

## **Street Art and COVID-19 on Social Media: Analysis of Eduardo Kobra's Works Created During (and About the) 2020 Pandemic**

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**Abstract:** Several well-known Brazilian Street artists have been creating works of great sensitivity and meaning in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. They often publish online photos of the process and of the final version on Instagram and or Facebook, as well as in other digital platforms. We choose Eduardo Kobra as our case study, since he is a world-renowned artist, whose works are present in several Brazilian states and in different countries, and have been a constant and regular presence on social media. Therefore, our work aims at analyzing Kobra's posts on Instagram and Facebook in order to identify works of art directly influenced by the pandemic context, as well as to analyze the way he has been expressing himself in this period in a verbal and iconographic way. We use the netnography method (Kozinets). We were able to observe digital appropriations in some posts, which can affect processes of resignification of the work, as well as influence the artistic production, with the emergence of a possible dialectical relationship.

**Keywords:** Street art, social media, Eduardo Kobra

### **Introduction**

COVID-19 is an ongoing worldwide pandemic, which affects many aspects of daily lives, including restrictions of circulation on public spaces and increase of digital access to cultural assets. In this context, although Street artists are still creating many works of art on walls and buildings around the world, they intensified their presence on social media. Several well-known Brazilian Street artists have been creating works of great sensitivity and meaning in the pandemic context. They often publish online photos of their artistic process as well as the final version on Instagram and or on Facebook as well as in other digital platforms. Another issue emerging from this digital process of using social networks to publicize their works of art lies in the power to enhance financial collection initiatives, as it makes them better known to broader audiences.

In this paper, we discuss one specific artist and his social media presence: Eduardo Kobra. We choose him as our case study, since he is a world-

renowned artist, whose works are present in several Brazilian states and different countries, and have been a constant and regular presence on social media. Kobra's works have also been analyzed in academic papers (Moro & Silveira, 2014; Gomes *et al.*, 2019; Verdiani *et al.*, 2020).

Our work aims at analyzing Kobra's posts on Instagram and Facebook in order to identify works of art directly influenced by the pandemic context, as well as to analyze the way he has been expressing himself in this period in a verbal and iconographic way. We use the netnography method Kozinets (2014).

His Instagram profile (@kobrastreetart) has over 1 (one) million followers. Kobra has two official Facebook profiles. Both present his work of art during pandemic and almost have the same content. We choose the one which has more followers. His Facebook profile (@kobrastreetart) had 387 (three hundred and eighty seven) thousand followers on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2021.

We followed posts on both official FB pages of Eduardo Kobra, from the second semester of 2019 until February 2021. We observed images and comments on both social media, with special attention to works of art contextualization in the pandemic, considering new and previous works. We discuss some posts that we divided into three overlapping phases that could be characterized as mobilization and hope; defense of vaccines and helping the health system. Before presenting the data analysis, we start with some conceptual and methodological discussions.

### Methodology

The authors Verdiani *et al.* (2020) contextualize the fact that Street art is increasingly present in the processes of urban revitalization, bringing significant impacts not only linked to urbanism. The relationships that are established in these spaces are also re-signified by the viewer that contemplates and moves through and between these spaces. Thus, if we observe the profusion of Street art works presented in many parts of the world, we can incur the mistaken belief that it is a trend of the last decade. However, Street art dates from 1970s (Verdiani *et al.*, 2020), emerging in New York, as a branch of Pop Art and Graffiti Writing, with an emphasis on the development of artistic demonstrations that sought to highlight social problems.

Verdiani *et al.* (2020) also emphasize that, in the year 2000, artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring were able to bring Street art to the galleries, as well as to official events. This movement brought significant collaborative actions by artists with world institutions in order to requalify degraded urban areas, draw attention to neglected neighborhoods and contribute to the revitalization of areas, which also contributed to discourage illegal and clandestine activities. In this perspective, Gomes, Obara and Avila (2019) highlight potentially significant elements of Street art, such as its possibility of bringing cultural and socio-political manifestations to a portion of the population. It is an activist art that brings up reflections related to cities, exposes social problems, and can have power to transform old places, isolated and deprived of their former use, into extraordinary public spaces.

Reifschneider (2015) considers that when drawing attention to colors and techniques, such works have the effect of attracting the viewer's eye, who is invited to perceive further. Such a process brings transformation effects, dealienation of the viewer, as they call their attention to significant contemporary issues, as well as to the appropriation of urban space and its possibilities. He stresses that such tension can open up possibilities in the field of sensitivities, helping to promote these urban spaces, in the process of their re-signification, as well as in the recognition and revision of laws that limit the appropriation of public areas. It is also worth mentioning that, for Gomes, Obara and Avila (2019), since Street art is created in the urban environment, it has direct contact with the public on the streets, encompassing different types of art that can also be expressed in the public environment: interventions, performances, graffiti, living statues and installations.

The interaction with the public is a significant point of reflection raised by these artistic processes. For Reifschneider (2015), there are works that by their very nature allow a direct interaction with the viewer, including the way they allow him to exercise strategic choices, coming from different sensory experiences. When citing Bourriaud (2009), he points out the importance given to the collective elaboration of the meaning of the work, in which viewers play the role of participant-observers, collaborating for its realization. Thus, from this disruptive perspective, art becomes the very process of its making. Thus, Street art increasingly incorporates this transgressive spirit, generating productions that, many times, escape classification.

We must also consider the increasing relevance of Street art and its growing and significant importance for cities. Gomes *et al.* (2019) emphasize the aspect that Street art not only improves the urban landscape but also impacts tourism, making unknown or even forgotten parts significant tourist spots, which attract visitors and improve local economy. Nowadays, there are many challenges and an imminence of social, economic and cultural problems and challenges to cities. Among the most distressing problems of the first half of this century is the incidence of the pandemic caused by the virus COVID-19, of which we still do not have a complete overview of how many socio-cultural-economic impacts will be left around the world. For now, what we have is a worldwide effort to eradicate the virus. And in this global mobilization, many

artists are engaged in actions as well as producing works contextualized in different aspects of this tragic period. However, the artist chosen for this study, Eduardo Kobra, produced different works and different themes last year, mostly sought to lead the public to reflect and act to help in some way, especially concerning the most vulnerable populations.

Kobra's works of art have in their core a concern on leaving a message, on awakening reflections from the viewers who have contact with them. Moro and Silveira (2014) compare Kobra's art to those songs heard randomly on the radio, as you can be surprised by realistic images, with a strong emotional and nostalgic charge when turning a corner. Such images would have in their potential the possibility of bringing up cultural, social and aesthetic relations, which, when observed more closely, bring the perspective that the artist has a keen eye on technique and the on the way of representing.

The artist's own appropriation of his official social networks, on Facebook and Instagram, corroborates that these works occupy the streets and places for which they are developed, as well as are part of the life and imagination of all those who interacted with them through social networks. Kobra's digital presence considerably expands the impact and dissemination of these works, especially with regard to the sharing of posts through social participation of the viewers that interact on the artist's social networks.

When someone shared through posts, these selected works had different perspectives and appropriations made by the public on social networks, so Kobra's works have been re-signified. Thus, it is possible to advance our look at what these posts can also re-signify as memories, both for those who re-shared them through posts, and for those who came into contact with the works, posted on the profiles of the people who elected them as meaningful to share on their personal profiles. Social networks become present, develop and re-signify themselves, over the years, through their countless possibilities of sharing and social participation. The power of sharing posts, and, therefore, information and images, lies in the potential for social participation.

Thus, as we move towards the field of social memory, we question how significant Kobra's works

are, in particular those selected for this article. It is clear that their relevance, in addition to their artistic and aesthetic value, lies in their relations with the memories of a given time, i.e. the way in which they are directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that is still present and traumatic, which has numerous subjective crossings related to all of humanity.

Concerning social memory, Halbwachs (2006) emphasizes the fact that memory is a habit, which has been incorporated throughout our lives, which is in us and seems to be inscribed in our own body. In this way, he emphasizes the importance of collective memory and underground memories, and the extent to which both are intertwined in their processes of formation and re-signification. From this conception, there arises the need to be a testimony to a fact and for that fact to become a memory for a group. Thus, such testimony serves to reinforce or to weaken, as well as to complete what we know of an event about which we have already had some information. It will become clearer throughout our text that Kobra's works have in themselves a dimension of testimony.

Halbwachs (2006) also brings us another significant element: the selectivity of all memory. This concept implies that there is a precedent negotiation process, in which there is a compromise between collective memories and individual memories. From this perspective, for the memory to benefit from a testimony, it is essential that this individual testimonial memory have connection and contact points with the collective memories. So, testimonial memory needs to be perceived as well as recognized, to a certain extent, so that there is an adjacent re-signifying process, that is, the memory brought via testimonies can be reconstructed having a common basis.

The artist, Kobra's, works analyzed in this article, become collective to some extent when they start to be re-signified by those who come into contact with them, those who feel connected to these experiences and interact on social networks. This synergy, verified by the empathic reactions of some people who have contact with them through posts on Facebook and Instagram, implies possible reverberations in particular when being shared with other groups and promoting social interaction. In this way, there is a process of memory resignification that was, previously, of an individual nature, becoming collective memory insofar as it is

appropriated by the public, or even, it can also be re-signified by others who have contact with this mnemonic material in an indirect way.

Thus, from these conceptions related to the field of social memory, we will discuss some selected works of Kobra. We can see in the selected works the dynamic, dialectical and bonding role of memories linked to a certain event, which, in this case, can be classified as a traumatic and tragic event at global levels. Regarding the memory of traumatic events, Candau (2019) addresses the fact that the memory of tragedies belongs to the subjective territory of the events, which contribute to the definition of what will become memorable. From this perspective, the author reinforces that there is an interpretation, a reading of the history of tragedies linked to the memory of suffering, to memories that are processed as painful, the fruits of misfortunes. Those traits linked to the memories are shared for a long time by those who have suffered such misfortunes, as well as by those who have had friends and relatives who have suffered. Such perspectives of suffering, deeply rooted in memory, leave very significant traits in personalities and, consequently, in the subjectivity of people and groups that have experienced such tragedies.

Therefore, dealing with the suffering resulting from the tragedy, caused by the possible trauma resulting from the countless deaths due to COVID-19 virus, is a great and universal challenge. In the Brazilian context, with the growing and vertiginous increase number of deaths in the first half of 2021, the challenges of re-signifying how much of a traumatic and tragic pandemic are related to the memories of Brazilians are still a territory subjective to discover and re-signify now and in the future. However, the works selected here help us like a precious support to reflect on the implications that the pandemic period has brought as challenges to the lives of all Brazilians, as well as to all populations on the planet.

The study of Kobra's works and posts related to the pandemic followed the netnography method according to Kozinets (2014). Therefore, we followed five main steps, as proposed by Kozinets (2014, p.63): (i) definition of main questions, social media and topics to be researched (Street art and most popular social media in pandemic times); (ii) selection and identification of the community (Eduardo Kobra's Instagram and Facebook virtual communities); (iii) participative observation and

data gathering, aiming to obtain an intensive cultural understanding of the things happening in this topic; (iv) analysis and interpretation of the data obtained (messages and posts should be read, interpreted and analyzed); (v) presentation of main results.

The data survey was carried out along the official social networks of Eduardo Kobra: Facebook, in Eduardo Kobra (2021b) and Instagram, in Eduardo Kobra. (2021a). It included the initial tracking of those posts that were directly related to the theme of COVID-19. From the posts found in the tracking, a number of works were identified. Thus, observing their patterns, we later decided to limit them into three different groups: a) mobilization and hope; b) defense of vaccines and c) helping the health system. The digital netnographic tracking was carried out until March 3, 2021, being complemented by contextual analyses, which also took into account the socio-cultural-economic aspects prevailing in the period, both in Brazil and worldwide. In this article, we analyze the contextual aspects and the repercussions linked to the different posts. Other significant variables are the number of likes and shares that these posts received. When we analyze these numbers, it is possible to have an idea of how much they subjectively impact groups of people, who are somehow attracted by the content of these publications.

## Results and Discussion

Eduardo Kobra is a Brazilian artist from São Paulo. He has several works in the city of São Paulo, some included the folder of the Thematic Tour Guide on Street art in the same city, visible in *Viva São Paulo* (2020). This folder presents different artistic manifestations of Street art throughout the city, bringing significant data regarding the artists who authored the works. Kobra was born in 1976. Since he was 12 years old, he has been involved with urban art, having gone through different phases in his career. Currently, he is a renowned artist, a reference of Street art, internationally recognized. Kobra's peculiar feature is the option for works on gigantic scales, carried out in public spaces, such as walls, building walls and other places that have high visibility for passers-by who walk the streets. At any scale, it is notorious in his works a unique visual identity, developed by the choice of photorealism combined with colors and the use of circles, triangles and or squares, which are superimposed in shapes



that resemble the colored drawings that appear in kaleidoscopes.

As previously mentioned, Kobra uses his social networks to publicize and promote his artwork. In addition to the time frame of publication, our research also considered the date of creation of the work, that is, only posts containing works produced during the pandemic were part of the analyzed data. Regarding Kobra's selected posts, we consider the likes and shares related to the works of our three analysis groups: a) mobilization and hope; b) defense of vaccines and c) helping the health system. In the first group - mobilization and hope - the works *Coexistence* and *Ester* stand out, both works, respectively, have a significant role related to the pandemic.

One of its first and most impactful works, produced during the first months of COVID-19 pandemic, is called *Coexistence*. Several posts promoted it (fig.1), with positive messages as "faith" or even as a means of boosting its profile, asking for new followers, as in this post or a post allusive to Child's day. In April, as message of hope, we reproduce here a part of his post: "We will overcome this together, but apart. Or apart, hence together."

This work was also used in a social campaign, as promoted in a post of April 2020: "We have created The Art of Helping initiative to distribute kits with food and hygiene products to people living on the street." Besides helping people living on streets, this campaign also helped refugees, who prepared the kits: As Kobra posted: "And this material will be made by refugee families - this means we will be collaborating with these two groups."

As explained in his posts, the beautiful girl presented in this work (fig. 2), named *Ester*, represents hope again. As explained in his post of August 2020: "The daughter of a friend of mine, little Ester, only 5 years old, is a survivor of the COVID-19. She and her mother are among the more than 3 million Brazilians who contracted the disease. Fortunately, they survived and are doing well. However, there have already been more than 100,000 of fellow Brazilians who were not so lucky - and their families are mourning these difficult pandemic times. It is for these family members that I painted the little girl Ester, in prayer. And, mainly, so that we do not become indifferent to so many deaths. Let's take care of ourselves because the

situation is serious." Unfortunately, our situation nowadays is even worse concerning deaths due to COVID-19 reported daily.

Five months later, in January 2021, this beautiful work was posted again. And again, his message claims for our action: "The little girl portrayed here, Esther, is one of many survivors. She is praying for those who are gone, for those who have suffered, and for us to overcome the difficulties of the moment. Everyone is responsible. Until the vaccine comes, we will take care of ourselves, because this is the only way to stop the transmission of the virus."

And so, vaccines are one subject that Eduardo Kobra is really concerned about. He is one of the many Brazilian voices defending science and advocating pro vaccines. Therefore, Kobra created some works of art concerning COVID-19 vaccines, which we classified in the second group: defense of vaccines. We selected two works directly related to the development of vaccines for COVID-19 (fig. 3). These works present vaccine glasses, one of them having an image of a dove materializing from the vaccine liquid itself, representing hope.

In another similar work, the same vaccine glass, in the same scenario, opened, is filled with various types of butterflies, all represented by the flags of countries from different parts of the world. There is a detail related to this work made by Kobra, which is the fact that the butterfly that has the Brazilian flag represented on its wings is neither inside the vaccine glass nor flying over, in an attempt to be part of the content of the represented glass at work. The butterfly represented with the Brazilian flag is next to the glass, the only one that is perched and facing away from the glass. There is a hypothesis that such work, of butterflies and vaccine glass, possibly alludes to the various problems faced in Brazil regarding the denial of the pandemic, recurring difficulties related to public health policies and the little interest of the Federal Government in the acquisition of early, rapid and effective vaccination for the entire population in Brazil. Such a question is quite visible in the creation of this work by Kobra, bringing to light one of the great characteristics of Street art, which consists of its strong socio-political position, coupled with the concern to denounce facts, as well as to call attention to reflections on subjects and issues that have a strong impact on culture and society.

Kobra created these two wonderful works of art in the first semester of 2020. Both represent our hope that soon this pandemic will be eradicated due to vaccines. In August, Kobra posted: "While I was working on these images, about 150 teams of scientists from around the world were in their laboratories looking for a solution for this cruel pandemic." At that moment, we were all waiting for a vaccine, and Kobra beautifully captured in images and in words that "The hopes, therefore, for the planet to breathe free again, lie in scientific development. May this vaccine come soon and be a breath of peace on Earth."

In February 2021, Kobra celebrated science in his post, remembering that "The two institutions responsible for our national production celebrate 120 years of history precisely in the midst of this difficult pandemic moment: Fiocruz celebrated its anniversary in May last year and the Butantan Institute celebrates it next Tuesday." Kobra, then, announced: "I will gift both with these works that I did some months ago. The message is only one: in the vaccine lays our hope. I pay my tribute and express my gratitude for the work of the scientists and all the employees of Instituto Butantan and Fiocruz." Thus, Kobra used these two works in order to honor two public institutes that are the main reference to COVID-19 vaccines: Butantan and Fiocruz. And it was all over social and traditional media.

Another remarkable work was created using an oxygen cylinder (fig. 4), and is presented in the last group of posts - helping the health system. This work is an allusion to the critical period in January 2021 when people died in the city of Manaus without appropriate assistance, as the result of lack of oxygen in hospitals and health units. All posts related to this work relate to a campaign, an auction of an oxygen tube, painted by him, to raise funds to develop an oxygen plant for the Brazilian city of Manaus. These posts are completely different from the others, because they involve direct details about the auction and do not show so many details of the work.

We already mentioned other posts and initiatives that show Kobra's activism and protagonism during the pandemic period. Yet, this is a work of art that from the beginning is designed to raise money for public hospitals, mainly in the North region of Brazil. At the same time that it draws attention to the serious health crisis in our

country, it also draws attention to the environmental problem in the Amazon, which has alarming rates of forest fires, especially in 2020.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is still a huge challenge present in 2021, as we write this work. New waves of contamination and new variants of the virus are causing concern at the same time that, although vaccines already exist, their rapid, effective and equitable distribution in the world is not yet a reality. For this reason, the works chosen for this paper are still very much in dialogue with the present time.

If we consider the context of Kobra's works analyzed in this paper, in which the pandemic theme is the central point that links them, the fact that a large number of profiles on Facebook share the works shows how much they are re-signified by different people. It also shows how much can be reinvented from each new post originated by shares. In this process, there is an increase in the form of social participation on the part of these users who start to digitally appropriate these works when posting them on their profiles. However, it is also possible to glimpse co-creative aspects, as users who re-share such posts can insert impressions and comments when making their posts on their personal Facebook profiles.

Regarding the analysis of the posts on Instagram, they are similar to those carried out on the artist's Facebook. On Instagram posts, there are the same photos of the works analyzed here and similar post texts. However, it is valid and quite interesting to use more than one social network to make these artistic works visible, in the form of sharing their initiatives and disseminating the digital actions linked to the process that covers the development of these works. There are many social network users who have migrated to Instagram or even prefer to centralize their posts and interactions on that social network, which have become increasingly popular. Therefore, for an internationally recognized Brazilian Street artist, like Eduardo Kobra, the more possibilities of sharing his work with different groups of people on social networks, the more new opportunities for interaction, social participation and, even, co-creation.

There are subjective aspects in the works analyzed in this research, which express opinions, thoughts and feelings of the artist in relation to the pandemic. We were able to observe digital appropriations in some posts, which can affect processes of resignification of the work, as well as influence artistic production, with the emergence of a possible dialectical relationship. When we started our research, it seemed that choosing one year and one artist would make our task easier to present in these few minutes. However, we had to choose just some of the many works to present and also to discuss just some of our findings.

Kobra's works have in themselves a dimension of testimony, in the sense of Halbwachs (2006). Of the analyzed works, *Ester* brings a story of a survivor child from COVID-19. Hopefulness immortalized the vaccine glasses in two works that the artist donated to Butantan Institute and Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ). Both represent the desire for the success of vaccines and the achievement of mass vaccination. *To breath* was created using an oxygen tube, which by itself is a symbol. It has in its own meaning the struggle for life, to breathe and overcome the disease, to be able to recover. The oxygen tube is full of meaning, especially due to Manaus, a Brazilian city where many patients of COVID-19 died because they lacked oxygen in January 2021. This work is a sign and a symbol used to promote an awareness-raising campaign carried out by the artist himself, who held an auction for the construction of an oxygen plant in Manaus.

Finally, there are subjective aspects in the works analyzed in this research, which express opinions, thoughts and feelings of the artist in relation to the pandemic. We were able to observe digital appropriations in some posts, which can affect processes of resignification of the work, as well as influence artistic production, with the emergence of a possible dialectical relationship. Several other analyses and discussions remain as future works.

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## Figures



Figure 1 - Coexistence work of art presented on Facebook posts.

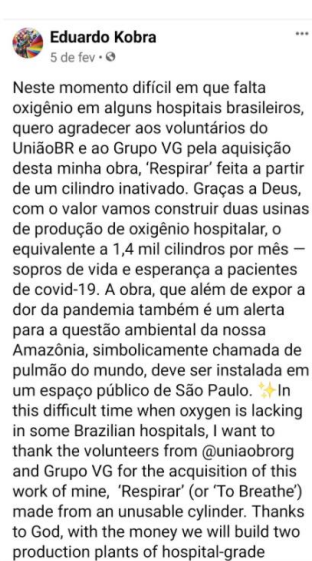
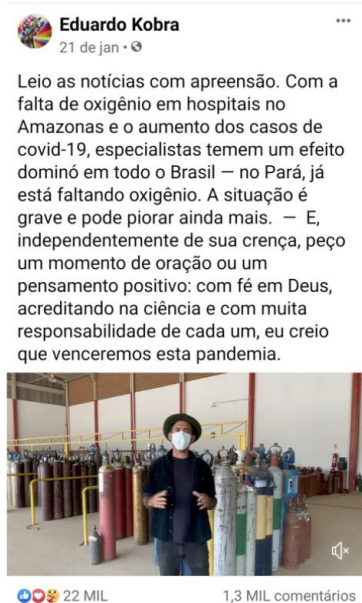


Figure 2 - Ester work of art presented on Facebook posts





Figure 3 - Hopefulness works of art presented on Facebook posts



to the environmental issue of our Amazon, symbolically called the lung of the world. It will be installed in a public space in São Paulo, Brazil. Video AlexandreCuryitu



10 MIL 639 comentários • 61 MIL visualizações

Figure 4 - "To Breath" work of art presented on Facebook posts