

Whale to the West... Experiences in Urban Art

Can a little village kindergarten contribute to the cultural life of the community? Helena Martinho, a Portuguese pre-school teacher, uses art education and describes a street art project as an exercise of freedom and a way to build culture.

– BY: HELENA MARTINHO –

Equipped with paints, brushes, sponges, gowns, stool and ladder ... week after week we returned to the wall until the blue whale was finished, even sporting a silver piercing in its tail (a metal ring that was already on the wall).

As we were gathering our tools and preparing to leave, our elderly neighbour that had passed by slowly every day, (a calm onlooker as the work took shape), commented: "So much work... so much work... will it be worth it?... one day the wall will come down, it will all be demolished...". An interesting observation about the ephemeral nature of "street art"... He chatted with me and with the kids and finally I asked him: "What do you think? Does it look nice? Do you like to see the whale on the wall?" He said yes, he enjoyed it, it was nice and it was different. "So it was worth it!" I answered, before getting back to school with the children, with their gowns, hands and hair spattered with blue paint.

That wall had always been there, yellow and gigantic, part of a tumbledown-house. How many times did we pass by unaware, without really looking... until the day that the group saw that huge whale. The decision to paint it was taken almost immediately! Many sessions later... there she was... the blue whale that children now greet each time they pass by.

The class knew what "street art" was. The children had already seen art projects in natural spaces and in more or less decaying urban areas. In one of our lectures, which was open to families, we had presented the TOUR PARIS 13, which was considered the biggest ur-



ban art exhibit of all time, carried out on a building that was about to be demolished in Paris. More than 100 street artists, including ten Portuguese artists, painted every room within 36 apartments.

Many issues were discussed at these lectures: the location, the artist's idea, what he/she meant, the process, the materials used, and what people thought when they were unexpectedly confronted with the works on the street.

Suddenly, everyone started to imagine shapes and drawings on the walls, inspired by a gap, a hole in the

plaster, a protruding pipe...

After the Blue Whale, a very textured wall gave the idea for a Red Dragon. A hole in the plaster became a "kiwi" bird, water drainage tubes suggested an "amazed elephant" or a "face that cries". A monkey suddenly appeared hanging from the ivy that covered a wall (jungle vines, in the children's imagination). And faced with a colorless stain, a small boy immediately named it "Pale Lady".

During an expedition a little farther from school, a parrot was born. And it was so artistic that someone even suggested calling it the "Miró parrot"!



Children drew out several plans in all their art works about the photographic image from the wall or from the fence that was to be painted. After selecting the best idea, the painting itself would begin.

Lots of drawings, projects, conversations and group decisions ... lots of paint, stools and ladders carried up and down the street. The eye was now trained, constantly looking for new opportunities!

To think about the space and the environment around us, to dare to change it and to challenge the locals to join us was an experience of freedom for everyone.

Sometime later, inspired by the street artist SPIDER-TAG, we were doing a spiral with nails and wool on an old wooden door of the house where our whale "lived". A passing neighbour asked: "So, what are the children doing?". Without stopping their hammering, a very determined boy answered "A spidertag!" "A what?" asked the lady again. And then I explained that it was a kind of spider web and told her about the artist that inspired us. She liked it so much that she joined the game: "Look, do you want a spider that I have at home to put there too?" Of course the children wanted it and so the lady disappeared for a few minutes leaving everyone anxious, expecting her to return with a real spider. But it turned out to be a gray and pink rubber spider that was placed right in the middle of the spiral. It was perfect! And there it remained, endlessly weaving its web ...

And, like the Spider, our little village kindergarten weaves its "web" with people, with art ... determined to survive and to contribute to the cultural life of the community.



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Note: This project was developed in Vimeiro Kindergarten - Group of Schools and Kindergartens of D. Lourenço Vicente, in the academic year 2013/2014. The result of the Project was shown at an exhibition at Lourinhã's Public Library in May and at the "Centro de Interpretação da Batalha do Vimeiro" during June and July. These exhibitions were organized with the help of the architecture office "ESBOÇO CÚBICO" and the architect Ana Timóteo, mother of one of the pupils.