behind each product that has this type of added value, there is somehow or other also a cause of misery. In reality, the added value is more like a placebo to counteract the guilt rather than a real solution to the problems to which it refers. For instance, Starbucks, in theory, 'reduces' environmental impact by offering alternative disposable cups, instead of stopping the use of disposable cups.

In this spectacular scenario, art, the favourite *vedette* of the System, far from being outside, creates a concept of rancid marketing – artivism, activist art, or political art. That which we call 'political art' operates as an act of bourgeois consolation. The dematerialisation of guilt. Anti-political civility. Politics as Magritte's pipe. Sacrificial pseudo-commitment. Political art, or the virtue of big money to designate a show of the false conscience. The implacable logic of the charity lady (de Lobxs, 2018). Poverty in the Third World, and the plight of refugees, are now among the most sought after objects of art by the artists of the First White World in offering post-political messages in pursuit of 'humanity'.

Around the globe, art as a disposition of the Western market and as a coloniser is in the hands of a single social class, i.e., the upper middle class. Artists with class sensitivities and feelings of generosity and salvation approach complex social conflicts that they do not really understand with fascination, as if they were objects that are easy to apprehend (Martel in Pinto Veas, 2018). Thus, art is the propagator of spectacular 'microfascisms' and cultural hegemony. Telling the history of Capital with prejudices and stereotypes that obscure power relations. Stories of monsters and animals without historicity. Addressing poverty in Africa without considering the processes of colonisation (Ngozi Adichie, 2009). Addressing the crimes associated with drug trafficking without showing for whom this market really exists. In this way, sensitive and privileged artists not only belong to this oppressive faction, but they help to capitalise oppression while hiding it as such, with the excuse of making issues visible, while in actual fact only scratching the surface.

Street art is today one of the main expressions of artivism. Street art is often used as a tool in gentrification

Milu Correch, Nuart Plus. Stavanger, September 2018. Photograph ©Kristina Borhes



Milu Correch. Nuart Aberdeen 2018. Photograph ©Nikki Smith



processes – creating guilt in the painters who are invited to paint in marginal neighbourhoods, which are often populated by people with darker skin and lower incomes. In this way, artists create representations of neighbourhoods through their white privilege filter, generating morally correct images, capitalising on oppression in terms of the merchandising of ‘good’, obfuscating power relations and therewith extending disempowerment. Speaking in Spinozian terms, they rely on sad affections. Sad affections are those that diminish our power, and our ability to act. These include emotions such as hope, grief, and guilt. These sad affects are reproduced and reinforced by power (Spinoza, 2015). Thus, Africans will always be represented as malnourished victims and native Latino Americans as good savages; impotent objects devoid of subjectivity and enunciation that must be saved without asking for their opinion. This reproduction of the white saviour is sometimes reflected in artists’ pictorial work, and at other times, in the explanatory texts that now often accompany images circulated in social networks or in curatorial presentations of exhibitions.

In the preface to *The Condemned of the Earth*, Sartre writes:

But let it be understood that nobody reproaches us with having been false to such and such a mission – for the very good reason that we had no mission at all. It is generosity itself that’s in question; this fine melodious word has only one meaning: the granting of a statutory charter. For the folk across the water, new men, freed men, no one has the power nor the right to give anything to anybody; for each of them has every right, and the right to everything. And when one day our human kind becomes full-grown, it will not define itself as the sum total of the whole world’s inhabitants, but as the infinite unity of their mutual needs (Sartre, 1983: 7).

The techno-aesthetics of wall painting should be decolonised, abandoning the microfascisms of generosity and salvation. We should find a way to relate to otherness without a banal objectification, but as an exchange of subjects. Question the normalisation of false resistance and abandon the ridiculous mission of ‘changing the world’ from bourgeois comfort. The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house (Lorde, 2018). Let’s not just tell the part of the story that incites us.

There are ways of talking about the same conflicts but, returning to Spinoza, with cheerful affections (Marx, for example, considered shame as a revolutionary feeling) that are empowering, that promote action against hegemony, and do not hide power relations. We do not need First World discourses to explain the realities of the global Third World. As Sayek (2018: 11) has suggested, we should instead locate and use alternative discourses:

...that refuse to appeal to victimisation and the nullification of our subjectivities and agency. Discourses that refuse to rely on reductionist and paternalist thinking that would deny the power of our concrete actions. We do not seek saviours or discourses of salvation, but rather for our own process of empowerment to be recognised as subjects of the same order and with the same validity as Western subjects, yet without being categorised or translated as identical to them.

As artists, we should not be spokespersons for an oppression that has not burned our own skin. Let’s not steal the tears we have not cried. One can question power, capital, and the system without capitalising on, or seeking to save, people as objects – we should share our capacity for enunciation and our own power with those less powerful.

Taking inspiration from literature, film, and illustration, combined with her own research into local histories, Milu Correch’s narrative-based paintings continue the rich tradition of Latin American muralism. Her ‘kids on cars’ series contained ‘plotlines’ ranging from Classical mythology to Romantic symbolism while her more recent body of work explores the brutal history of Western Europe’s Witchcraft Trials, which were responsible for the deaths of over 40,000 men and women from the late 16th to the early 18th century.

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