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The Impact of Favela Painting

Fariha Rahman

Westview High School, fariha@pdx.edu

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Fariha Rahman

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Senior Inquiry

Pandey & Puterbaugh

While Brazil is growing rapidly, increased attention is being paid to its many lower-income “marginal” neighborhoods, called favelas, found near and within many major Brazilian cities (Rolfes, M., 2009). Three such favelas have been visually transformed by a Dutch design firm’s Favela Painting project, which consists of enormous murals painted on the walls of favela housing. The project was developed by two designers, Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn or Haas&Hahn, after they first visited a Brazilian favela to film a music video. Their original intent had little to do with any negative conditions of favelas – they simply wanted authorization for a painting on the both cramped and what they found to be uniquely functional buildings on very steep hillsides. After some time, they began seeing their project as a convenient way to address some of the poverty and crime (especially as the result of the drug trade) in favelas. They believed that Favela Painting would create a tourism industry in each favela that would lead to economic and social improvement, though in its current state, Favela Painting cannot be effective.

Haas&Hahn worked with the Brazilian Institute for Innovation and Social Healthcare (IBISS), a non-governmental organization (NGO) aimed at lowering social and economic inequality in Brazil, to contract workers from within favelas who had consented to being safely removed from the drug trade. One article summarizes the Favela Painting project’s development:

The project is the brainchild of Dutch artists Dre Urhahn and Jeroen Koolhaas, who visited Rio's favelas for the first time in 2005 to shoot hip hop videos. They rented rooms in one of the city's most dangerous slums, Vila Cruzeiro, and worked with local youths. "We suddenly had this clear vision that it would actually be great to transform their living environment together with them into something artistic that would instill pride in their life," Urhahn told CNN. (Darlington, S., 2010)

The goal was an increase in tourism to these favelas, which is meant to improve economic conditions by drawing state attention and creating more long-term sources of income for favela dwellers. However, this idea has its limits, especially in the context of a favela – “slum tourism” is a growing trend that generally has very negative effects on low-income areas (Rolfes, M., 2009). Scholars suggest that by creating distance between residents of low-income areas and the tourists and tour guides, these areas remain disadvantaged and in whatever state that best promotes further “voyeuristic” tourism (Rolfes, M., 2009). In context, this form of tourism is distinguished by its lack of legitimacy in relating the tourists and the viewed – for example, in a more negative sense, ‘ghettotourism’ can allow the moderately rich to feel better about their economic status by comparing theirs to the lives of the very poor (Rolfes, M., 2009). Though the Favela Painting project aims to celebrate, not handicap, aspects of favelas, it requires alteration in order to successfully improve the socioeconomic situation of impacted favelas and avoid the pitfalls of ‘slum tourism’. Residents ought to have greater creative say in the development of the paintings, and ideally, any newer paintings done under the project would increase focus on training favela dwellers to undertake similar projects or lead in greater capacities in Favela Painting.

The end goal of tourism for the Favela Painting project makes it appear rather misguided within the context of favela tourism. Austrian scholar Thomas Frisch notes that favela tourism is a growing industry with hints of “neo-colonialism” where aspects of low-income neighborhoods are “othered”, made static, and treated as essential to the integrity of visits to Brazil and other countries profiting from “slum tourism” (2012). Beyond using residents for an end they do not benefit from, and instead pay for, slum tourism fails to respect and consider these communities as equally human and dynamic as those of tourists. Frisch includes an analysis of the growing complexity of favelas and the relevant political players as a result of tourism, suggesting that each additional “player” has their own ends in mind (2012). In the case of Favela Painting, these parties include drug cartels, Rio government seeking to increase favela tourism, Haas&Hahn, and NGOs such as IBISS. As something that brings in unnecessary cultural elements from a non-residential group while failing to address drug-related violence and health issues, Favela Painting’s current existence in Rio favelas fails to create a positive impact.

Another author, Claire Williams of the University of Liverpool, focuses on “literary representations” of Rio favelas, writing, “The term favela, associated widely with poverty, crime, and violence, has become ‘a tropical prefix used to spice up western places and products’, ‘an international cultural phenomenon’ (Phillips, 2003), and ‘a trademark’ (Freire-Medeiros, in press)” (p. 484, 2008). Her mention of the idea of a ‘trademark’ suggests that the term ‘favela’ in the context of international tourism communicates only one, flat meaning of a darkness used and sold to add complexity to Western life and culture, while its own reality is ignored. In addition to the favelas’ original role as the setting for Haas&Hahn’s artwork, these ideas can be found in the designers’ proclaimed goal of “redesign[ing] and thereby rebrand[ing] a community as a whole” with each project (“Back to Rio”, n.d.). To avoid the simple use of favelas as the backdrop for a

“feel-good” Western project developed and designed by two Dutchmen, Haas&Hahn cannot simply focus on tourism, since all it can contribute, if favela culture is not genuinely represented in Favela Paintings, is one more way to “trademark” these areas (Williams, S., 2013).

Haas&Hahn do avoid certain “voyeuristic” (Williams, C., 2008) tendencies of favela tourism in the design of their project but are still held back by focusing on tourism. Of course, the fact that they aim for a landmark creates a reason other than the viewing of low-income living conditions for tourism. “Poverty” is not repeatedly “performed” (Williams, C., 2008), with only entertainment value, but rather hopefully alleviated by the general improvement of the area through increased income for local painters from the project and its connection to Soldados Nunca Mais. However, Favela Painting seems to offer less of a solution to social issues in favelas than it would claim. Jenny Xie, writing for *The Atlantic Cities*, argues that “the more urgent and pervasive problem in Santa Marta [the setting for the latest Favela Painting] is still its inadequate sewage system, which lacks capacity and reach” and attempts to beautify favelas and other parts of Rio de Janeiro are superficial and distracting from larger issues (2013). There have been recent outbreaks of police violence in these same favelas, arguably due to “racial and class dimensions” (Clarke, F., 2014).

The first favela painting was the 2004 piece called “Boy with Kite,” specifically aimed at representing the sense of hope Haas&Hahn believed was prevalent in the favelas they visited with a picture of a young boy holding a kite, which is also a common pastime for children living in favelas. Though this favela and others are heavily under the control of drug cartels, which often have violent shoot-outs and serve as employment for many residents, Haas&Hahn suggested that the painting would attract tourists and weaken the cartels by doing so. However, a

fairly recent article from The Telegraph notes that drug-related crimes did not significantly decrease before 2013 (Williams, S., 2013). Though it is meant to further the goals of the Soldados Nunca Mais program, Favela Painting does not have a long-lasting impact on crime, which suggests that any attention it is gathering fails to quantitatively improve the area. The economic improvement would hinge on greater employment of residents by the tourism industry, which is already questionable. One writer for The Atlantic Cities quotes “Charles Heck, a graduate student in geography at Florida International University,” who “estimates that tourism to Santa Marta has improved the incomes of fewer than 100 residents, out of about 6,000 people living there in total” from his observations while “living and researching in Santa Marta” (Xie, J., 2013). Williams notes that her studied literature, especially travel writing, tends to “romanticiz[e] or demonis[e]” low-income areas; Favela Painting leans towards romanticization in its artwork when the designers speak of celebrating the life and vitality of the residents they have met with symbolic paintings while trying to address the drug trade. Haas&Hahn involve residents in many parts of the process, starting from choosing the best design. Though public art is sourced from individual ideas, and it is ridiculous to expect the paintings to genuinely represent the entire favela, the tendency towards simplifying and romanticizing favelas can be negated if more input from residents is solicited during the actual design of the paintings.

To an extent, Haas&Hahn do aim to involve locals. The most recent painting (in Vila Cruzeiro) spanned 34 buildings, so they contracted local young men associated with the IBISS Soldados Nunca Mais program to help with actually painting the murals. IBISS is a non-governmental agency “aimed at helping the city’s most economically and socially excluded people,” which includes trying to empower and inspire leadership among favela dwellers (“IBISS in English”, n.d.). This program, therefore, is geared directly at the issues slum tourism

often neglects, and Favela Painting is in a prime position to make use of IBISS's methods to increase the effectiveness of the project. Soldados Nunca Mais itself directly contributes to weakening the drug trade and improving favela conditions by drawing out child soldiers involved in drug wars and rehabilitating them. As a result, Favela Painting served as an alternate income for some (all workers for the project came from the favelas). As quoted in a CNN article, one man affirms that it does help people avoid the drug trade, saying "'It gave me a different outlook on life, showing me that an honest job can be a good thing... If Coral [the painting agency] had 30 or 50 more job openings, I'm certain they would pull another 50 people off that wrong path". Another speaks very positively about the larger Vila Cruzeiro painting: "'It gives the community life!" said Edimar Marcelinho Franco, who helped paint the 34 buildings and walked away with a professional painting title" (Williams, S., 2013), suggesting that the paintings do reflect and contribute to local culture and community. However, greater agency in what exactly is painted on the hillsides would certainly amplify these benefits.

The designers also consciously avoid presenting the favelas they work in as "dark", negative spaces, (Freire-Medeiros, 2009) but again, in the structure of their project, still share some issues with "poverty tourism" (Rolfes, M., 2010). Rolfes, a German academic in the Department of Geography of the University of Potsdam, writes, "In some academic articles, authors call those tours social tours or reality tours because a number of them are explicitly presented or advertised by their operators as being authentic or realistic and as possessing strong interactive features. Touristic experiences off the beaten path are also expressed. This refers to MacCannell's term of staged authenticity" (2010). Though Rolfes is generally considering situations in which tourists visit low-income areas for no apparent reason other than their economic status and living conditions, where there is little improvement of the areas themselves

through tourism or otherwise (similar to Claire Williams' ideas), this echoes Haas&Hahn's goals of authentically expressing the spirit of Rio favelas, which are in their case usually admirable but have a strong potential to accidentally misrepresent favelas – selling communities as areas that generate improbable hope in the face of illegal crime when in fact police violence may be more of an issue and residents are becoming increasingly disillusioned, or suggesting that the project has completely cleaned up favelas when they are in high need of better sewage systems. These issues, and others, can be addressed better if the paintings specifically allow for the voice of residents themselves.

Many of the forms of poverty tourism considered by several authors are unlike the kind Favela Painting hopes to cause. Favela Painting is inherently a constructive idea, but the general methods of its implementation do not allow it to be fully effective in improving favela conditions. It currently fails in several areas, from limiting the drug trade adequately to strengthening general economic conditions, among other issues of favelas' images and stereotypes. It certainly hopes not be a degrading or static form of tourism but in celebrating the community, may fall prey to the tendency to other-ize favela dwellers to future tourists by separating the leadership and creation of the project's goals and ideas from residents. This is where it shares features with more voyeuristic forms of slum tourism, such as instances where completely foreign travel or tourism agencies dominate an industry that claims to address social issues when instead perpetuating them in order to maintain its appeal, which can account for the quantitative ineffectiveness in reducing drug crime rates in the relevant favelas. Haas&Hahn's Favela Painting may have 'put favelas on the map for something' other than the drug trade, but it is not only helpful but necessary for the project to do a little more when it seeks to represent communities through artwork.

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