

The Disappearance/Virtualisation of Graffiti and Street Art From Urban to Institutional to Virtual Space

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Abstract

The subject of this essay is the presentation and reflection of curatorial challenges related to the exhibition of graffiti and street art. The curatorial practices of graffiti and street art has undergone several changes over the past decades: from the streets to the institutionalisation and commercialisation to virtualisation. In particular, the essay is examining curatorial practises in three main areas, the streets, the institutions and finally the augmented and virtual space. Due to the development of ICT and digitalization the possibilities of curating seem countless. However, within these developments there is also a downside. What if all unsanctioned graffiti and street art suddenly have 'no space', nor in the virtual nor in the real world, where neoliberal cities desire homogeneity, segregation and 24/7 surveillance? Can unsanctioned art even exist in the virtual reality? Can it still be called 'unsanctioned' or 'illegal'? The possibilities of multiple layers of reality as well as the thread of the disappearance stand very are very close by each other. It is the time to think about where and how which require novel perspectives and appropriate formats on how to reinforce this unique cultural expression in public.

Keywords: graffiti, street art, curating, urban, streets, white cube, institutionalisation, digitalisation, virtualisation, space, unsanctioned, layers, reality, cityscape.

1. Graffiti and street art in the urban space/cityscape: natural habitat

Regarding the topic of this paper graffiti and street art in the streets have a long history and established their own curating tools in the urban space. In the public space are not too many rules, which allows to have an independent existence that is shaped authentically, naturally and contextually (fig. 1).

On the one hand there is graffiti with its font-based aesthetic (Lewisohn, 2008: 18-23). Graffiti is rather difficult to decode, which is why they usually only address a few insiders of the local graffiti scene or specific crews. Moreover, graffiti established their own hierarchies and rules in the public space that functions almost like a self-regulation (Macdonald, 2001/ Castleman 1986). Street Art, on the other hand, due to its figure-based aesthetic,

visual language and imagery, is very accessible and aims to connect with a large audience (Gabbert, 2007: 16). Nevertheless, graffiti and street art have common aspects, such as illegality, gaining fame, broad dissemination of their pieces or tags as well as their aim for recognition. Both art forms are integrated into their local context and space. Graffiti and street art pieces are often autonomously produced and financed, do not have a commercial aim and are freely accessible (Lewisohn, 2008: 15). Other factors as surveillance, weather conditions, time scarcity, surface finish, applied technique and other external influences are natural tools of the urban space "curating" itself (fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Photo archive of the author, graffiti in the streets of Lisbon, 2018.

Therefore, the experience in the “authentic and naturally-curated” space, in the so called public space or cityscape, is unexpected, surprising and constantly changing. To the authenticity of graffiti and street art in public space includes an important topic which contribute to the experience in the streets - site specificity. In recent years, Peter Bengtsen has studied and shaped this topic on a profound level. (Bengtsen 2018; Bengsten 2017; Bengtsen 2013). The concept of site specificity attracted a lot of attention, especially in the 1970s. Particularly important in this context is the re-appropriation of the public sphere and the extraction of art from elitist museums towards the democratization of art for society (Butin 2002: 150). One of the biggest differences between street art and public art is the illegality, whereas public art

the artworks are always sanctioned. Recent tendencies, like the increasing number of sanctioned murals, show that a hybrid between street art and art in public space has emerged. The growing interest in graffiti and street artists towards the creation of sanctioned walls leads to a decline in the “natural” curation of the public space. Regarding that, Peter Bengtsen expresses concerns that sanctioned street art pieces lead to a fossilisation of urban space. This jeopardises the natural dynamics and transience of urban space (Bengtsen 2017: 1-2). In fact, a great potential of graffiti and street art in the public space is their element of surprise and empowerment to explore the space (Bengtsen 2014: 146-147).



Fig. 2: Photo archive of the author, 'self-curated' graffiti in the streets of Zurich, 2017.

Moreover, Bengtsen recently argued that the encounter of arts in the public space can affect or even influence the ways the audience thinks about or relates to the environment (Bengtsen 2018: 126).

2. Graffiti and street art in the institutional and commercial space: artificial habitat

The introduction of graffiti into galleries and the commercial art market started in the 1980s. Since 2000's the term 'street art' has arisen and established itself as part of urban art (Reinecke, 2007: 26-29). The institutionalization of graffiti generated a re-evaluation of a former subcultural movement. Through the institutional shift graffiti was not only re-evaluated, but also recognized as an independent art genre and therefore established its own target group (Austin, 2001: 193; Derwanz, 2013: 195-234; Lewisohn, 2008: 138). The institutional shift leads foremost to changes in the context, which makes its implementation into the institutional framework very challenging and delicate. As described in my last paper, exhibiting graffiti and street art in an institutional framework leads to a great the loss in its organic meaning or even censorship. (Di Brita 2018: 9) Therefore Lewisohn describes art institutions in relation to graffiti and street art as "sanctioning bodies" (Lewisohn, 2008: 134).

Due to the importance of this hypothesis it is important to discuss how the various forms of the institutionalisation or commercialisation influence graffiti and street art in this section. Inevitably the exhibition of graffiti and street art in galleries and museums, art fairs, biennials and other art institutions lead to effects of neutralization, aestheticization and censorship. As the controversy in the exhibition Art in the Streets at the MOCA showed, artistic and institutional interests can diverge, which in this case led to the censorship of a murals. Exhibitions that include graffiti and street art thus call into question the responsibilities and duties of an art institution. Curating and consequently the selection process of artists in open air museums and festivals seems to be a contradictory procedure, although this procedure is inevitable in institutional framework. Already through the selection of the artist line up, a natural procedure of institutions, a "fair" representation of the arts in the streets is falsified (Bengtsen 2014: 125). Nothing happens by chance anymore and the highly praised transience, ephemerality and short-livedness of the art in the streets is lost. Therefore, the exhibition space within institutional and commercial framework can be identified as "artificial habitat". (fig. 3)

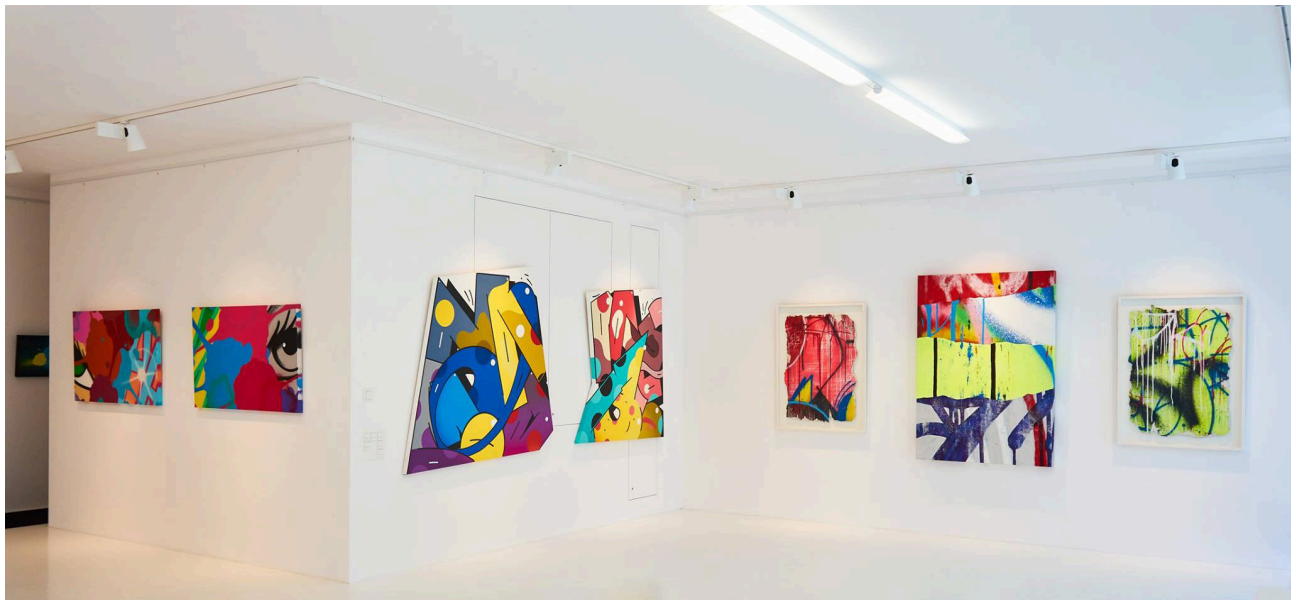


Fig. 3: Installation view From A Tag To An Artwork, Kolly Gallery, Zürich, 2017.



Fig. 4: Mist, installation view Language of the Wall. Graffiti/Street Art, Pera Museum, Istanbul, 2014, (source: <https://arrestedmotion.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Pera-Museum-Language-Wall-Graffiti-AM-26.jpg>)

The art works exhibited in art institutions lack site specificity as well as political and ethical connotations, which is why they mostly appear clinical, clumsy and misguided. Studio-based works appear as replications or representations of urban aesthetics, which do not necessarily emphasize the quality of an artist (Duncan, 2015: 130-133; Lewisohn, 2008: 127). The neutral white 'cell' means a loss of the political and social potential of an artwork and thus leads to a big challenge for artists to enable their art pieces to have an impact. In order to make art works in the white cube impact aesthetically and contextually the artists make use of urban references or so called 'tropes' (Bengtson, 2014: 75-76).

A further challenge of curating graffiti and street art in an artificial habitat affects the content-related, formal, structural set-up/composition of the exhibitions. These different exhibition set-ups and their affects will be summarized briefly. Firstly, graffiti and street art is exhibited in "white cube" museums or institutions, like Street and Studio. From Basquiat to Séripop (Kunsthalle Wien 2010) or Arts in the Streets (MOCA 2011), there is usually an art historical approach, which seems quite conservative, traditional as well as highly controlled or staged. Unfortunately, the exhibition showed what influence curatorial measures can have, which in this example even led to the censorship of a work. Secondly, there is institutions that somehow try to incorporate a slight freely curated set-up to offer more freedom to the artists by assign certain walls to the artist and they are

free to create their pieces, as this was the case in Street Art (Tate Modern, London, 2008) or Language of the Wall. Graffiti / Street Art (Pera Museum, Istanbul, 2014) (fig. 4).

The attempt to bridge the gap between urban space and institution is realized through appropriate events or street art city tours. Apparently, institutions are trying to re-contextualize urban art by looking for a suitable exhibition format. In the case of Tate Modern and Pera Museum the white-cube turns into an urban space. Thirdly with the rise of the open-air museum like Wynwood Walls (since 2009), it was believed to be an ideal solution. So far it seems as this form of curating the urban space has had a great impact on graffiti and street art “natural habitat”. On the one hand

the negative stigmatized art movement was obliterated by a social acceptance, upswing or even hype. New target groups increase the number of visitors in museums and therefore exhibiting urban art results a new marketing as well as rebranding strategy to gain new audience in art institutions (Bengtson, 2015: 221-223; Danysz, 2016: 223-231). On the other hand graffiti and street art have actually been absorbed by their greatest opponent, the commercial and institutional spheres (Suter 1994: 149). Through the clever use of graffiti and street art, Goldman Global Arts, the company behind Wynwood Walls managed to revive the Wynwood district. The district evolved from abandoned merchandise and factory buildings to a tourist destination as a global stronghold for street art (fig. 5).¹



Fig. 5: Entrance Wynwood Walls, Miami, date unknown, (source: Urban Land Institute 2017, <https://casestudies.uli.org/wynwood-walls/>)

The creation of a hybrid and ephemeral museum leads to another dimension in the theoretical discourse of graffiti and street art. The use of urban art as instrument of revitalization and commercialization of cityscapes. Unfortunately, graffiti and street art can become marketing, consumer and entertainment goods and lead, as in the example of the Wynwood Walls, to gentrification (Abarca 2015, S. 230).² As Abarca points out: „[...] gentrification can be seen as a postmodern form of urban spectacularization“ (Abarca 2015: 231). Through gentrification, the real estate value of a revalued districts experiences an increase, which more and more often reflects the strategy of state

or private real estate investors. Especially street art's natural origins in the street and positive as well as friendly appearance makes it even more suitable as a visual art for upgrading urban space. Street art supports the strategies of upgrading through legitimacy, authenticity and a certain street credibility. Ultimately, this simplifies and secures today's gentrification processes (Abarca 2015: 229-232). Finally, this impact of gentrification stands in great opposition to Bengtsen's argument of street art's practice of site specificity and its natural force of surprise and unexpectedness while exploring the urban space (Bengtsen 2014: 146-147).



Fig. 6: Google Arts & Culture, Painting in VR by Cyrus North (screenshot), 2016 (source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMSd3EYP2Bo>)

3. Virtualisation of graffiti and street art: virtual habitat

After integrating graffiti and street art into the institutional and commercial space within its sanctioning practices and gentrification strategies this chapter should present the potential as well as the threads of the disappearance of art in the streets though its virtualisation, in augmented (AR) and virtual (VR) realities.³ In this regard the terms of 'urban non-places' and 'posturban cities' are of great importance. It is nothing new that communication and information technologies (ICT) influenced and even changed the interaction with art in the urban space. According to Gwillt the graffiti and street art interventions could be able help urban non-places to become more lively and attractive. He also argues that the combination of street art and AR has a potential for a complex socially and technologically encoded interface, which combines public space, digital media and creative practicees (Gwillt 2018: 227-228). Similarly, Bourdin/Eckhart/Wood (2014) argue, that through the omnipresence of ICT all places of the world are available instantly and sometimes even live. They speak about the acceptance of "surface realism" where real cityscape is merged with the actual visual image of it. ICT diminish exploration phantasies in cities and instead increase the trust towards spectacular photo post on social media to visit a certain place or not. Even the behaviour of city dwellers or visitors of this "virtual" world has undergone a change, instead of a place of irregularities to one, which is socially highly controlled and "clean" (Bourdin/Eckhart/Wood 2014: 11). To recapitulate, after graffiti and street art was forced into the artificial framework of institutions and commercialism, it should additionally be cleaned and utterly controlled in a virtual reality?

Of course this is a quite provocative and negative posed question, but reading though Hoppe's thoughts of 'postmodernism' it is not far-fetched. According Hoppe an urban environment is defined by a high rate of heterogeneity, density, ethnic or visual diversity are conceived as hazardous and irritating (Hoppe 2018: 111). Also the military services frame the 'urban' as dangerous and conflicted space, where future conflicts and wars will be carried out. In fact, in her analysis she found examples to confirm such assumptions: "The examples that I found via my analysis are perfect examples for such an urban imaginary that tries to avoid a multifaceted urban space to which unsanctioned urban creativity belongs." (Hoppe 2018: 111). These examples are neoliberal as well as smart cities, where segregation and

control as well as surveillance and cleanness are desired parameters (Hoppe 2018: 112).⁴

In the last years graffiti and street art have been integrated in various augmented (AR) and virtual reality (VR) projects. That will be presented below.

In 2016 the VR graffiti simulator Kingspray was launched, which should encourage graffiti writing without any sanctions. Looking at the image (fig. 6), a headset, with sound, as well as touch controllers (e.g. Oculus) are the new basic equipment. In the VR graffiti experience there is a lack of haptic or sensory interaction: nor smell of spray paint nor touch of a spray can. Any sprayed graffiti applied to a non-existent wall in virtual reality. Gwillt's research also concluded that immersive VR is less popular than initially imagined (Gwillt 2018: 236).

Regarding AR there are much more possibilities that are still connected to the physical reality. For example, Felipe Pantones AR debut at Kolly Gallery in Zurich in 2017, called Afterimage, was a hybrid between the institutional frame work and AR. Additionally to the artwork in the actual space there other paintings as well as a sculpture only discoverable through AR on a smart device (I phone and I pad) (fig. 7).

It allowed the visitors to walk behind the art works to find the artist's signature or other hints on the backside of the artwork. Additionally, it allowed an extreme close look at the artwork very closely. The gallery space was enriched with additional paintings spread in the room itself. Observing the visitors appearance this exhibition format caught the attention and was entertaining too.

Together with Spanish artist Escif the Palais du Tokyo in Paris tried to merge institutional space with AR. In the exhibition *Encore un jour banane pour le poisson-rêve* in 2018, viewers must download a custom application that stores the moving graphics associated with each work. Escif call his pieces and virtual installations "virtual vandalization" of the museum entitled. For exemple, the work *Tokemon Go* consisted of AR graphics hidden around the Palais de Tokyo that interacted with the works exhibited, like in the figure XX virtual shopping bags were added to Kiki Smith's sculpture (fig. 8) (Palumbo 2018, URL). The statement of the artist sums up the new qualities of incorporating AR into the institutional framework "I like the way that augmented reality gives the chance to add some new shapes to reality, as graffiti does, without any authorization needed." (Escif, in: Palumbo 2018, URL).



Fig. 7: Installation view, Felipe Pantone, *Afterimage*, Kolly Gallery, Zürich, 2017.

In one of Gwilt's case studies a mural by How & Nosm was augmented through virtual reality, on behalf of BC Biermann and 'The Heavy Projects' initiative. Gwilt describes it as an „animated sequences that 'overprint' and narrate parts of the original image and second, by adding substantive additional virtual content that appears to spill out into the urban environment, dramatically extending the work above and in front of the original image.“ (fig. 9) (Gwilt 2018: 233). Interestingly he interprets the artwork and its augmented reality as “temporal narrative around the original murals” (Gwilt 2018: 233).

To build a bridge to the beginning of this essay, the new findings from this chapter will be discussed in the light of context relation, site specificity and gentrification. The great potential of AR combined with outdoor or indoor graffiti and street art exhibitions can increase its site specificity only in a certain extent. As shown in Escif's as well as Pantone's work, the app used in the museum or

the gallery contained a kind of surprising interaction with the site and the artworks represented there. Additionally, it empowered the audience to explore the space on a virtual level, which was somehow connected to the “real” site of the museum or gallery. Including Gwilt's experiences, it could be argued that AR could integrate the element of surprise and empowerment to explore the space (Bengtson 2014: 146-147) as well as the relationship between audience and environment (Bengtson 2018: 126). Nevertheless, it seems that AR has an effect of gentrification respectively spectacularization (Abarca 2015: 229-232), when certain sites are augmented by exciting “side effects” in the virtual reality. Overall there is tendencies that artists show concern and are motivated to rethinking the use, perception and boundaries of public space and their willingness to adopt their art to a virtual reality in order to experience the urban cityscape and their relationship with it in a new way (Gwilt 2018: 233).



Fig. 8: Screen shot from a video of the installation view, Escif, Tokemon Go!, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

4. Conclusion

From the streets to the institutions the urban art movement has undergone a great shift of context and re-evaluation as an ‚art genre‘, but meanwhile experienced the downside of the institutionalisation and commercialisation. Exhibition formats and curating practices have been designed to enhance marketing strategies, develop tourist destinations, raise spectacularization leading to higher visitor numbers and increasing sales. Ultimately culminating in gentrified housing estates, revitalized districts and finally shaping the image of ‚urbanity‘. With the progress of ICT, the relationship and perception of graffiti and street art is evolving again - quite harshly and fast. With a new set of devices and application there are countless forms and possibilities on how to incorporate augmented and virtual realities in order to experience mere layers of reality, which are mutually interlaced. Obviously it is just the beginning of a process with – literally – countless possibilities. Literature

has shown, that there are by far not enough case studies yet to define a certain curatorial tendency within the AR and VR area, but it seems very attractive to work and enjoy “temporal narratives” with it on all sides - the artist’s, the audience’s as well as the institutions’. Additionally, it is obvious that AR as well as VR cause a new need of devices or applications to experience the virtual reality, which can possibly lead to an exclusion of the audience, who cannot or do not want to invest in such „gadgets“. This would lead to a “digital gap” on a new level. The existence of several layers of realities is accompanied by the challenge of “being present”. So far the sensations in cities or personal encounters have been on a direct- stimulus and sensory level. Through ICT the actual presence of a person in one moment is nowadays simultaneously challenged by several virtual spaces (Eckardt 2018:14; Graham/Zook/Boulton: 2013) Ultimately, the virtual realities “hybridize both human experience and architecture” and help to orientate within the urban surroundings (Gwilt 2018: 230).



Fig. 9: Heavy Projects, How & Nosm mural augment, full view and augmented reality on a device, Miami, 2012 (source: <https://www.heavy.io/wynwood>)

When graffiti and street art will be fully integrated into augmented and virtual reality through the possibilities of ICT, consequently there will be no unsanctioned or illegal graffiti and street art anymore. This leads us back to the argumentation of Hoppe, to a future scenario of a posturban city where only segregation and control as well as surveillance and cleanliness are desirable (Hoppe 2018: 112). The shift into the virtual world and the fact that urbanity, heterogeneity and divisiveness in cities are classified as dangerous, makes it quite plausible that unsanctioned graffiti and street art are displaced to a non-existent place or even disappear completely, because they simply belong to the 'urban'. At this point the surprising and unexpected graffiti and street art, as it is known today, does not exist anymore and disappears in a virtual game or layer only available through certain applications accompanied by certain equipment. Perhaps in a near future, which still seems gloomy and far away, the terms 'graffiti' and 'street art' have to be redefined.

Notes:

Whether the role of graffiti and street art in this open-air project is respected and promoted would have to be viewed with a critical eye and could be part of an independent investigation.

This argument is supported by Goldman Properties own statement on their website „Since 1968, Goldman Properties has been driven to restore urban neighbourhoods, ignite street life and create thriving global destinations.“, see: <http://goldmanproperties.com/About-Us/History.asp>

In the examination of the virtualisation of graffiti and street art there will be no distinction between augmented and virtual reality.

She describes this clean, homogenous and highly surveilled reality a capitalist hyperreality. (Hoppe 2018: 112).

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Figures

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