

## There and Back Again: Redistributing Visibility between the Virtual and Real Alleys of Graffiti

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### Biography:

Andrea Baldini is Associate Professor of Art Theory and Aesthetics at the School of Arts of Nanjing University and Director of the NJU Center for Sino-Italian Cultural Studies. He is also Young Ambassador of the Jiangsu Province. A native of Italy, he studied as a Fulbright Fellow at the Department of Philosophy at Temple University in Philadelphia (USA), where he obtained a PhD (2014). He has published extensively on philosophical and theoretical issues related to creativity and everyday practices. Recent articles appeared in the *Journal of Visual Culture* and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. His monograph *A Philosophy Guide to Street Art and the Law* has been published by Brill. He is preparing a second monograph, tentatively entitled *A Philosophy of Elegance*, for Reaktion Books.

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### Introduction

Blu's 2008 short film *Muto* is probably the most ambitious celebration of the intimate relationship connecting new-media technologies and street art. Critically acclaimed and viewed almost 12 million times on YouTube, this award-winning video is a stop-motion animation of hundreds of murals that the Italian street artist painted in different cities across the globe. Blu's surreal figures invade the city and their gestures are experienced and appreciated through computer screens and mobile phone displays.

When looking at street art's relationship with new media, *Muto* is hardly an exception. Technology has played a crucial role in making the street art movement a popular genre. The availability of cheap digital cameras and the possibility of photo publishing on social media have transformed graffiti – the original and most radical form of street art – from an esoteric practice into a global

phenomenon. Social networks have made available to internet users a constantly expanding gallery of street artworks. Communicating technologies have then radically changed how we engage with this art form. We primarily appreciated street artworks as and through photographs, in ways suggesting epistemic and ontological primacy of the “reproduction” over the “original.” For its constitutive linked with the city, street art's digital media revolution had then affected how we perceive, experience, and conceptualize public places.

In this paper, I argue that post-Internet street art has significantly re-shaped urban space, questioning dominant spatial hierarchies in politically subversive ways. Street art questions what Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible” by making visible what usually remains unseen. It does so by deploying tactics thriving on the interplay between material and digital reality. Scholars

have largely overlooked this link between the virtual and the real alleys of graffiti. Street art exists in between material and virtual reality, showing the conceptual and practical impossibility of their neat separation. Today's public space is produced and negotiated also in binary code. Section 2 discusses the subversive nature of graffiti and street art. Section 3 examines writers' and street artists' use of communication technology and how this affects the practices and their link with the city.

## **2. Re-Distributing the Sensible: Street Art as a Practice of Resistance**

Many in the literature emphasize the countercultural nature of graffiti and street art. Among those, Ricardo Campos and Andrea Mubi Brighenti explore how writers and street artists develop alternative identities through their participation in these artistic practices. Kurt Iveson characterizes graffiti and street art as DIY practices by means of which urban residents reclaim their right to the city. "Graffiti writing and other forms of street art," Iveson writes, "involve alternative ways of imagining, mapping, using, mediating and making urban space." As countercultural movements, they generally function as practices of resistance against the dominant order.

Recent trends in philosophy of art also highlight the subversiveness of graffiti and street art understood as counter-cultural practices. Within that debate, I have conceptualized graffiti's and street art's dissident nature in terms of its capacity to challenge dominant hierarchies of visibility in urban spaces. By following an insight of Martin Irvine, I have argued that graffiti and street art constitute a "counter-imagery" essentially questioning what Jacques Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible." For Rancière, this notion refers to – among other things – those norms and conventions controlling visibility in public spaces. Graffiti and street art are practices of resistance against those dominant systems of visibility.

In general, writers and street artists primarily oppose what I call the corporate regime of visibility, that is, the peculiar distribution of the sensible granting to commercial

communication a monopoly over the use of the city's visible surfaces. However, as I have argued with Pamela Pietrucci in a recent essay, graffiti and street art can also question other distributions of the sensible such as those regulating visibility in post-disaster contexts.

In violating the distribution of the sensible, street art and graffiti bring to the public eye spaces and communities that are generally ignored: small alleys, junkyards, abandoned buildings, and those who use them, the homeless, the marginalized, and artists. By aggressively appropriating urban surfaces, as one can see for instance in the works of the German collective Zelle Asphaltkultur, writers and street artists introduce in the city something new – witty designs and colorful forms defying economic considerations and authoritarian control. [Insert Figure 1] And, at the same, just like when tags appear on a rusty door, they also make visible what was already there, but left unnoticed. Liminal lives, their places, and their forms of expression remain often invisible to passersby. Street artists counteracts such an order. [Insert Figure 2]

One can explain the political significance of writers' and street artists' gestures as follows. By disrupting the distribution of the sensible, they are "making strange" our streets and squares. This in turn shows the contingency of dominant hierarchies of visibility. As "soon as we no longer think things as one formerly thought them," Foucault writes, "transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible." Street art's disruptiveness can then open up a space for reimagining a more inclusive public space. In the following section, I explain how street art and graffiti exploit communication technology as tactics of engagement.

## **3. Social Media and the Ontology of Street Art**

With the emergence of social media, the popularity of graffiti and street art has dramatically increased with that their tactical efficacy and political outreach. Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, and Twitter are among the most popular repositories of photographs of graffiti and street artworks. [Insert Fig. 3] Tags, throw-ups, burners, stencil-graffiti, and

examples from other genres of street art are a constant presence in the newsfeed of users. Writers and street artists systematically exploit communication technology's possibilities of outreach.

For instance, Banksy, who is the most popular street artist today, disseminates most of his works through internet. This strategy amplifies the subversive significance of his work, which is often politically explicit. The installation of his works usually generates reactions at a global level, and reactions to his pieces are discussed at length in mainstream med. Most notably, during the last decade or so, web-shared photographs and videos of his interventions in Palestine make visible in very effective ways this silenced and forgotten conflict, carving at times a space where to discuss the fate of this land and its suffering population.

Street art's tactical use of communication technology follows from the peculiar ontology of this art form. In effect, its appreciative practice does not significantly distinguish between "originals" and "reproductions." Contrary to what happens in traditional visual arts, the appreciation of graffiti and street art does not require direct contact with the created artifact. Reproductions of the object such as photographs, digital images, and videos do not lack any of the salient properties that are relevant to appreciation. In this sense, graffiti and street art are varieties of mass art, closer to computer art or photography than painting or sculpture.

In my previous work, I offer an argument defending the ontology of street art as mass art. For limits of space, here I can just briefly summarize such a defense. What writers and street artists do are better understood as performances rather than visual objects. This well accords with the emphasis that practitioners place on the performativity of their gestures. We appreciate the outcomes of their performances, that is, the objects, for the following reason: they yield, as David Davies would say, "a perspicuous representation of the performance whereby" they were generated. Photographs or videos capturing those outcomes can also function as props

for appreciating the generative performances. The relationships connecting respectively the performance, the object, and its reproduction(s) are similar. Both objects and reproductions, in effect provide, us with a suitable focus for appreciating street artists' actions – which are in the most proper sense the artist's work.

The intimate connection between communication technologies, street art and graffiti is then a consequence of the ontological peculiarity of these art forms. One should notice, I hasten to add, that even before the Internet revolution street art and graffiti were primarily appreciated through photographs generally circulated through magazines and fanzines. The ephemerality of works in the street, often illegal, has naturally suggested the use of photographic reproductions as means of appreciation since the earliest stages of graffiti's history. Social media offered a more convenient, direct, and effective way of sharing the gestures of writers and street artists. This shift in distribution deeply affected these practices, which then broke into mainstream visual culture.

For their peculiar ontology, street art and graffiti already suggest metaphorically and metonymically the interpenetration between virtual and material reality. However, there is also a more literal way whereby street art and graffiti connect the digital with the physical. The viral sharing of street art and graffiti in social media's newsfeeds often generates in users the desire to explore these spaces. Sites of photographed street artworks become often destinations of "pilgrimages" by the curious, the urban art lover, and those with a thrill for urban exploration, or "urbex."

The most popular example of this transition from the virtual to the material is the so-called "Banksy tourism." This is a well-known and controversial phenomenon where followers of the elusive street artist visit locations certainly outside mainstream routes such as abandoned areas in metropolises, economically depressed regions, and areas of conflicts including, once again, Bethlehem and the West Bank Barriers in Palestine. The magnitude of this phenomenon shows how powerful a motivator

photographs of street art can be. Graffiti and street art – and their appreciative practice – are therefore interesting examples of how the virtual can turn into the material by shaping the nature and uses of actual spaces. Street art and graffiti make visible what was hidden and silenced not only in the virtual public sphere, but they show it also through the materiality of physical space.

If street art and graffiti “pilgrimages” would not produce a digital echo, the interdependence of physical and virtual domains in street art and graffiti would not be complete. However, this is not the case. Street art and graffiti bring us there, in the materiality of the city, and back again, in the digital transubstantiation of physical urban space. The material consequences generated by visitors’ bodies interacting in and with generally unseen and silenced fragments of the city and its inhabitants (both present and imagined) create a ripple effect in the byte streams of the internet. In effect, those who decide to see street art in real-life tend also to share the results of their “hunts” on social media, feeding the interplay between material and virtual reality. The politics of urban spaces are then caught in between our digital screens and physical actions.

This process of continuously reminding to one another testifies to the porous nature of the distinction between the physical and the digital domains, showing the conceptual and practical impossibility of their neat separation. Urban space is produced and reproduced through the interaction between the material and the virtual. And, as the case of street art and graffiti perfectly embodies, in contemporary city its nature is not merely shaped through the materiality of everyday actions, but also through what appears as the political significance of virtual reality. The visible and the invisible today speak also in binary language.