Reclaiming Medellin's esquinas through art and memory

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Abstract

This contribution aims to analyze the role of art in the recuperation of public space in some peripheral neighborhoods of Medellin, commonly referred to as ‘comunas’. Despite a significant improvement in security conditions in the second-largest city in Colombia, several of these neighborhoods remain under the control of armed groups, a legacy, in part, of the paramilitary structures that profoundly affected Medellin in the nineties and early 2000s. Referred to as ‘combos’ or ‘bandas’, these groups continue to wield considerable social and economic control of their territories through a combination of extortion, forced displacement and targeted homicides, traumatizing inhabitants and hampering their access to public space. This paper suggests that certain memorial practices that have emerged from the violence plaguing these neighborhoods, such as the creation of murals, spontaneous establishment of shrines, or organization of commemorative ceremonies, contribute to the recuperation of public spaces. Increasingly, various actors around Medellin, conceived here as ‘memorial entrepreneurs’, advocate for the [...]
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This paper suggests that certain memorial practices that have emerged from the violence plaguing these neighborhoods, such as the creation of murals, spontaneous establishment of shrines, or organization of commemorative ceremonies, contribute to the recuperation of public spaces. Increasingly, various actors around Medellin, conceived here as ‘memorial entrepreneurs’, advocate for the reclamation of the ‘esquinas’ (literally, the ‘corners’) through the expression of this memory. Focusing on urban art and performance, the objective of this contribution is to present case studies that demonstrate the way in which the work of these actors impacts the larger city, reshaping its fabric through material actions, as well as through the production of knowledge on these often unknown and stigmatized territories, and by the consolidation of relationships between its habitants. Memory and art are thus considered here as ‘resources’ through which residents exercise their right to the city.