Metatheoretical considerations for a definition of street art: Can algorithms identify street art?

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Abstract
What is street art, exactly? In this paper, I address a fundamental concern about street art: its definition. The subject has been widely debated, but I approach it from a novel perspective: metatheoretical. I'm particularly interested in deconstructing the potential functions of a definition of street art, as well as the goal of definitions of street art. I then survey the literature from this vantage point, providing a well-reasoned summary of some current alternatives. I conclude by wondering if any of these definitions could be turned into an algorithm. I believe in a moderate level of optimism. Though algorithms can identify street art under certain conditions, they appear nonetheless incapable of capturing types of definitions such as evaluative definitions that include predicates whose application conditions are highly discretionary and contextually sensitive.

Keywords: street art, definition, algorithm, value of art, ephemerality, subversiveness

1. Introduction

Can we provide an algorithm that could identify street art? I call this the *algorithm question*. This is a tricky problem. Before even considering algorithmic reduction, or the process of formalising a definition, the manner in which we should correctly characterise street art raises serious concerns. Defining something, in effect, is usually a contentious endeavour. It has always been so: Plato's dialogues were attempts to answer questions of the form "What is *X*?" and revealed the fundamental difficulties of arriving at non-controversial definitions early in the history of Western thought. And dealing with the demarcation of street art is no exception. There are significant disagreements among theorists regarding the proper classification of street art (Bacharach, 2015; Baldini, 2022; Riggle, 2010). Divergences are frequently more than just accepting different conditions and criteria as necessary for defining an artwork as an example of street art. Many people have expressed scepticism about the possibility of defining this art kind (Bengtsen, 2014; Blanché, 2015; Danysz, 2010). It is unclear how we can answer the algorithm question when there is deep disagreement about the definition itself.

Rather than directly addressing the algorithm question, I recommend a different approach. I propose using philosophical jujitsu to investigate a second-order question about the definition of street art. In this paper, therefore, I wish to address a meta-theoretical or second-order concern about a definition of street art, namely, "What is a definition of street art?" This question has been largely ignored in the literature on street art, but I am convinced that it holds the key to a more rational approach to the algorithm question, while also shedding much light on the demarcation debates in general. I wish to make clear that there are different kinds of definitions that may very serve different functions while pursuing different goals. The proliferation of definitions of street art, in this sense, is benign, and merely signals the plurality of (possible) approaches to this ever-expanding and evolving practice(s). Recognizing this, in turn, can help researchers deal with street art more consciously, rigorously, and systematically, whether or not they are interested in algorithmic reduction.

I will argue that algorithmic reduction is possible with certain types of definition, that is, we can have algorithms

that can identify street art under certain constraints. This scenario justifies a moderate optimism about algorithmic definitions. However, as we shall see, there appears to be types of definition of street that cannot be reduced to algorithms: these definitions, such as evaluative definitions, which characterise the identity of works of street art in terms of a specific value that they realise, cannot be expressed in terms of unambiguous and determinate processes. The application of this kind of definitions requires interpretative judgments that are highly discretional and contextually situated, and cannot be effectively captured by formalized rules. In section 2, I discuss dominant trends in the literature on the definition of street art and make some meta-theoretical observations to explain why a variety of accounts should be accepted. In section 3, I use the second order clarifications to argue that certain definitions of street art can be expressed using an algorithm. Section 4 demonstrates the limitations of algorithmic reduction and proposes that some definitions, like evaluative definitions, cannot be captured in determinate and mechanical terms.

2. Definitions of street art and demarcation scepticism

When we consider the algorithm question, there is a natural doubt that arises. What are the candidates for a street art definition that we could consider reducing to or expressing as an algorithm? There is a wide range of more or less suitable candidates that can be found in the literature on street art . Philosophers have made significant contributions to the definition of street art, acting as demarcation optimists, or theorists who believe in the possibility of defining street art. These theorists have proposed various (types of) definitions that, according to them, capture the essence of street art, or at least a salient aspect of its identity.

Riggle (2010), for example, has offered an influential characterization of street art. He claims that a work of art is "street art if and only if its material use of the street is internal to its meaning" (p.246). Riggle's view is criticised by Bacharach (2015), who believes that Riggle's account ignores two fundamental aspects of street art, which she expresses as two necessary conditions: (1) any work of street art is installed aconsensually, that is, without the authorization of the property owner; and, (2) any work of street art is an act of defiant activism. Baldini (2022) presents a definition of street art that also emphasises its political undertone: he believes that street art is essentially subversive insofar as it defies conventional assumptions about acceptable uses of public places.

Prominent street art theorists from other disciplines have proposed accounts of street art that appear to be sceptical. There are at least two types of sceptics when it comes to the definition of street art: radical sceptics and moderate sceptics. Danysz (2010) exemplifies radical scepticism about street art definitions: "Street Art is in motion and the simple act of giving it a name, of reducing it to a word or an expression is problematic. Style Writing, Graffiti, Subway, Art, Stencil Art, Street Art . . . How is anyone supposed to define the most important artistic movement of our brand new century?" (p. 12). The very possibility of defining street art is denied by radical sceptics. Street art, in their opinion, cannot be defined because it is constantly changing. Moderate sceptics also highlight street art's constant evolution (Bengtsen, 2014; Blanché, 2015; Young, 2014). They allow for provisional or piecemeal definitions of street art while rejecting the possibility of a conclusive definition.

For example, Bengtsen (2017) claims that street art refers to "expressions in urban public space (including privately owned, but publicly accessible, space) that are of an unsanctioned, open and ephemeral nature," while acknowledging that "its [street art's] meaning will never be settled once and for all" (p. 104). Similarly, Blanché (2015) proposes a working definition of street art as "self-authorized pictures, characters, and forms created in or applied to surfaces in the urban space that intentionally seek communication with a larger circle of people" (p. 33).

A few meta-theoretical considerations can help us shed light on the debate while clarifying some key aspects of a street art definition. Danysz's radical pessimism, like any other similar perspectives on the definition of street art, is deeply problematic and likely contradictory. Danysz has curated several street art exhibitions and written books about the subject. Though she never expresses a formulaic definition of that art kind, her work shows us a collection of exemplary cases of what she considers to be works of street art. In this regard, she provides a genuine *ostensive defini*

tion of street art (Gupta & Mackereth, 2023). An ostensive definition proceeds by simply showing what is intended, as one might ostensibly define a specific shade of white or a camel by displaying an example. Not all definitions are linguistically formed, nor do they have to be. On the contrary, most definitions are given by pointing to something. Rather than avoiding definitions, Danysz provides us with one: she prefers certain artworks over others, though she does not explain why.

When it comes to moderate sceptics, I believe their concerns are exaggerated, and their meta-theoretical position is easily reconcilable with that of optimists. These sceptics appear to be influenced by Weitz's (1956) popular viewpoint, as when Bengtsen (2017) claims that "the term 'street art' is much like the term 'art'" (p. 104). The essentially open nature of art, according to Weitz, gives us reason to be sceptical about the possibility of defining art at all. Artists' creativity allows them to bend the extension of art in unexpected and unforeseeable directions. No matter how we define art, new art can be created that contradicts the definition. The concept of 'art', in effect, has application conditions that are always amendable. As a result, any attempt to finally capture its essence, according to Weitz, is doomed to fail.

As Margolis (1958) firstly pointed out, Weitz's position is problematic at several levels. In effect, changes in what counts as a given practice do not mean the practice cannot be defined. This general point applies to street art just as it does to other human practices such as religion or language. Though, one has to highlight, moderate sceptics are less restrictive on this issue. Moreover, provisional definitions of certain concepts occur in most – if not all – domains. In this sense, the term 'art' – or 'street art', for what counts – is not different from the biological notion of 'mammal', which has underwent revisions and adjustments in response to the discovery of uncanny specimen such as the platypus and the echidna. With very few exceptions – perhaps in highly formal domains such as mathematics – definitions are *always* provisional.

Here is the insight we can draw from what has gone before: Definitions are generalised identities that guide how a term is used. Because both the human and natural worlds are not only complex, but also in flux, it is to be expected that a term referring to some particular(s) may be defined in a variety of non-reducible ways.

Furthermore, definitions can serve a variety of functions: they are not limited to one type, and their general character varies according to function. Some may be interested in extensional adequacy, which aims to accommodate all or most of the things that we intuitively recognise as belonging to a particular concept. These definitions are also known as classificatory. Others may be interested in understanding why people value doing something. These are known as evaluative definitions. As previously stated, definitions, for example, do not need to be formulated linguistically, nor do they need to present a set of necessary conditions that are jointly sufficient, as in the case of so-called real definitions. Once this meta-theoretical point about definitions is acknowledged, the positions of optimists and moderate sceptics can be easily reconciled. In the following section, I bring this meta-theoretical discussions to illuminate the algorithm question.

3. On the nature of algorithmic definitions

The second-order reflections on the nature of definitions (of street art) that I developed in section 2 are crucial for illuminating the algorithm question, as anticipated. It is clear at this point that there is no singularly valid definition of street art. And this claim should be interpreted in two ways: first, because of the complexity of this artistic practice and its evolving nature, different interpretations of its nature may coexist as equally plausible, just like Bengtsen (2017) and Blanché (2015) correctly point out. Furthermore, street art can and often is defined through various types of definitions: some definitions may be classificatory, others evaluative, and they may be linguistically formulated or ostensive.

So, rather than asking whether we can provide an algorithm to identify street art, a better question is: what types of definitions of street art can be reduced to an algorithm? To answer this question, let me first define an algorithm and sketch out how a definition of street art that could be expressed through an algorithm should look like. Then I'll suggest that at least some proposed definitions of street art

can be reduced to an algorithm.

Algorithms have been around for thousands of years, possibly dating back to the time of ancient Babylon, despite becoming very popular after the computer revolution in the twentieth century (Louridas, 2020, p. 5). Simply put, an algorithm is a finite set of unambiguous instructions that specifies successive steps to solve a problem or perform a task (Fant, 2007, p. 7). These instructions can be mechanically executed, and thus algorithms can be implemented on computers, resulting in the ever-expanding arrays of digital tools and programmes that we use on a daily basis, ranging from the editor where I am typing these words to the router that provides internet access to my laptop. To put it more formally: (i) an algorithm must be a step-by-step action sequence; (i) each procedure must be unambiguously specified; (iii) an algorithm must complete in a fixed number of steps; (iv) an algorithm must provide a correct solution; and (v) a deterministic algorithm is one that, given the same input, always produces the same result (Fant, 2007, p. 4).

Now, how can an algorithm be designed to capture a definition of art, or, in our case, street art? In recent years, the rise of AI has enabled computer scientists to create complex algorithms that exploit the possibilities unleashed by big data to identify art. Rather than identifying art in general, programmers' primary goal has been to identify artistic styles. Their algorithms frequently make use of machine learning techniques, specifically deep learning and neural networks. These algorithms are trained on massive datasets containing images representing various artistic styles.

The neural networks that are used to classify artistic styles learn to recognise patterns, textures, and colour palettes that are common to specific styles, allowing them to analyse and classify new artworks. The algorithms that guide AI categorization attempts are therefore generally based on formalist parameters. To put it another way, such algorithms are based on formalist definitions of artistic styles. Patterns, textures, and palettes, in effect, are visible qualities that, along with other perceptual properties, comprise the form of an artwork.

Saleh and Elgammal (2016) conducted a ground-breaking work in art algorithmic categorization. It started with a collection of over 80,000 photos of artworks by over 1,000 painters spanning 15 centuries. These paintings represent 27 distinct genres, with approximately 1,500 examples in each. The paintings were first classed by genre, such as interior, cityscape, landscape, and so on, by the researchers. They then utilised a portion of the photos to train several types of cutting-edge machine-learning algorithms to identify certain attributes. These included broad perceptual qualities like overall hue as well as more complex features like objects depicted in the picture, e.g., a horse and a cross. As a consequence, each picture has a vector-like description with 400 distinct dimensions. The algorithm was then tested on a collection of artworks about which it knew nothing. And the findings were astounding. This new method correctly identifies the artist in more than 60% of the paintings it sees and the style in 45% of them.

At this point, the most reasonable and obvious solution to how we reinterpreted the algorithm question at the start of this section is: A formalist definition, that is, a definition that identifies works of street art strictly in terms of their perceptual qualities and, more generally, formal properties, is an optimum candidate of definition of street art that may be reduced to an algorithm. In this regard, algorithmic definitions of street art may be seen of as distinguishing specimen from non-specimen in terms of the lines, colours, patterns, and even objects depicted in a piece.

There are undoubtedly definitions of street art in the literature that qualify as strinctly formalist. Bonadio (2023) is arguably a recent example (2023). He distinguishes street art from graffiti by stating that, although graffiti is a kind of writing, street art is representational and utilises the visual potential of a variety of mediums, including spray cans, stickers, paste-ups, and textiles. According to Bonadio, these works are often created in public locations, but as the rest of the book seems to suggest, this is not an essential component of street art in general, but rather a salient and recurrent property.

Now, imagine creating a neural network in the same way as Saleh and Elgammal (2016) did. The machine-learning algorithm might be taught by providing it with suitable sam

ples from various subgenres of street art (murals, stencils, yarn-bombs, etc.). Their images might be used to produce vector-like descriptions, allowing the AI to recognise and accurately categorise pieces of street art based on form similarities, such as styles, colours, palette, designs, content, and so on. It is fair to anticipate that the algorithm will perform similarly to Saleh and Elgammal (2016).

However, one may be dissatisfied with the formalist definition of street art and consider non-perceptual characteristics such as the use of public locations to be vital rather than just recurring. Consider the definitions in Bengtsen (2017) and Blanché (2015), which both allude to the use of public space as important to the character of street art. Is it possible to create an algorithm that can capture such a non-perceptual feature? This, in my opinion, should not be a fatal barrier for algorithmic definitions. Of course, this process would have to be formalised in order to provide definitive results. One may envisage an AI that can access information about the geolocation of works under investigation to identify whether they are street art or not, that is, whether they have been erected in public locations, among other things.

Somethings similar, I believe, could also be said about a feature that often appears listed as an essential characteristic of works of street art: their being self-authorized (Blanché, 2015), unsanctioned (Bengtsen, 2017), or aconsensually produced (Bacharach, 2015). While disregarding nuances that are not relevant to the present discussion, one could interpret those notions as referring to works that have been produced without the authorization of the property owner. Just like in the previous case, we could imagine AI capable of accessing public registry documenting authorizations required to paint on a public surface. There are unambiguous methods to define this concept and whether or not a work contains it. But are there properties and features that street art could likely have that an algorithmic definition could not possibly capture? In the following section, I consider just this question.

4. Limitations of algorithmic definitions

We have established so far that some definitions of street art can be reduced to an algorithm. These are definitions whose parameters and criteria can be expressed unambiguously. And, at the same time, we can find determinate answers to the question of whether a specific work possesses them – making it (or not) a specimen of street art. As anticipated, these possibilities warrant for some form optimism about algorithmic definitions of street art. Now, these definitions may very well be very useful in certain contexts. For instance, mapping the distribution of street art in a city may very well be greatly facilitated by using algorithms capable of identifying work of street art.

However, I hasten to add that my optimism is moderate. In effect, I believe that there is a wide range of definitions that cannot be captured by an algorithm because they contain features that cannot be interpreted unambiguously. And, perhaps more importantly, these definitions – unlike for instance formalist definitions – cannot be used to ground mechanical procedures that can produce determinate and unchanging results. In effect, the application of these definitions to real-life examples appears to be highly discretionary and contextually situated in ways that appear to resist algorithmic formalisation. Let me give you some examples.

Consider the predicates “ephemeral, ‘which appears as a distinguishing feature of street art in both Bengtsen (2017) and Blanché (2015). Is there a way to express the predicate unambiguously and derive a mechanical procedure to obtain a definite and consistent answer? I believe the answer is unequivocally no. It is difficult to put into words what ephemerality is all about. Of course, it appears to be related to (short) duration, but this could be misleading. In practise, many works of street art are extremely durable and can withstand the passage of time better than many other types of works. Consider Invader’s tiles, which require significant and deliberate effort to disappear. As a result, we cannot provide an exact temporal criterion (e.g., “lasting one week”) for determining whether an artwork is ephemeral or not. According to the literature, ephemerality has more to do with relinquishing control over the faith of the work by making it public domain (Blanché, 2015, p. 37) and/or challenging commodification processes (Baldini, 2017, p. 29; Blanché, 2015, p. 37). It is difficult to assert unequivocally that an artist is unconcerned about what happens to their work or that it defies consumeristic logic. When considering these issues, there is frequently ambiguity and

tension. In this sense, it appears highly unlikely that a mechanical procedure for exactly determining whether a work is ephemeral or not will be developed.

Things look even worse when we look at evaluative definitions. This type of definition, as previously stated, characterises the identity of works of street art in terms of a specific value that they realise. Aesthetic theories, which understand the identity of works of art as dependent on their aesthetic value, are typical evaluative definitions in art. In other words, from this point of view, artworks are objects that have a certain value, namely beauty (Zangwill, 2007). Of course, there are no hard and fast rules for determining what is beautiful. Colours, patterns, palette, and other features that an algorithm can detect in a painting, for example, cannot guarantee that the painting will be beautiful. To put it another way, there is no principled way to convert non-aesthetic properties to aesthetic properties (Mothersill, 1984). And appreciating the latter necessitates a judgement of taste, which appears to be essentially subjective (Kant, 1987).

When looking at street art, Baldini (2022) proposes the following evaluative definition: "all genuine works of street art share a common value. That essential value is their subversive value, or *subversiveness*" (p. 3). Such a value should be understood as a function of the capacity to question social norms that govern the uses and functions of public spaces. According to Baldini (2022), dominant spatial hierarchies favour commercial communication over other forms of public discourse. Street artists challenge those norms by spontaneously appropriating portions of the urban landscape for self-expression.

Subversiveness, like ephemerality, appears to defy algorithmic reduction. Of course, one cannot determine whether a work is subversive simply by looking at its formal characteristics: the colours, patterns, palettes, objects depicted, and so on do not reveal much about the subversive value of a piece of street art. It seems rather obvious that works with similar, if not identical, formal features may fundamentally differ in terms of their ability to challenge dominant hierarchies of visibility, and thus in terms of their identity as street art. Something other than a specific appearance is required to unleash an anti-systemic force.

Dash Snow's tag serves as a good example here. Snow's estate sued McDonald's in 2016 for using the tag as an interior design element in a number of restaurants (Buffenstein, 2016). The original tag and the McDonald's version are virtually identical in appearance. Nonetheless, it would be strange to attribute the same subversive value to both. While the original tag could be considered a challenge to dominant social norms governing visibility in public spaces, the McDonald's version is not. On the contrary, the design that appears in those famous fast-food restaurants is a form of commercial communication, one might say: its goal is to promote trade. It is a form of advertising that attempts to connect McDonald's to the rebellious nature of street art.

I should add that attempts to interpret subversiveness in terms of illegality, which could plausibly lead to an algorithmic reduction, appear deceptive. While there is a strong link between breaking the law and being subversive, no identity exists. In other words, subversive works do not have to be illegal, and illegal works do not have to be subversive. I believe there are numerous examples of legal street art that is also subversive. Pieces in Stephan Mohr's project *Under Art Construction*, for example, were perfectly legal. Nonetheless, the critical and irreverent nature of at least some of those pieces, which frequently criticised Europe's economic and political elite, have arguably rendered them subversive (Baldini, 2015).

Furthermore, certain illegal guerrilla advertising projects that appropriate the style(s) of street art do not qualify as such. Take, for example, Fauxreel's *Vespa Squareheads*. In 2008, Toronto and other Canadian cities were awoken to the sight of hundreds of wheat paste posters in the street artist's signature photograffiti style (Simoes, 2008). The posters depicted young male hipsters with a Vespa handlebar instead of their heads. The truth about the series soon emerged: it was a guerrilla advertising campaign commissioned by Piaggio to promote their latest Vespa model.

The tale of the *Squareheads* is interesting because the works were illegal. In effect, neither Vespa nor Fauxreel sought permission to install the posters, which a court would al

most certainly regard as vandalism. Nonetheless, they appear to be incapable of carrying any subversive value in the sense specified above. They are examples of aggressive marketing rather than a challenge to commercial communication's monopoly over urban visible surfaces. They are works that, in a perverse way, appropriate a street art style in order to achieve the inverse of subversiveness, which could be called advertising value.

Let me summarise what I've said up to this point. While I defended a form of moderate optimism about algorithmic reduction of some definitions of street art in the previous section, I have now suggested that others cannot be captured in terms of a fixed formula. In the former group, one finds definitions that refer primarily to perceptual and formal properties that can be detected mechanically and definitively. The latter group, on the other hand, includes definitions that use ambiguous and vague predicates that necessitate highly discretionary and contextually situated reasoning.

According to the literature on algorithmic reduction of legal judgments, these "involve an irreducible element of contextual interpretation, which resists encoding into rules that can be derived for application in every case. To ignore this would risk a kind of tyrannical formalism, in which rules are applied regardless of contextual factors" (Binns, 2022, p. 199). Similarly, and perhaps more forcefully insofar as the arts are a less formalised domain than the law (Baldini, 2017), the application of predicates like ephemeral or subversive cannot be mechanically determined, but requires an act of interpretation that is irreducible to an algorithm in an important way. When dealing with these varieties of definitions, it appears that the hermeneutic activity of a human agent is required.

Let me offer one final thought before concluding. As previously stated, I believe that some definitions of street art can be reduced to an algorithm, which can be extremely useful for specific purposes. Of course, they could be used by forces seeking to persecute street artists as vandals violating laws governing the proper use of public spaces. This is certainly a possibility, and in the past, seemingly benign initiatives promoting the appreciation of street art and graffiti using new technologies have been used as tools of surveillance and repression. As just one example among many, consider *Stradanove*, a web portal created by Rivasi (2017, p. 11) to document and archive graffiti writing. The authorities began to use the portal's content to incriminate writers. Unfortunately, perverse applications of new technologies are the norm rather than the exception. However, I believe that luddism is not the solution. A more productive attitude is trying to actively guide the evolution of technologies as to make them ethically sound. One could imagine, for instance, constraints in street art that prevent results derived from algorithmic definitions from being used as evidence in a court of law.

5. Conclusion

Algorithms have profoundly changed the way we live as a result of the invention of computers. The computational power of modern microchips has reached a point where modern machines can perform extremely complex tasks not only efficiently, but also extremely quickly. Algorithms have allowed machines to surpass humans in activities once thought to be the domain of human intelligence: starting with Kasparov's defeat by the digital hand of Deep Blue in 1997, artificial intelligence has demonstrated great promise. It is not surprising that researchers have been investigating the possibilities of machine learning in the troubled field of art demarcation. We already have examples of successful algorithmic reductions of artistic style definitions. In this paper, I argued that we can be moderately optimistic about the possibility of capturing some varieties of street art definitions through an algorithm, that is, we should expect to be able to identify street art through numbers. However, not all definitions appear to be amenable to algorithmic reduction. In effect, definitions of street art, like definitions in general, come in a variety of flavours. Some just like evaluative definitions involve judgments that are not positively condition-governed and necessitate the use of hermeneutic abilities that result in discretionary and contextually-sensitive interpretations. Humans will not become obsolete until we develop algorithms capable of doing so. Meanwhile, let's just enjoy some technological benefits.

Conflict of Interests and ethics

The author(s) declare no conflict of interests. The author(s) also declare full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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