

## Shaping identities through Street Art. Iconography of social claims in Orgosolo's Murales.

Nowadays, street art is one of the most common public art manifestations in bigger cities. However, there are case studies that show how this form of visual communication has a long history and can strengthen the capacity of the self-assertion also of small communities, far from the well-known urban phenomena of the large cities.

This article discusses one of this case studies: the murals in Orgosolo (Sardinia, Italy), analysing the iconographic production according to which their creation would be linked to different forms of claims, starting from the rebellion of the local population against decisions of the national government concerning the municipal territory until today, passing through the manifestation of dissent towards the resurgence of neo-fascist phenomena in the mid-seventies of the last century. Furthermore, this article analyses the links between the need for self-representation and self-affirmation of the citizens and the use of vi-

sual languages in public space, connecting political events with artistic manifestations.

This research is based on the diachronic analysis of the development of these murals, focusing on the evolution of their subjects and visual languages, and highlighting their role in the building of the public opinion, on the collective imagery, and on the perception of the local identity. Through this analysis, the article presents how it has created one of the most iconic expressions of auto-representation of the Sardinian identity, revealing that these representations, known as an expression of the Sardinian tradition, are not autochthonous but a classic example of "invented tradition", arising from external inputs.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As ancient as the primordial signs left by primitive men in their caves and, at the same time, as contemporary as in Street Art, graffiti reveals an archaic dimension of our present.

The writer and traveller Bruce Chatwin took pictures of the rock paintings in Rio de las Pinturas in Patagonia. Hands that emerge from the stone, obtained by blowing pigment on the hand, to make a mark, a sign of recognition and identity. Indeed, non-verbal communication can be considered as the manifestation of identity, and it became more significant especially if it is a submitted or repressed identity; as the case of murals, but also urban graffiti, that acquire a peculiar meaning in the context in which they are made (Serra, 2007).

The need to be visible and to affirm opinions and interests are the roots of the social revolution. They can be considered an engine for the artistic movement's birth, which develops intending to denounce the inequities and grows as a manifestation of the self-determination of a community. For instance, the muralist movement in Mexico cannot be conceived without the revolution. The wall artists, in this dimension, give visual form to an emerging historical self-awareness of a people (Anreus et al., 2012). The three major exponents of this movement - Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and Alfaro David Siqueiros - trusted in a collective art that could produce benefits for society as a whole. Their works are placed in very visible and popular public places.

The murals, as collective art, had a communicative and didactic function. It is a social art that wanted to participate in the development of a society and its culture, in close relation with its historical roots. In the same way, in Orgosolo, similarly to the Mexican experience, the realisation of murals becomes an opportunity to visually manifest dissent and to establish a local identity. Indeed, the experience of Murals in Orgosolo is closely linked to a conception of 'socially engaged art' and can be considered a form of 'social achievement'. The engagement of this artistic expressions refers to the concept expressed in the Jean-Paul Sartre lecture



Fig. 1 - Pinuccio Sciola, *Untitled*, 1985, San Sperate.  
Retrieved May 19, 2020, from <https://www.continentecreativo.eu/paese/san-sperate/>

held at the Club Maintenant in Paris on October 29, 1945, and published in the following year in the essay "Existentialism Is a Humanism" where he stated that there is no reality but in action. "Man is nothing else, but what he plans to be, he exists only to the measure in which puts himself into action, he is, therefore, nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is" (1999, p. 36). With these words, Sartre wishes to report the action as the only means capable of changing society. Against this background should be placed that form of art that developed after the Second World War that Renato De Fusco defined as "politically committed art", as "a model of an art of political-social content, or that belonged to international communism, to the anti-fascist struggle, to the various popular movements, pacifists, anti-colonialists, etc., with works, however, stylistically linked to the experiences of the avant-garde" (1989,

p. 242), and that would encourage many cultural and artistic movements to the Communist Party. One of the best-known expressions of this type of art is undoubtedly that of the Mexican school born during the revolution of 1910. The works of the painters Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, the major exponents of Mexican Muralism, represent an explicit reference in figurative languages and the practice of murals as a suitable medium to be understood by the people. The artistic languages that best interpret the need to involve and communicate with the popular classes are precisely those figurative, capable of creating images connected to reality and easily understandable, such as those of Socialist Realism to which the Pictorial Neorealism refers, which sees in Renato Guttuso one of its most significant artists. In this context, we should read the Orgosolo mural, which is a demonstration of

how murals can mobilise large parts of the population around relevant issues of society, as well as to promote a political and cultural debate on issues that are often little known or hidden.

## 2. VISUAL CULTURE AND PUBLIC SPACE

To make a space effectively public, it must respect the collective right of groups to make themselves visible to the public (Goheen 1998). In this way, the public space contributes to the functioning of democratic systems by promoting the visibility of the actions and political struggles of the citizens who gather and organise themselves in it.

The public space becomes a privileged place of direct and non-mediated contact between individuals, which can enhance the process of the formation of public opinion, the confrontation, the knowledge, the awareness of the reality. However, the formation of public opinion needs spaces and media through which the phenomena of the world become visible (Cicalò 2009). It is the space of the relationship between individuals in which action is performed, and the public visibility of the discourse on which the organisation of democratic society is based is achieved (Arendt 2001).

The concept of public space is closely linked to the idea of democracy (Zukin 1995), which is based on the declaration and affirmation of individual rights. Public space is, in this sense, a space of negotiation, an institutionalised space of conflict (Deutsche 1996). Accessibility to public space and visibility in public space becomes indicative of individual freedoms and the possibility of disputes and protests.

Despite urban policies oriented towards order and control, the public spaces of the city continue to be the theatre for the manifestation of the unpredictable and uncontrollable action of individuals organised and brought together in search of visibility and attention. The idea of the conquest of visibility in public space has been deepened by geographical studies from which two different visions of the urban landscape emerge: the urban landscape as a stage (Cosgrove 1984, 1985) and the urban landscape as a theatre (Sennett 2006, Cosgrove



Fig. 2 - Serramanna Artistic Group, *Untitled*, 1977, Villamar.

Retrieved May 19, 2020, from < [https://www.sabrinabarbante.com/sardegna-in-inverno-come-e-dove-andare-e-che-cosa-non-perdere/img\\_4298/](https://www.sabrinabarbante.com/sardegna-in-inverno-come-e-dove-andare-e-che-cosa-non-perdere/img_4298/) >

1997). In the first approach, the city constitutes the scene in which the dominant classes represent themselves through the possession of space and the control of social relations that take place in it. Therefore, the political role of space is expressed not only in demonstrations and protests that take place in it but also in the expression of power and domination that is exhibited in it.

However, the city is also the theatre in which every citizen becomes an actor. According to this idea, the public sphere is represented through the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi* (Sennett 2006) in which the play of everyday life takes place and in which what is visible immediately becomes public.

If in the idealisation of the agora the public space was constructed through action and discourse, in the *theatrum mundi* it is realised in seeing and being seen: interaction between people is characterised by primacy of visual over discourse (Cupers 2005).

## 3. MURALES AS MEDIA FOR SELF-REPRESENTATION

In recent years, street art has increasingly become mainstream. Through it, the artist intends to trigger public debate and to make controversial issues public for all to see - even in restrictive political environments and even for the illiterate. This form of increasing public awareness on

social and political issues has a history that is rooted in the Mexican Muralist Movement of the early twentieth century, which was conceived as a form of art aimed at people. The foremost interpreters of this artistic current, Diego Rivera, Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros, turn to the largely illiterate rural population, taking inspiration from indigenous and popular art and reflecting elements of Mexican culture that after centuries of colonial domination, on the walls regain a leading role in history (Charlot 1963). After spreading throughout Latin America, with the Great Depression after 1929, the Movement's approach spread to the United States (Marling 1982). It was in the 1960s that left-wing student movements arrived in Europe and spread throughout the world as a form of art of protest for the self-representation of local communities and weaker minority groups.

The murals have maintained their connotation of public art capable of self-representing communities, allowing them to express identities and opinions. They're easily realised and visible as places on the streets where the daily life of the people takes place, makes wall paintings one of the most effective media to speak to the local communities and about the local communities. The possibility to realise them in an anonymous, uncontrolled and clandestine ways makes murals a free space of self-representation in which it is possible to say through images and words what in no other space can be said and seen with the same effectiveness and power.

#### 4. THE SOCIAL PHENOMENON OF MURALS IN SARDINIA

In Sardinia, the term Muralism refers to a multitude of experiences and actors ranging from the sixties and seventies of the last century to the present day (Cozzolino 2014, 2017). The first most significant experiences are found in San Sperate –in the province of Cagliari–, in Orgosolo –in the historical Barbagia region– and Villamar –in Marmilla. Although they can be associated with the same phenomenon, spread across the whole region, the different territorial facts belong to different modalities and conceptions of this practice.

The experience in San Sperate is closely linked to the figure of the artist Pinuccio Sciola (1942-2016), who was among the first to use this technique in Sardinia and is considered one of the pioneers of Muralism in the island (Concu 2012; Olita & Pes 2007). In 1968 –a year of great political and cultural turmoil– Sciola –returned from his studies at the Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst in Salzburg and from a series of trips to Spain and France– in conjunction with the religious feast of Corpus Domini, began painting with lime the ancient walls of ladiri (adobe bricks) in the old town. The whitewashed walls will become later the basis for the first murals. This operation, which can itself be considered an artistic performance, kicked off and transformed into reality the initial idea - and which persists until now - of a Paese Museo [Town Museum] (Porcu 2012). This experience allowed Sciola to participate in the 37th International Art Exhibition of the 1976 Biennale di Venezia, directed by Vittorio Gregotti (1927-2020), hosted in the Italian section entitled *Ambiente come sociale* curated by Enrico Crispolti (1933- 2018).

The subjects portrayed in the murals of San Sperate mainly rely on daily life or social and environmental reasons differing from those Orgosolo, that show scenes primarily political or ideological relating to social struggles. In the following decades, artists such as Angelo Pilloni –with his works linked to local history and traditions– and Raffaele Muscas –who with essential and ancestral geometries investigating the shapes of the human body– continued this experience. They create other murals and helping to feed the artistic repertoire of the Paese Museo. The experience, a difference from others on the island, outlining an expansive vision and a different concept of the cultural commitment of art and the artist, who while not including a part in the linguistic specific of the author, connected an equal dialogue relationship and cooperation with citizenship.

In Villamar - unlike the San Sperate experience and in a more similar way to that of Orgosolo - the murals show mostly political and ideological scenes related to Sardinian events. The murals in this town of Marmilla developed during the second half



Fig. 3 - Andrea Cascui, *Crocus*, 2016, San Gavino Monreale. Retrieved May 19, 2020, from <<http://ilgorgo.com/andrea-cascui-new-murals-san-gavino/>>

of the seventies of the last century. In 1976, the entertainers of the initiative were local painters, such as Antioco Cotza and Antonio Sanna, and two Chilean artists and political exiles, Alan Joffrè and Uriel Parvex. The latter, members of the Chilean Muralism of the Brigadas Ramona Parra (Longoni, 1999) during the socialist government of Unidad Popular (1970-73) by Salvador Allende, were forced by the coup (1973) of General Augusto Pinochet to take refuge in Sardinia. This group of artists gave birth to a period, through the realisation of the murals,

of more widespread social and cultural awakening. The subjects portrayed in Joffrè, Parvex and Cotza's murals – characterised using bright and intense colours– are usually of social denunciation and represent particular local and world-historical moments. While those made by Sanna often portray landscapes, habits and customs that have now disappeared from the town.

Today, this phenomenon –albeit with different purposes– continues in two quite distinct directions. On the one hand, it is inserting itself into the artistic vein of Street Art, with some local artists such as La Fille Bertha, Andrea Casciu, Manu Invisible and many others, that have more an authorial character. On the other, with Trompe-l'œil-like representations on many walls of different towns depicting pastoral and past life scenes, which are perceived especially by tourists as scenes of local "authenticity" (Zukin, 2013). It should remember, however, that only in the nineties did the first publications (Mannironi, 1994; Piredda, 1994; Rubanu & Fistrale, 1998) which returned a renewed interest in this form of public art. To the point of marking a trend also in the intention of the Regione Autonoma della Sardegna cultural policies, which led to the cataloguing and inventory of this art form within the Sistema Informativo Regionale del Patrimonio Culturale, edited by the art historian Silvia Ledda. At the same time, other more enlightening and informative initiatives are developing, they aim to publicise the centres concerned for tourism promotion. For example, the Urban Center in Cagliari has developed in 2020 the project Continente Creativo, which aims to enhance the artistic expressions of Sardinia linked to the Muralism and creativity of contemporary Sardinian artists.

## 5. MURALES IN ORGOSOLO

The Orgosolo case study assumes a connotation entirely own in the Sardinian context, it constitutes an iconographic transfiguration process of social claims, with an apparent reference to the Mexican Muralism of the pictorial movement born in Mexico after the 1910 revolution.



Fig. 4, 5 - Dioniso, First murals created by the group, 1969, *Orgosolo*.

(on the left) The original mural. Retrieved May 19, 2020, from <<https://derev.com/fiores-in-su-granitu>>, (on the right) The murals today. Retrieved May 09, 2020, from <https://medium.com/italia/la-storia-non-violenta-di-pratobello-74d3749c33d6>

The first mural made in Orgosolo dates to 1969. The initiative was born under the pressure of the anarchist theatre group Dioniso from Milan and its promoter Giancarlo Celli. Driven by the need to experiment through a 'direct relationship' of their ideas with different cultural backgrounds populations, they decided to test their theatre concept in other national contexts. The choice fell on Sardinia, which at the time represented the Italian region with the highest emigration rate and where popular movements already existed, like the occupation of military firing ranges in Prato-bello areas. They moved to Sardinia in early July 1969, before arriving in Orgosolo, they stopped with their performances first in Santa Lucia and then in Mamoiada.

The creation of this murals was part of those as mentioned earlier 'direct relationship' with the population which involved various activities

such as: poetry sessions at homes; the assembly theatre; the most strictly political meetings and assemblies; the Dioniso-Test –a political game to question the concept of ideology; and finally, the Dioniso-Scuola –which provided for mural painting with popular participation. The aim of the latter activity made it possible to exploit the uniqueness of the action to highlight a dissection of the problems that afflicted the population (Balbus, 1980).

The activity undertaken by this mural painting (Figures 4 and 5), which can define as a 'militant graphics' practice based on local political events of those years, gave birth to the Circolo Giovanile di Orgosolo association which theorised the revolutionary union between pastors, workers and students. The mural shows an allegorical personification of Italy. She subjugated by the United States (Uncle Sam's hat replaces the Turreted

Crown) and forgets about Sardinia (represented by a question mark). Furthermore, murals show Sardinia occupied by military settlements (rifle against citizens) and exploited by the industrialists from north Italy (the scale that hangs on the side of a man with the car against the shepherd with his sheep). Another element detected is the disappearance of some features (Figure 2) present in the original mural, which shows little attention in the restoration and maintenance of the works.

In this first experience, we can highlight how this practice refers to the concepts of "strategy" and "tactics" expressed by Michel De Certeau (1980) in his book *L'Invention du Quotidien - Volume 1, Arts de Faire*. The term "strategy" refers to the manipulation of power relationships - between state and local population choices - within a space of its own that becomes the basis for managing external threats -in this case, the walls of the city centre. While, with "tactics" we refer to a deliberate action - here through the political mural- to express dissent and manifest one's positions.

In the following years, right on the association's premises, thanks to the collaboration of the members and the participation of Francesco Del Casino -a local middle school drawing teacher- saw the consolidation of this practice on the walls of the whole town. In the beginning, the murals had as subject the events related to the local struggles supported by the Circolo Giovanile. Still, very quickly, the themes developed and report the ideological positions of the inhabitants concerning local, national or world themes.

Most of the murals in the town are after 1975. Just in that year was the thirtieth anniversary of the Liberazione d'Italia from the Nazi-fascist occupation and the teacher Francesco Del Casino decided to create more than ten murals on the walls of the town's buildings (Figures 6 and 7) with the help of his students.

The intent was not only to commemorate the incident but above all, to involve the students to make them participate and aware of the brutality of the war, breaking the boundary that divides the school from society. In those years, in fact, "the school wanted to use new communication techniques aimed and based on the community and the



Fig. 6 - Francesco Del Casino, *Untitled*, 1975, Orgosolo.  
Retrieved May 09, 2020, from <<https://www.continentecreativo.eu/paese/orgosolo>>

involvement of even the weakest social groups” (Serra, 2007, p. 29).

The presence of Del Casino until 1985, the date of his return to Tuscany, left several testimonies on the walls of the town. On several occasions, he returned to Orgosolo to retake this practice and to commemorate some events or to dedicate some murals to characters with a strong political and civil commitment. These include the one dedicated to Mahatma Gandhi of 1997 (Figure 8) or the one in memory of Pinuccio Sciola of 2016 (Figure 9).

Linguistic references of his works –even if the murals works should be considered more as collective than authorial works– are manifold. Ranging from Pablo Picasso’s Synthetic Cubism to Antonio Ligabue’s False-Primitivism, even if the link with the Nuova Secessione Artistica Italiana - Fronte Nuovo delle Arti is powerful (Fagioli, 2005). Using the definition of Antonio Gramsci (2014), Del Casino could define as an “organic intellectual” who emerges from the local situation and remains connected with it.

Following the artist’s work, in 1978 the contribution of the local painter Pasquale Buesca was added. In the following years Vincenzo Floris and Diego Asproni from Bitti, who then continued their work in the town of origin, joined the operation. In 1994, the political denunciation reappeared on Orgosolo walls, with a mural showing the destruction of Sarajevo and the conflicts that were devastating the former Yugoslavia. However, in 1996, a representative episode marked the citizens’ relationship with this artistic practice. The group of muralists Le Api painted a mural entitled Sweet dreams on mattresses of Pratobello, which depicted some shepherds cooking a pig on a spit, one of whom was talking on a cell phone. The following day, following a discussion between the artists and some local shepherds, it was decided that it was inappropriate to portray a shepherd holding a cell phone, the next day the phone was cancelled and the face repainted (Satta, 2003). Irony associated among the myth of Pratobello was not appreciated and shortly after the murals were cancelled, breaking the now consolidated link between the community and this practice.

<http://disegnarecon.univaq.it>



Fig. 7 - Francesco Del Casino, *Untitled*, 1975, Orgosolo.  
Retrieved May 09, 2020, from <<https://www.continentecreativo.eu/paese/orgosolo>>

Last in terms of appearance, as well as the largest in the town, was the mural by the artist Manu Invisible, entitled Vuoto [Void] (Figure 10). In 2019, on the day of the fiftieth anniversary of the Pratobello revolt, after two days of work, the new mural was presented. The painting recalls several recent political events and seems to refer to the tradition of Pablo Picasso and Guernica. At the top, the presence of smugglers and the boy Alan Kurdi, found dead on a beach in Turkey, refer to the tragedy of migrants in the Mediterranean. The toponym ‘Yemen’ on the map of Sardinia refers to the Domusnovas bomb factory, while the other dots indicate the NATO bases on the island. Finally, in the centre, an arm with a broken sword, the symbol of war conflicts, stoked by

Su Lizu (the lily) symbol of Orgosolo, that represents the will of the town’s popular to take sides against any form of war violence.

Currently, in the town, there are more than two hundred and fifty murals. They are dedicated to various political and social themes ranging from the Liberation of Italy to the local traditions and the defence of the environment, passing through the celebration of some historical political figures such as Karl Marx, Salvador Allende –President of the Chilean Republic– and Antonio Gramsci.

## 6. MURALES AND ORGOSOLO IDENTITY

For many years in Orgosolo, the act of portraying local and world affairs through the practice of murals

has constituted a process of cultural identification. Manuel Castells –although critical of the recognition processes of the local communities’ territorial identities– argues that people resist to individualisation process and social atomisation only if united in community organisations that generate a belonging feeling and a “cultural identity”. However, for this to happen, a social mobilisation process is needed in which people can discover common interests through engagement in an urban movement. Its very existence produces meaning for participants and community in general, as well as a collective memory of the place (Castells, 2014). An active process in Orgosolo community until the nineties of the last century. Murals, today, constitute for the community a document akin to a “Postmemory” (Hirsch, 2014). Relationship between observers of facts and subsequent generations or distant contemporary witnesses lead to a memory of things that happened in the past and are known only through the stories and evocative images on the walls. Pasquale Buesca himself, in an interview with Bill Rolston (2014), says that young people do not have the same spirit as when the murals were born, they are less interested in politics and, today, Orgosolo is like a great museum. A ‘musealization’ process of urban spatial practice, born as an expression of dissent precisely through the transformation of the artefacts into objects of conservation and enhancement for tourism purposes. The growing political interest in the cataloguing of works and artefacts (Vanali, 2018) also testifies to this transformation.

The latest experiences, as well as that of *Manu Invisible*, although maintaining the evocative and ethical code towards dissent towards some political events, represent more an authorial than collaborative artistic practice, generating a loss of the feeling of belonging to “a cultural identity” community. An “artification” (Shapiro, Heinich, 2012) that manifests itself through a change process, both practical and symbolic, and of attribution of meaning that leads to a radical transformation of the sense of the murals.

The murals over the years have allowed several times to change the identity of Orgosolo. First of



Fig. 8 - Francesco Del Casino, *Gandhi*, 1997, Orgosolo.  
Retrieved May 09, 2020, from <<https://www.continentecreativo.eu/paese/orgosolo>>

all, it allowed re-evaluating the bandits’ negative town identity, illustrated in Franco Cagnetta’s essay *Inchiesta su Orgosolo* (1954) and the 1961 film *Banditi a Orgosolo* [Bandits in Orgosolo] by Vittorio De Seta, modelling his identity through the social claims of the murals. Over the past twenty years, the Orgosolo town, with ‘musealization’ process of the murals, and identifying with the image of pastoral Sardinia (Satta, 2001), has turned into a tourist centre. This vision about town-museum is also projected externally through official institutional channels, like official Sardinia tourism portal. At the same time, International newspapers, like *The Guardian*, celebrates the myth of the mural and invites tourists to visit the town.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, this research shows that the case study of Orgosolo’s murals is a classic example of invented tradition. “The traditions that appear to us, or claim to be ancient, often have a rather recent origin. Moreover, sometimes they are entirely invented” (Hosbawm, Ranger 2002). The invented traditions are a symbolic and ideological nature practice that is implicitly proposed as a form of continuity with the past. A tradition that was born with the 1968 protests and with relative new generations revolt’s communication of those years, which saw the pre-eminence of iconic language over textual language (Fatta, 2019).



Fig. 9 - Francesco Del Casino, *A Pinuccio Sciola*, 2016, Orgosolo. Retrieved May 09, 2020, from <<https://www.continentecreativo.eu/paese/orgosolo/>>

The murals of the small towns of Sardinia have taken on a folkloric and touristic connotation over time to become an expression of a Sardinian identity that sees in the collective imagination the local populations resistant to change, in constant conflict with the authorities and suspicious of influences and contamination with the outside world. This research shows that these murals are instead an expression of the ability of local populations to absorb external inputs productively and constructively. Their stylistic and graphic characteristics are recalling im-

<http://disegnarecon.univaq.it>



Fig. 10 - Manu Invisible, *Vuoto*, 2019, Orgosolo. Retrieved May 09, 2020, from <<http://www.manuinvisible.com/it/muri/lettering/>>

portant international artistic movements, their use as an instrument of denunciation, protest and self-affirmation consistent with the history of political and ideological movements that transcends narrow regional boundaries, places the experience of Orgosolo murals within a broader cultural context. The fact that it has become one of Sardinia's most iconic and symbolic artistic manifestations demonstrates the strength of this media of communication. Which, coming from outside, has found in need for auto-affirmation and identification of the Sardinian people

a fertile ground in which it can take root and evolve to the present day, keeping the tradition alive and making irrelevant it is having been invented.

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