

Communicating bottom-up social development



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## Favela Painting: Building community, social change and emancipation through an OrgansparkZ/Art installation



*For some time now, Brazilian favela dwellers have been constructing representations of joy, resourcefulness and creativity that the wider public sphere now associates with favela life. Through multiple bottom-up projects, they have managed to challenge deep-seated negative understandings of favela dwellers as inherently poor and violent. In this post, **J. Miguel Imas** discusses how the Favela Painting project has contributed to this endeavour through an OrgansparkZ/Art intervention, a collective art installation that acts as a vehicle for social change.*

*"Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." Banksy*

*Favelados* in Santa Marta, a slum community in Rio de Janeiro, are socially transforming their ramshackle and precarious space into a colourful art-installation place for living. Applying art/creative organsparkZ practices developed by two Dutch artists, Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn, *favelados* are asserting themselves, challenging the most stereotypical views of who they are and how they live through this highly creative, socially transformative and emancipatory community-art project.

Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn were attracted to Brazil by the hip-hop culture scene. In 2005 they arrived to document it in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. While filming, they began to appreciate not only the socially preconceived opinion people had of the favelas and how their inhabitants live, but the creativity that the community possessed. It was in one of these visits that they stumbled upon the idea of painting an entire favela. Reflecting on this wild idea and the kind of social message it could bring for the rest of the city, they began working in earnest in Vila Cruzeiro, one of the most violent favelas in Rio de Janeiro. Their first painting there was "boy with kite". It was highly symbolic and representative of how life could reflect something distinctively different from the violence and exclusion associated with life in slums. Most importantly though, they involved *favelados* in their artwork. This brought a high sense of pride, ownership and the realisation that this art intervention project could have a more transformative impact on the community than simply an illustration of street art. Indeed, it marked the beginning of 'Favela Painting' as a community-art project, in a true collaborative sense.



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After their success, Haas & Hahn (as the artists are known) returned more determined to collaborate further with the local community. Bringing with them Dutch tattoo artist Rob Admiraal and involving favela dwellers, they painted an entire street of Vila Cruzeiro in a Japanese style river. This was a collective effort that injected tremendous esteem inside the favela, which suffers from regular gun battles and other forms of intervention, such as that of the police, with deplorable consequences for the community. This collaborative art initiative attracted both national and international attention. Principally, it stimulated people to start questioning their assumptions of what favelas are, what they represent and, above all, to engage with them rather than to exclude them. The project challenged the 'imaginary' boundaries constructed to separate these slum spaces from civil society. It empowered the slum community to build their own narrative, providing them with a voice.

Favela Painting represents an OrgansparkZ/Art<sup>1</sup> intervention of social consequences. OrgansparkZ are creative practices which are neither managed nor organised within the corporate established aesthetic order, sparking alternative meanings that transgress the conventional such as in graffiti art or other unexpected street performances. It is about the unpredicted, spontaneous and subversive actions that critically question the dominant views of our society. It is about shared feelings and imaginations. Shared, because these art activities are co-created in a participative sense, inviting collective expressive-creative acts where the language of learning is one of allowing, surrender, and humility. That is, a reflection of a true bottom-up experience of artistic and social inclusion rather than an imposition of what and how things should be done. OrgansparkZ art interventions disrupt stereotypes, fixed meanings and other pre-conceived ideas held about groups of peoples or spaces such as in the case of favelas. Through art/creativity organsparkZers seek to transform their social condition, from what is prescribed and pre-defined to what they themselves reflect and identify as not one but all the views of a community. It is a collective art installation vehicle for social change.



Favela Painting presents a different discourse of social change, of engagement that invites co-participation and co-creation in order to improve the quality of life of favelas from within. As Koolhaas and Urhahn state, their focus is to mobilise people to transform their own communities to inspire, combat prejudice and attract more positive attention, generating both social and economic opportunities. This is constructed in collaboration with the *favelado* community, fully embracing their culture and their values (both artists lived inside the favelas and painted alongside *favelados*). Favela Painting, then, as an organsparkZ social-art initiative offers a different platform

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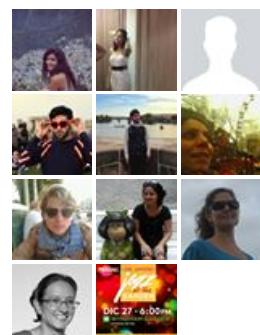
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for community-driven [art] action; one that paints a powerful picture not of a slum but of a cohesive creative community, capable of designing and articulating their distinctive identities, culture and values.

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As an art project of social transformation, Favela Painting established a genuine example of organsparkZ art intervention that transcends and breaks with the social diktats imposed by our consumerist society. In the fight against global inequality and poverty, OrgansparkZ/Art installations such as Favela-Painting offer a powerful and invigorating creative alternative on how to intervene in deprived and marginalised communities in order to allow those communities to build more sustainable lives and respect from within and outside. For us, who are involved in research and the production of knowledge, it makes us think more critically and creatively about what kind of involvement we want with these communities and what kind of knowledge we construct. Perhaps we should be also painting with them rather than about them.



<sup>1</sup> Imas, J. M. and Weston, A. (forthcoming) Organsparkz communities of art/spaces, imaginations, & resistance. In K. Kosmala, J. M. Imas and M. Milano (eds.), *Precarious Spaces: The Arts, Social & Organizational Change*. London: Intellect Press.

*All photographs courtesy of Miguel J. Imas.*

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#### About the Author

**Miguel** lectures on organisational-social psychology at the faculty of business and law, Kingston University. He holds a BSc and PhD in Social Psychology from the LSE and has been visiting professor at the Getulio Vargas Foundation (Brazil) and the University of Chile (Chile). Miguel has undertaken extensive (visual) ethnographic research in Latin America, where he has engaged with indigenous as well as deprived communities and organisations. He has contributed to developing similar research in South Africa and Zimbabwe. His work has been published in several journals on postcolonialism, art-resistance, and barefoot entrepreneurs. Currently he is editing a book on precarious spaces, art and social change to be published by Intellect Press next year. He can be contacted at [j.imas@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:j.imas@kingston.ac.uk)

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