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Worlding Rio de Janeiro's favelas

Relations and representations of socio-spatial inequality in visual art

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Conclusion

The production and display of visual art can work towards inclusive social transformation as well as deepen socio-cultural divisions. In this thesis, I have tried to specify how this contradictory reality takes shape for the context of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. The thesis has shown that the meanings, values, ideas and associations attached to favelas are extensive and complex, negotiated in diverse spatial contexts by actors from highly different backgrounds. To analyze these discourses, I examined how artistic representations of favelas come into being, how they are discursively framed in different socio-spatial contexts, and how they are interpreted by non-favela audiences. I have described this process as the 'worlding' of Rio de Janeiro's favelas in visual art, focusing on how artistic favela representations travel between different geographic locations (e.g. Brazil and Europe) and representational contexts (e.g. tourism, film, television and academic writing). In turn, each chapter discussed a specific aspect of this worlding process. In this conclusion, I will present the most important discourses and tendencies that this thesis has identified, summarizing how artistic favela representations are produced, framed and interpreted.

As a different entry point into these debates, I'd like to discuss two examples of visual art practices that break with dominant structures and narratives in original and interesting ways. The first is the biennial exhibition *Travessias* – which explicitly aims to challenge the socio-spatial contexts of art display by organizing a high-end, contemporary art exhibition in the Maré favela complex (fig. 6.1). Not only does the exhibition attract audiences from different parts of the city, they also organize workshops in favelas that are not necessarily about favela spaces or only for residents (Kalkman, 2019). As such, the distinction between art *for* and art *about* favelas is effectively blurred – building on the nuanced analysis of Rio de Janeiro's geographies of inequality by organizing partner *Observatório de Favelas*. The second example is the work *Veneza/Neves* (2015), by the internationally successful Brazilian artist Paulo Nazareth. Born and raised in a favela in Belo Horizonte, Nazareth's presence in many ways disrupts the dominant race, class and geographical relations of the Brazilian and global contemporary art scene. When he was invited to participate at the 2015 Venice

Biennale, the artist famously refused to attend the exhibition himself – because he does not want to set foot in Europe before having visited all African countries. In addition, he organized a parallel exhibition in the favela called *Veneza* (Venice) in Belo Horizonte. There he exhibited the same works that were shown in European Venice, to which he accompanied a number of Brazilian and foreign art world professionals and journalists. Interestingly, unlike some of the other peripheral artists discussed in this thesis, Paulo Nazareth’s inclusion in the art world does not seem to hinge on his identity as a favela resident. His works address social, economic and racial inequality in a broad sense, usually through a conceptual and/or performative approach. Yet, while secondary accounts sometimes address his poor background, they rarely use this as the sole focal point of his work or – worse – a marker for authenticity.



Fig. 6.1. *Travessias* (2015) Galpão Bela Maré, Rio de Janeiro (photo: Simone Kalkman).

These two examples speak to the ways in which different forms of inequality inform the institutions and locations in which contemporary art is exhibited and legitimated. They illustrate the need to change the formats along which art practices in or about favelas are organized, most notably the common practice of outside artists doing ‘projects’ in favelas to be subsequently exhibited for a supposedly passive, non-favela audience. Moreover, these

examples highlight the distinction between *relations* and *representations* of inequality in the world of contemporary art, separating what might be called the artistic theme of favelas (as ‘something to be represented’) from the lack of diversity within local and global art contexts, which directly affects favela residents wanting to participate in this field. Finally, by showing that so-called high art is not only relevant to and appreciated in elite sites and debates, *Travessias* and Nazareth challenge the idea of favelas as housing only popular, urban culture – or even no culture at all. Following Bourdieu’s (1989) well-known argument, they therefore question how artistic styles and visual languages function as a form of social distinction.

As this thesis has shown, these are crucial distinctions to make because these issues are fundamentally entangled and interrelated in artistic and exhibition practices – which highlights that initiatives like these work against a deeply-ingrained, historical reality of exclusion and exoticism. The prejudice and territorial stigma attached to Rio de Janeiro’s favelas are crucial problems that lead to the omnipresent (and sometimes lethal) discrimination against favela residents. Not surprisingly, the important task of contesting these realities is frequently mentioned by artists working in or with favela spaces. However, while the negative imagery of favelas is persistent, it is not uniform or exclusive. Despite enduring stigmatization, favelas have long figured as potent symbols of Brazilian and Rio de Janeiro identity – not least because of the efforts of Brazilian and foreign artists in this regard. In addition, various projects that highlight the agency and talents of favela residents have received considerable media attention in recent years. Finally, it should be emphasized that the non-favela audiences that encounter these representations (e.g. in museums, newspapers, television programs, or online) are highly diverse, ranging from artists from Santa Teresa to affluent businessmen from Leblon, lower middle-class workers from Baixada Fluminense, and foreigners of various national and socio-economic backgrounds. When considering specific projects or practices, chapters one and three have therefore argued for the need to specify *which* and *whose* prejudices artists address, and – crucially – which alternative imaginaries they hope to replace them with.

Moreover, I have stressed the need to highlight the thought patterns that underlie these discriminatory frameworks, most notably the dichotomous distinctions between favela and *asfalto*, formal and informal urbanism, and global North and global South. Naturally, the deep-seated inequalities that lie at the basis of these dichotomies should not be overlooked. In many ways, Rio de Janeiro is divided: access to opportunities and services is usually

contingent on where you live in the city. However, the categorical distinction between favela and *asfalto* maintains the favelas' status as territories of 'Otherness,' as a separate but internally unified category (Valladares, 2005; Roy, 2011b). As chapter four has shown, current artistic engagements with favelas often build on an inversion of the dominant value judgments attached to these dichotomies. For example, European exhibition makers tend to celebrate favelas as quintessentially Brazilian, and argue that we – the global North audience – can learn from favela architecture and realities. Here we see that the (valid) ethical concerns about representing Rio de Janeiro's favelas in foreign contexts are fundamentally linked to epistemological debates around poverty, inequality and the production of urban theory. The ways in which distinctions are made between formal and informal urbanism, for example, tend to be based on histories of social, economic and racial discrimination, which are in turn closely related to the geographies of academic knowledge production (Roy, 2005; Varley, 2013). Considering these dichotomies and divisions, Jorge Luiz Barbosa says in the closing debate of *Travessias 2015*: "The larger objective of this project is to realize that the favela will be a part of the city, and [to show] that it is a space of production, of artistic and aesthetic fruition." He continues by linking this to "the right to coexistence" (*a direito à convivência*), a broader notion developed by the Observatório de Favelas:

A city cannot be constructed on the division between us and them. We must fully live the right to mobility. We will create conditions for all to have the means to circulate through different territories and resources, to feel that they belong to the city as a whole and not only to one particular social, cultural or economic location (de Souza e Silva and Sousa Silva, 2015, my translation).

In a similar vein, I have questioned the idea of 'the favela' as a social, cultural and spatial category – which ultimately serves to maintain the boundaries between different people and places in Rio de Janeiro as well as on a global scale.

To do so, a closer look at the long and complex history of these narratives and imaginaries proved crucial. Since the early twentieth century, favelas have repeatedly been depicted to praise Brazil's uniqueness, emphasizing how the country differs from Europe and North America. As chapter two has argued, the favelas' status as 'periphery of the periphery' is key to keep in mind here. Since the colonial era, Brazil has occupied a peripheral position

in the (art) world, but it has also been highly unequal in itself. Favelas are a manifestation of these different scales of inequality, and the triangular interaction between favela residents, middle- and upper-class Brazilians and foreigners complicates their representation and display. Historically, many artists that depicted favelas were deemed inferior and/or exotic by the so-called international art world, despite their status as members of the Brazilian elite. In many cases, these artists' celebrations of favelas as manifestations of Brazilian reality were provocative and challenged discriminatory, global narratives. At the same time, their work often reproduced local forms of inequality and resulted in producing the very exotic images that foreign audiences were hoping to encounter. This illustrates how the so-called global art world has long appropriated images of diverse 'Others,' without disrupting the dominant sites within which artistic value is created and legitimized. Even Paulo Nazareth's refusal to come to Venice, or his work at Art Basel Miami Beach, where he "sold his image as an exotic man," still arguably depend on the dominant institutions and discourses of the art world, particularly considering the newfound popularity or 'hype' of Brazilian art abroad (Smallenburg, 2015; see also Brandellero, 2015).

Through these historical representations, favelas have now become part of the clichéd imagery of Brazil, surrounded also by 'positive' stereotypes. We have seen that while the depiction of favelas as spaces of extreme poverty, violence, and criminality has clear and often violent consequences in favelas, merely replacing these ideas with a 'positive' narrative, focusing for example on vibrant and festive community life, can be just as harmful. This denies not only the very real problems faced by favelas, but also – as this thesis emphasized – the role and responsibility of local and global elites in maintaining inequalities. As we have seen, these conflicting accounts of Rio's favelas are firmly rooted in the city's reputation of being both 'marvelous' and 'divided.' Chapter three showed that these narratives are not separate or opposed, but rather formed simultaneously and in parallel over the last centuries. In some instances, a focus on divergent realities can effectively draw attention to urgent problems, but this dichotomous framework also serves to misrepresent or even legitimize violence in favelas (Robb Larkins, 2015). More to the point, by juxtaposing 'negative' and 'positive' narratives the difficulties of favela life are simultaneously amplified and downplayed, which has important consequences for how artistic interventions are produced, experienced and interpreted. Because of this, it is crucial not only to challenge prejudiced or generalized imaginaries of the city via aesthetic content, but also to look at what functions

these narratives perform in the production, framing and reception of exhibition practices. Returning to *Travessias*, we see for example that despite the disruption of unequal geographies in the exhibition format, this show is also affected by discriminatory imaginaries because many members of the middle- and upper-class audience are afraid to visit an exhibition in the Maré (Mello, 2015).

For many artists and scholars, an effective way to counter stereotypical discourses around favelas is showing locally-produced representations and viewpoints, highlighting how diverse elements of urban imaginaries exist side-by-side in actual favela neighborhoods. While such forms of self-representation are incredibly important, I have argued for caution in this respect – as favela realities are fragmented and highly diverse. There are vast differences in the physical and social characteristics of favela spaces both *between* and *within* Brazilian cities, which also change significantly over time. Considering this pluriformity, there exists no true, ‘authentic’ favela reality to be captured in representations (Spivak, 1986; 2010; Bhabha, 1994; Said, 2003). Moreover, too strong a focus on local realities (i.e. zooming in) fails to acknowledge how these are shaped by socio-economic inequality as a broader phenomenon that affects Brazilian society and the (art) world as a whole, albeit unevenly. In addition to zooming in on local experiences, I have therefore flagged the need to zoom out, emphasizing relationality and positionality. One way of doing so would be to emphasize that the inclusion of artists from Rio de Janeiro’s favelas tends to be highly selective and conditional, varying across different social and spatial contexts (see chapter five). To foreground this reality, Paulo Nazareth explicitly wears his identification card around his neck, because despite being an internationally successful artist, “in the eyes of the powerful I look like a criminal” (qtd. in Smallemburg, 2015, my translation). The concept of worlding, with its focus on “anthropological [...] mid-range theorizing,” has been particularly useful to draw out these contradictory structures of in- and exclusion, as it focuses on how widespread regional and global inequalities manifest themselves in messy, entangled and often-contradictory phenomena and situations (Ong, 2011, p. 9).

The arguments presented above are especially urgent considering the increased commercialization of (images of) poverty in different media, in the Brazilian context often described as ‘favela chic.’ Critiques of this phenomenon inform many scholarly accounts of artistic favela representations – and for good reason. Despite age-old attempts to distinguish fine art from kitsch or the mass media, artistic projects in favelas are not exempt from

commercialization. On the contrary, chapter four has argued that they tend to build on the same discourses of appreciation and – considering the background of producers, mediators and exhibitors – often reproduce structures and systems of economic inequality. As shown in chapter five, however, the success of many artists from favelas also benefits from this commercial potential and foreign fascination. Accordingly, many peripheral artists navigate these conditions in a pragmatic manner, and not only out of financial necessity. As stressed in a variety of interviews, both commercial and non-profit actors (e.g. museums, NGOs) can be hypocritical, selfish and dishonest in collaborations – which makes these artists question the autonomy and altruism of both art institutions and social work. For the artists I spoke with, values such as reciprocity, trustworthiness and mutual respect matter more in collaborations than commercial gain (for either partner) in and of itself. This resonates with more pragmatic accounts of complicity. As Ziemer (2016, p. 8) writes:

In current fragile, particularly creative working environments, one has – in changing constellations, with people from different cultures, as well as under time pressure and shortage of money – to invent and carry out many projects; to produce publics; and to generate as much possible discursive acceptance in the respective sense.

In Rio de Janeiro's postcolonial society, such forms of 'labour precarity,' work both with and against older forms of inequality and discrimination – which raises a number of particular difficulties, (ethical) dilemmas, but also opportunities for peripheral artists.

Importantly, similar sentiments were expressed considering various forms of collaboration across socio-economic inequalities, for example referring to foreign artists. During my fieldwork, conversations with favela residents brought to the fore a number of fundamental points to consider for artists and academics working in or with favela spaces. Most importantly, residents emphasize that the community in question should be the starting point – not the artist's signature style or his/her desire to do good. Local needs, expertise and networks should be acknowledged and strengthened rather than bypassed or ignored. First and foremost, this means doing research: finding out what might help a community by speaking to residents and/or reading scholarly accounts. Some of Rio de Janeiro's favelas may now be considered over-researched places, particularly those located in the Zona Sul (e.g. Vidigal, Rocinha, Cantagalo, Pavão-Pavãozinho, and Santa Marta) and a few areas in the

Zona Norte (mainly Vila Cruzeiro, Vigário Geral, and parts of Complexo do Alemão and the Maré). This firstly means that a wealth of scholarly publications about these neighborhoods is readily available to artists and researchers in both Portuguese and English. At the same time, it has led to research fatigue, and some residents occupy a highly critical attitude towards foreign visitors (and validly so). Finally, considering the large amount of favelas (for example in Baixada Fluminense or Niteroi) that have not attracted artistic and/or research projects, it means that we can distinguish a center-periphery relations even within Rio de Janeiro's periphery – highlighting once again the multiple scales of inequality at play here. To summarize, the amount of scholarly and artistic projects conducted in favelas calls for cautiousness and a critical assessment of what a particular project really adds. As outsiders, artists and scholars (including myself) need to be realistic and humble if what we have to offer is of little significance for the people we work with. Unfortunately, too often the personal desire and the external requirement of real-world 'relevance' leads to overstating a single project's radicality and uniqueness, which, as argued above, both exaggerates and downplays the problems faced by favela neighborhoods and the role of art in this respect.

With this in mind, chapter five argued for revising how we conceptualize change or transformation through artistic practice, from individual achievements to more gradual and collaborative steps towards greater inclusion, in which a "multitude" of people and practices "start to act collectively and in shared projects and collaborative actions" (Bentes, 2011, p. 9). Building on a range of authors studying artistic representations of inequality, I have argued that it is not so much about "getting the empirical story right," although nuanced and diverse representations of favelas certainly do matter (Roy, 2015, p. 8). Rather, we should critically address the positionality of different actors involved in the 'extended field' of artistic favela representations, and the affordances and limitations offered by these diverse positions. Crucially, my increasing focus on this argument implied coming to terms with my own complicity within this unequal field of producing and consuming favela images. In response, I turned my lens from favelas as physical spaces to how we – the foreign audience – look at and think about these territories in artistic spaces and debates. Following Hal Foster's (1996, p. 203) seminal text, my primary goal has therefore been to "frame the framer as he or she frames the other." In doing so, I hope to have countered the idea of 'the favela' as a category – showing instead that favelas are 'worlding nodes,' connected and contributing in myriad ways to the city of Rio de Janeiro as well as the world at large.