

Reflections on the Institutionalization of Independent Public Art and its Influence on Social Taste

Tomáš Timko

Internal doctoral student, Faculty of Arts, University of Presov, 080 01 Presov, Slovakia

Abstract

The present paper deals with the persistent trend of transferring independent, or anonymous, even illegal, public artwork into institutions. From the postmodern era (e.g. artists like Keith Haring) to the present (e.g. an artist like Banksy, etc.), several significant cases have provided evidence that public art has become popular and sought-after by the audience. Nowadays, in addition to the classical media, the Internet, which has become, so to speak, the 'voice of the people', significantly facilitates the massive popularization of independent public art. However, such a demand makes many cultural institutions conceive of dramaturgy accounting for the most significant trends, the primary goal being attracting visitors. This results, among other things, in the formation of the aesthetic taste of the audience or the whole society. The paper seeks answers to these questions: whether or how the authenticity of independent artwork changes when transferred into the institution; how the popularity of public art shapes the dramaturgy of art institutions in Czech and Slovak cultures; how it modifies the aesthetic taste of the wide audience.

Keywords

Street Art; Public Space; Art Institutions; Street Art Exhibitions.

1. Introduction

The architectural form of the public space gradually began to change from the 1920s onwards. The path from decorativeness to functionality, which was determined by the architectural direction of functionalism, was significant. Another important influence was industrialization, which greatly marked the shape of urban architecture. The result was not only a visual change, but also an impact on the thinking and behavior of the inhabitants of large cities. In the postmodern atmosphere of the 1970s in the USA, young people who wanted to point out their existence in metropolitan cities took the floor. They began to mark public space, signing it with various pseudonyms. They started making graffiti. Gradually, however, some authors changed the wild and free signing to a speech that had its own characteristic concept. The result of this process was the emergence of several artistic forms in the public space, which are collectively referred to as street art². Street art is anonymous (respectively pseudonymous), mostly also illegal

manifestation of visual art in the public space, which is historically partly based on the graffiti as an art form; however, during its development, it has become more and more distant from it. Graffiti is mainly about presenting one's name or pseudonym, while street art is rooted primarily in social themes and its authors often use humor and satire. Street art is also part of urban art, which includes many different mediums and forms including graffiti, street art, and is primarily inspired by more general ideas like urban architecture or urban lifestyle (Heritage Editorial, 2019). Street art is more appealing to recipients, for several reasons: 1. the works are more story-based, we could say that they resemble a comic strip; 2. they do not project as much aggression as graffiti, as the latter is often associated with vandalism; 3. they make the impression of the authors' caring about the society, and their social or political involvement is clearly identifiable. The most common forms of street art are painting, sculpture, installation, but also a poster, sticker, template, or mosaic.

Street art has undergone some stages. One of the fore-runners of street art is e.g. artist Keith Haring, who was inspired by the new style of graffiti in the 1970s. Instead of writing, though, he created his own sign language; it was formed by the silhouettes of animals, especially dogs, and of human figures (Versteeg, 2018). Street artists started to place their output in the public space to encourage the recipients to take action and bring change. Some exhibit exclusively in the public space, while staying anonymous or using a pseudonym (e.g. Sam3, Blu, Os Gemeos). Others exhibit concurrently in the public space and in galleries, thus, their work being almost identical (generally, graffiti artists present in galleries, but also e.g. Banksy, Space Invader, Blek le Rat, Slinkachu). Still others have absolutely established themselves in the environment of institutions – they have given up the street pseudonym and exhibit regularly in galleries under their own name (e.g. Jean-Michel Basquiat aka Samo, Shepard Fairey aka Obey, Ján Kaláb aka Cakes, Matěj Olmer aka Bior).

The present paper discusses pros and cons of presenting street art in the public space, and also virtual space of Internet. In order to understand what institutionalized street art is about, I provide the definition of an institution relying on George Dickie's (1974) theory of the institutional definition of art. To prove the present trend of launching exhibitions of street art in Czech and Slovak institutions, I give a survey of street art exhibitions in the last 10 years. Lastly, I provide the consequences that street art has on the audience's taste. The aim of the paper is to ponder whether or how the authenticity of independent artwork changes when transferred into the institution, how the popularity of public art shapes the dramaturgy of Czech and Slovak art institutions, and how street art modifies the aesthetic taste of the wide audience.

2. Pros and Cons of Presenting Street Art in the Public Space

Street art exhibitions are extremely popular today. This is obviously so thanks to the Internet, the strongest medium that has an enormous influence on the popularization of street art. It transfers art from the real public space to virtual space. The Internet has clearly contributed to the massive popularity of British artist Banksy. His works appear to

be easy to read, they are satirical, and they criticize the consumer society, which is why they have become sought-after content for the so-called sharing on social networks. In this way, they have become a means of expressing the attitudes of Internet users (social networks).

The presentation and reception of artwork in the virtual world can be perceived both positively and negatively. It is certainly a great advantage that the works are made available to recipients who would not otherwise be able to watch them. On the other hand, the perception of content on the Internet is often superficial and unfocused (Šobáňová, 2016, p. 81), which in turn significantly degrades the possibility of an aesthetic experience. In any case, the popularity of street art on the Internet triggers demand for this type of art within institutions and contributes to the acceptance of the art forms of graffiti and street art in the eyes of both the public and art theorists. Some artists, based in street art, have decided to step out of anonymity; their work has developed and the new space for them now is an art institution. I perceive this shift as a natural development in creation, but partly also as effort for being institutionally recognized.

Such popularity simultaneously exposes street art to the breach of authorship and censorship. Preserving anonymity can mean much trouble for an artist, especially in relation to maintaining control over the use of their work. A proof of this is a British artist Banksy³. In 2018, he won a lawsuit against the Italian gallery Mudec Museum that, within an unauthorized exhibition, offered for sale unlicensed souvenirs with the motif of Banksy's works. On the other hand, a year later, he lost a lawsuit to the British company Full Colour Black that offered for sale greeting cards with motifs of his most famous works without his consent. The situation is all the more paradoxical because Banksy profiles himself as an author who despises copyright and claims that 'copyright is for losers'⁴ (White, 2020).

In addition to situations where street art artists are invited to beautify public space, also censorship or the destruction of artwork in the public space can sometimes be a case. There are cases when the authorities did not accept the artwork in the public space and, for the purpose of censor-

ship, devalued it or completely destroyed it. For example, an Italian street artist with the pseudonym Blu, in 2011, during the *Art in the Streets* exhibition in the USA placed a mural, i.e. a large-scale painting on the wall of a building, with the theme of death expressed as a result of the desire for money, directly addressing the USA politics. The authorities had the work painted over. A similar case happened in Košice in 2013, but the reason was different. The owner of the building granted the authors of the mural, Ukrainian artists In-teresni Kazki, permission; however, the house was placed in the historic city center and part of the art community and the monuments board initiated the restoring of the facade to its original condition, i.e. they had the mural painted over. An artist does not usually have to deal with such problems during the exhibition in the institution. A gallery provides a kind of security and eliminates chances of censorship or destruction.

3. The Transfer from the Public Space in an Institution

3.1. Defining an Institution

The theory of the institutional definition of art was formed in the Anglo-American philosophical environment, especially in the 1960s, when Arthur Danto first spoke of the existence of the so-called artworld. It was his reaction to the art of the avant-garde and postmodernism which often used existing objects from everyday life (ready-made). It had lost the ambition of imitation (mimesis), thus its definition through the theory of imitation was no longer possible. Danto saw something in the artworld as a list of works recognized by institutions. The philosopher George Dickie, who further developed the idea, considered the world of art to be a group of all the people who run art institutions. According to Dickie, the main task of the artworld was to grant the status of art work to a selected artefact that the author presents to the public as a "candidate for recognition" (Makky, 2019).

The theory of the institutional definition of art was a reaction to difficult-to-understand art, and especially to such artwork that hardly deserved to be called art (Žebíková, 2020, p. 59). The definition of the term institution within this theory has undergone the same development: initially, it was perceived as a closed unit, constituted by professionals; later, it was necessary to admit that an art institu-

tion consists not only of a small circle of workers but also of the professional public associated with it, even anyone who is an active participant in the running of the institution (Žebíková, 2020, p. 60).

The institutional theory of art has a number of critics. Among other things, they claim that it insufficiently describes art, as it focuses only on its status, but lacks an apparatus for its evaluation (Žebíková, 2020, p. 75). Nevertheless, it can still be regarded as applicable, and in the spirit of recognition of art by institutions, perceive the motivation of a group of street artists to leave the public space and become part of an institution.

The exhibition program, and in general, the entire dramaturgy of an art institution, depends on the institution type. Dave Beech (2014) classifies art institutions according to who founded them, who finances them, but mainly who regulates them, as a) commercial, b) state, and c) public⁵. Although public institutions depend on the market (visitors buy tickets, food, books ...) and the state apparatus (which, among other things, approves subsidies and grants), their main domain is sovereignty. They do not work in line with consumer demand, they do not adapt to it at all costs, and they do not apply democratic principles (on the basis of which the wishes of the majority are fulfilled) (Beech, 2014, p. 51). It can, therefore, be assumed that different approaches are applied in commercial, state, and public institutions on the basis of their motivation, which, as it were, can be respectively profit, the strengthening of historical or current political concept, and presentation of valuable art works. The inclusion of street artwork in the exhibition plan most often takes place in the first type of institutions, i.e. in commercial galleries.

3.2. Exhibitions of Street Art in Czech and Slovak Institutions in the Last 10 Years

The fact that street art exhibitions have currently been an interesting global trend can be evidenced by the number of exhibitions of street art, i.e. works of graffiti and street art, which have been implemented in the last 10 years. I choose the most essential ones from the Czech-Slovak cultural space to illustrate the interest of both the audience and the institution in this type of an exhibition program.

So far, the last project of its kind in Slovakia was the exhibition of artists Banksy and Poppy in the Košice Kunsthalle, which was open until the end of June 2020. It brought to Košice not only original paintings, i.e. the most frequent expression of both artists, but also a curious object in the shape of a watchtower, carved into olive wood, with which Banksy meant to draw attention to the long-standing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The exhibition also included a multi-media presentation.

In the Czech Republic, it was Banksy's Prague exhibition. Viewers could see it in the Mánes Gallery during the summer of 2020. It was the so-called unauthorized exhibition, which was confirmed by the announcement "The artist Banksy is not associated with this event" on the exhibition website. It is deemed controversial also because the wall graffiti, available to the recipients, was created on the spot by young Czech artists according to the original model, i.e. a work implemented in the public space.

At the beginning of 2020, the Bratislava Danubiana Gallery offered an exhibition by the Czech artist Zdeněk Řanda, better known under the pseudonym of Pasta Oner. This artist has extensive experience with street art, but his work has fully adapted to institutional practice, because exhibiting in art institutions is an absolutely dominant part of his artistic activity. His current work is more in the spirit of pop art from the end of the last century. In the same year, he also presented his work at the controversial joint exhibition *Alfons Mucha and Pasta Oner: Elusive Fusion in the Kampa Museum in Prague*. The artistic community criticized the project mainly for the artificial connection of authors from different periods and directions, which indicated the specific purpose of the exhibition, namely to attract visitors in the first place.

A smaller, but still varied exhibition, called *From Behind the Corner*, was hosted in 2018 by Nová Cvernovka in Bratislava. The exhibition included exclusively works of Slovak artists.

Probably the most extensive exhibition was *Obsessed with the City* in the Gallery of the Capital City of Prague. Recipients were able to visit it between 2012 and 2013, and with

a total of more than 21,000 visitors, it became the most popular institution-based exhibition of the time. It presents works by artists from around the world, with most of the works being created as site specific specifically for this project.

Equally popular are the street art festivals in Bratislava (*Bratislava Street Art Festival*) and Košice (*Street Art Communication*), which have been held since 2011 and which are attended by artists from all over Europe every year. The most significant output from both festivals are the aforementioned murals, i.e. large-scale paintings on the walls of buildings; however, they also include experiments like buses painted in a street art manner, which have served for public transport in Bratislava since September 2020.

4. Consequences of the Transfer into an Institution

Undoubtedly, the consequences of the transfer of street artwork into an institution have both positive and negative effects on the audience and on the exhibition culture in general. The biggest advantage is the education of young audiences, in particular towards art. In other words, street artwork opens the way to art for many people. Another advantage that an institution provides can be the possibility to immediately experience works that would otherwise be intended only to a small circle of recipients who have access to the public space for which the work was created, because artworks can travel as exhibitions to people all over the world. Last but not least, a clear advantage is the institution-provided education of a viewer, which takes place in the form of work description (information on the exhibited works), informational materials, and catalogues. Education helps recipients to correctly interpret works of art that may at first glance appear to be easy to read. If street artists are to socially activate the recipients, it is necessary to incite a specific activity to which the artist tries to encourage us.

The trend of exhibiting street artwork in institutions can also be approached critically, which will open up several negative consequences for the work, the author, and the recipient. The big problem is clearly the shift in authenticity and the partial loss of the aura of the artwork. The problem is also its being snatched from the space for which the work was originally intended, which changes the author's inten-

tion. However, the author does not even have a chance to render an opinion. To illustrate, I present two different approaches to the design of Banksy's exhibitions: 1) exhibitions, the concept of which is created by the author and that are staged by the author and to some extent by curator, and 2) exhibitions that can be tagged unauthorized, i.e. such that without the author's consent use their street paintings in other contexts, or even present mere replicas of the artist's works, produced by other artists. It is appropriate to fear that through reproduction the work loses part of its authenticity (Makky, 2019, p. 124), but also its quality. This is definitely a big problem as it degrades unauthorized exhibitions and marks them as commercial events merely generating profit. At the same time, we can ask: do artists authorize all their exhibitions? What about deceased artists? In this case, however, authorization is necessarily related to works transferred from other contexts and not those that were primarily created for the purpose of exhibition, presentation in the institution, or even outside it.

The negative consequence of the excessive popularity of street art and the increased frequency of its exhibiting is the impact it has on the taste of the audience. My view is that it is oriented towards simple forms, which must necessarily contain humour, irony, and which are socially critical. Likewise, the works of street artists are often easy to read and do not require the involvement of imagination and creativity. In other words, the recipient receives a message from the author without having to exercise intellectual capacity. Therefore, I do not consider it appropriate if these themes and approaches "overwhelm" the contents of works of institutional art, which are more intimate as well as much more varied. Interestingly, we are often confronted with controversy of street art exhibition projects in art institutions around the world. Some of these exhibitions showed no aesthetic and dramaturgical quality; they even teetered on the edge of legal use of exhibited artefacts.

An example of good practice on how to present fine art "from the street" in institutions with the greatest possible elimination of negative effects on the recipient and art itself can be the project *Invader Was Here*. The project of an established French street artist using the pseudonym Space Invader was implemented in the southern French

city, Marseille, in 2020 and consisted of two levels of artwork presentation: (1) exhibition in the gallery with all the essentials associated with it (i.e. lighting, adjustment, etc.) and (2) parallel implementation of the work in the public space. The artist created a map in which he marked all his interactions in the public space, so a visitor of the exhibition can also perceive the work in its natural environment for which it was created. The exhibition and the intervention in the public space are equal and complementary, they allow to understand the author's work in complexity; at the same time, this concept offers an institutional gallery space in which a full aesthetic experience is possible (Welsch, 1993).

5. Conclusion

The current interest of the recipients in visiting street art exhibitions in institutions, and thus their constant inclusion in the exhibition plan of important institutions, testifies to the extraordinary attractiveness of these artistic expressions. Their popularity helps to promote the institutions themselves, and thus also other exhibitions of 'classical' institutionalized art. The presentation of works of street art therefore certainly has a positive impact on the popularization of contemporary art.

The most significant negative consequences of frequent exhibitions of street art are their insufficient quality in some cases and the formation of the audience's taste towards works with lower artistic value. The problems with exhibitions usually lie in pulling works of art out of the context of the public space that is natural to them and in the low quality of the reproductions, or in their unauthorized use by the artist (or the unauthorized in the exhibition as a whole). The reason may be the saving of financial and other resources in their preparation, because these exhibitions are conceived as mass events organized for the purpose of generating profit. The taste of the audience can be shaped by the massive popularity of street art to such an extent that it becomes a measure of quality and value. Within such a perception of contemporary art, works of institutional art with high artistic value become alternative, or even secondary. This could deepen the difference between high and low art. Some of the works of art come to the margins of the audience's interest in contemporary art as elite art, and what artists try to tell us through them will remain unspoken to most people.

Despite partial criticism of exhibitions of street artists, my view is that street art should be part of the artworld. However, on a par with it, institutional art, which is able to absorb themes from a much wider range of society or life as such, should also be popularized. In relation to the development of society's taste, which clearly has an impact on the perception of societal values as such, it is necessary that institutionalized art find its way to the general public. This can be achieved through better promotion and a wider selection of activities added to exhibitions in institutions as a sort of accompanying program. The institutionalization of street art has several positive consequences, the most fundamental of which is the popularization of contemporary art; the negative consequence can be the formation of recipients' tastes towards purely simple content in works of art.

Endnotes

1. This essay is the result of the project VEGA no. 1/0051/19 *Music and dramatic art within 19th and 20th century aesthetic theory and aesthetic education in Slovakia*, realized at the University of Presov, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Aesthetics and Art Culture.
2. We are fascinated by the phenomenon of street art because of its spontaneity and creativity. Thanks to these qualities, this art form got from the periphery and rejection to the centre of attention of art circles. Unlike graffiti, however, street art authors have begun to use forms of presentation in public spaces that are more friendly to the masses (Bandúrová, 2014)
3. Craig Williams (2016) theory say that it is no longer just one artist, a whole group of authors operates under this pseudonym.
4. One of his works in the public space consists of the inscription: "Copyright is for losers©TM"
5. Market, State, Public (Beech, 2014)

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