Negotiating the tangible and the intangible: A case for street art festivals

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Abstract
Street art in the past decade or so has witnessed development in the form of the street art festivals that have sprung up across the globe. These festivals bring artists, street art enthusiasts, art historians, and the public together in the celebration and creation of street art. Practicing art in this format can arguably be seen as replacing the art institutions that often attempt to represent and commercially engage with this art, thus proving to be antithetical to its systems. Street art is characterised by an inherent contradiction that lies within it – while on one hand it is tangible due to its unregulated availability to people for aesthetic experience, both visually and physically, it is also intangible due to its ephemerality and unstructured manner of recording history. This article makes a case for street art festivals as representation of what may be called a 'Street art world,' that allows for documentation and reflection of the art movement that began in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

Keywords: Street Art Festivals, Street Art World, Institutional Theory, Intangible, New Media

1. Introduction

Street art has achieved significant success in the form of street art festivals internationally. This boom has been recorded formally and observed personally by art professionals as well as the public. The most popular and well-studied art festivals are music festivals, while academic study in the field of street art festivals is scarce. Studying street art festivals is important as it reflects the growing popularity of the genre in its natural habitat – the street. The art work is created, perceived, and slowly perishes in the environment from which it derives its meaning. Context is the crucial aspect here, where distinct rules apply to any work on the street, and it could accordingly be painted over or washed off.

Street art is a genre created for the people. Bringing art to the streets makes it available to all equally and the interaction between the artwork, the place, and the viewer is paramount. The relationship of street art with galleries and the attempts of galleries and museums to institutionalise street art within the dominant culture of the art world are often found to be incompatible with each other. This incompatibility is reflected in the dual nature of street art; it is tangible due to its unregulated access to people for aesthetic experience, both visually and physically, but it is also intangible due to its ephemerality and unstructured manner of recording history. Does this incompatibility between the two indicate the existence of a 'street art world' that exists in its own right, as symbolised by street art festivals?

The institutional theory of art assumes the 'fine art world' as its focal point for the discussion of art and the institutions that represent them. When it comes to street art, it becomes essential to understand what can be defined as street art and what does not fall within the category in order to fairly discuss the dynamics of an art form that is essentially understood as something that exists outside the culture of institutional representation. Street art is commonly understood as an evolution from the graffiti writing culture from the 1960s-1970s US. While graffiti is a type base art form that can range from a simple tag to a complicated piece, street art is considered a more visual/figurative movement. Today's street art culture includes the practices of graffiti depicted in works of artists like Bond who mostly creates complex pieces of his tag. Riggle (2010) explains that for a work of art to be called street art it is important that the street forms an

important part of the work whether materially or artistically, and its mere placement on the street cannot be considered a legitimate factor in deeming it a work of street art.

Street art over the past decade has evolved and gained a lot of popularity and consequently attracted a lot of attention from the institutional art world, the so-called gatekeepers of art and style, and brings commerce and money along for the ride (Reed et al., 2011). These aspects of the art world are represented by institutions like galleries, museums, auction houses, fairs and festivals, which are run by a niche group of museum curators, critics, journalists and historians. The discussion of galleries and museums with regard to street art is important at this stage therefore, as they are considered to be the upholders of the art theory that legitimises a given work as art within the institutional art world.

Street art uses its environment as an essential tool to create meaning. Whether materially or contextually, the painting derives its meaning from the urban space it occupies as a way of socio-political commentary or for beautification. On the other hand, our understanding of artworks that are displayed within a museum setting is heavily influenced by the physical, moral, intellectual and economic conditions inherent in the museums themselves (Brettell, 2006). Moreover, a work of street art is created to be experienced at a glance, the practice of looking at a work for long periods of time and contemplation are not necessarily expected of the viewer. The norms of creating and viewing artworks for the gallery and for the urban environment are opposed to one another.

2. Commissioned street artworks

Art created in the public realm, whether commissioned or uncommissioned, is often subject to censorship and action by governing bodies or upholders of aesthetic value. In 2011, as a part of the Art in the Streets exhibition held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the curators of the exhibition invited the Italian artist BLU to paint a mural on the north wall of Geffen Contemporary. The artist painted a field of military-style coffins draped by large dollar bills instead of flags. On the mural's completion, the curator deemed the work inappropriate (Finkel, 2010) and it was painted over. The reasoning given for this was that the mural was directly in front of the "Go for Broke Monument, which commemorates the heroic roles of Japanese American soldiers…" and that it was situated near a veterans affairs building (Bengtsen, 2015: 118). Its clear anti- war message was perceived to be offensive, though the meaning and relevance of the work was implicit in its location due to these very reasons. Moreover, the curators should have expected a work on similar lines as the artist's reputation for making political murals could not have been hidden from them (Bengtsen, 2015). This incident was heavily criticised by members of both the art world and the street art community on grounds of censorship and as a reflection of the quality of the exhibition itself. Although the mural was documented photographically and featured in the exhibition catalogue, the essence of the actual work in its designated environment could not have been captured. It was especially controversial for the street art community as it was a commissioned work and not an act of vandalism and yet was 'buffed.' This act was a fitting meta-commentary on the actual conditions of doing art in the streets (Bengtsen, 2015).

But, since the rise of popularity of street art, many municipalities and other governing bodies have invited street artists and street art festivals to be held in their city, on the grounds of boosting the cultural value of the district while also helping the economy, even if it is temporary. Such an act can be viewed as an attempt at gentrification, a quick fix for problems that were ignored for long. When street art is created with the support of local authorities that exercise influence or censorship to modify the content of the artwork, should it still be called street art? It is important to ponder whether these creations would be better termed as public art or murals.

3. Removal and sale of street art

Galleries have on many occasions attempted to represent street art in multiple ways, be it for commercial purposes in galleries or as retrospectives in museums. They have encountered the inherent paradox in the museumisation of an art form that specifically came about as an alternative to the institutional setting. They have endeavoured to represent works of art by street artists in the form of replicas or prints of art works made on the street and by removing works of art from the streets and physically bringing them into the gallery space. The removal of work from the streets is particularly controversial as the context within which a work is created is changed. It loses its meaning derived from the 'street'.

With growing popularity of street art among the public and art professionals, auction houses like Christies and Sotheby's have, since 2007, included studio works by street artists. This new market with new age commercial platforms like eBay soon began selling works taken off from walls and brought into private collections. This practice is heavily criticised by artists. French artist Invader comments on the removal of graffiti:

> If it is because [they don't] like it, that's ok. If it is to sell it on eBay or to put it in [their] living room, that does not make me happy. Street pieces are made for the street and for the people in the street to enjoy them (Bengtsen, 2016).

The removal of a piece of concrete on which an artist has painted and bringing it into the museum is derived from the basic idea of preservation of the artwork. But when this is done, the artwork will not run its natural course of ephemerality and hence, it is directly antithetical to the ethos of street art. Similar concerns have been voiced by street artists like Invader and British artist Eine, who talks about not signing his street artwork so that it cannot be authenticated and hence cannot be sold. This view is also reflected in the comments by Chris Ford, the managing director of Lazarides gallery, when he says that the art works should stay on the streets as the work is considered a gift to the city (Interview by the author). Notwithstanding these strong views, when street art is removed and placed within a museum or gallery or in the collection of a private dealer, the loss of context heavily compromises the meaning and value of street art. This demonstrates a state of tension between street art and the institutional context.

4. Exclusion from galleries

The idea of exhibiting this visual aspect of the street culture in commercial galleries is not a new one, and began early on with the exhibition of works by various graffiti artists in 1980s as an attempt to increase acceptability. This was also captured in the seminal film on graffiti writing, Style Wars, with the exhibition of studio works by graffiti writers. Today, the exhibition of street art or studio works by street artists is not common practice, yet one can observe an increase in the number of museums seeking to display street art works to represent this increase in popularity and to historicise the practice since the 2000s. The first exhibition that included works by street artists was Spank the Monkey, held at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, in 2006. This was followed by the Street Art exhibition at Tate Modern, London, which displayed works of street artists on the iconic Bankside façade of the gallery facing the Thames, but did not culminate in the inclusion of any on the inside, as a part of the permanent collection. Steve Lazarides, a pioneer in urban art, offered to donate studio works by street artists to the Tate to include in their collection and thence the art historical narrative, but this offer was refused by the gallery. Another exhibition dedicated to present a historical perspective in the growth of the movement was Art in the Streets, held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 2011.

All these exhibitions attempted to trace the evolution of graffiti and street art to their current state, like a retrospective. But they were a reflection and a result of the popularity of the genre, temporarily legitimising the movement. They never assimilated the works within the narratives of the art movements that preceded street art. The institutional engagement with street art has been from the perspective of the formal art world but not in terms of what the street represents. The inclusion of art works by street artists in exhibitions reflects the popularity of the movement but, at the same time, their removal for sale reflects economic considerations as well as the desire to collect artworks. Where it has been museumised, street art has again been approached from the point of view of the institution and not the art form.

5. The virtual platform

Explicit and implicit acts of censorship and appropriation have led many artists to condone the actions of the institutions. The growing popularity of street art and the growth of social media has created a virtual museum for street art; any new work that is created by an artist finds its repository. In many instances, street artists use the street purely as a medium to create art and do not necessarily place the work at the most strategic location. The aim is often to capture the work and find an audience over the internet. The life of the art work itself becomes longer than it would have been on the street when compared to its digital life. In cases where the context and siting of the work are important, a binary-coded viewing on the internet drastically changes the experience. This leads to the question of why street artists agree with the disassociation of their work from its siting and context

in one instance, but do not do so when the work itself is removed from the location sometimes to be displayed within an institution.

The destruction of the work is inevitable whether by natural causes or by human intervention by painting over it. The answer to this question is reflected in the actions of the Italian artist BLU, who in March 2016 removed almost all his murals from the streets of Bologna. This took place as a response to an exhibition held at Palazzo Pepoli, called Street Art: Banksy & Co.: Art in the Urban Form from March 18–June 26, 2016. The exhibition displayed about 250 street art works, among which were many artworks by artists like Banksy, BLU, Dado and Rusty that were removed from the streets to be displayed in the gallery. The exhibition was organised for the purpose of salvaging them from demolition and preserving them from the injuries of time (Ming, 2016). Explaining his act of protest in a statement published by the Wu Ming foundation, BLU said:

> After having denounced and criminalised graffiti as vandalism, after having oppressed the youth culture that created them, after having evacuated the places which functioned as laboratories for those artists, now Bologna's powers-that-be pose as the saviors of street art (Ming, 2016).

BLU goes on to comment on the appropriation of the art works, which would legitimize the hoarding of art off the street according to him (Cascone, 2016), and stresses the need to fight a model based on private accumulation that commodifies life and creativity for the profits of the usual few people (Ming, 2016). For this, he responds by removing paintings from the streets to snatch them from those claws and to make hoarding impossible (Ming, 2016). The internet as a medium, on the other hand, democratizes the experience. This is reflected in the views of Steven Harrington and Jaime Rojo, who talk about the ability of the internet to make artists virtually stateless and point out that the unbound and chaotic nature of digital communications feels more organic and trustworthy (Reed et al., 2011).

The above discussion demonstrates the antagonistic relationship that street art shares with galleries and museums, revealing street art as a non-institutionalisable art form; street artists and enthusiasts show no indication towards a need for such assimilation with art institutions.

6. Street art festivals

Street art festivals are a very recent development in the history of street art and have therefore, not been studied academically. Apart from some texts published by festival organisers such as Nuart festival in Norway, namely Eloquent Vandals: A History of Nuart Festival (Reed et al., 2011) there is not much literature available to gain a deeper insight into the functioning and reception of the festivals.

The street culture/Hip-Hop culture that came about in the 1960s-1970s, showed interdisciplinary traits with the crossover of music, art and social gatherings, as described by Chris Ford (interview with the author). This seems to be the general ethos of street art festivals that also celebrate aspects of its predecessor-graffiti and all other aspects that were practiced along with it.

Street art festivals are focussed on the practice and promotion of this culture, where artists from all over the world gather to create art, make music and put up performances for a specific venue or a city. This practice has become widespread in the past decade with resemblance to a music festival more than a visual arts fair, where the paintings and other forms of street interventions can be seen as a performative act for the celebration of a genre. Important examples of such festivals are the NuArt festival held at Stavenger, Norway, Meeting of Styles, held in various locations across the world like London, Denmark and San Francisco, See No Evil, Bristol and St+Art festival at Delhi and Mumbai to name a few.

Organisers of street art festivals want to stay true to the ethics of the art form, which is reflected in the freedom accorded to an artist during a festival which is organised either independently by using methods like crowdfunding, by procuring artistic grants, or by collaborating with government bodies. The extent of freedom is questionable when the festival is funded or partnered by a government body. Yet, maintaining the integrity of the art form is important to most festival organisers. Such an attitude is reflected in the views of Martyn Reed, curator of the NuArt festival, who describes how the festival has abandoned the use of the term 'Curator' or to 'curate' as they are associated with the aspect of preservation, which is antithetical to the essence of street art. Instead he addresses himself as a type of 'ambivalent

mutated curator' whose task it is to simply watch the work degrade over time (Reed et al., 2011). Examples that reflect the changing attitude towards street art can be seen in the painting of the old Juvenile and Magistrates' Courts as a part of the See No Evil festival in Bristol where the same artists were tried a decade ago for their street works and the painting of the façade of the Police Headquarters as a part of the St+Art Festival held in New Delhi in 2014. A portrait of Gandhi, more than 150 ft. tall, was painted - an ironic display of the tense relationship between street artists and the law enforcement body. Such examples only make the practice of street art within the festival structure more powerful in communicating with the audience through art in the public space.

7. Conclusion

The dialectic nature of street art creates an interesting paradox. Its material tangibility clashes with its historical intangibility. The movement has been around for over 40 years, and there have been few attempts at historicising it, let alone successfully placing it in a narrative; this is reflected in the refusal of the Tate Modern in admitting studio works by street artists to their permanent collection.

Street art is, a lot of times, appropriated by institutions for their personal advantage where the removal of the artwork is not essential, but is harmful to the meaning of street art as can be observed in the instance of BLU removing his work from the street. In 2014, he painted over his murals in Berlin as they were being used for advertising by a real estate company at Cuvrybrache and he did not want to have his art being used for this re-valorisation of the lot (Akkermann, 2015).

The removal of street art from the streets for trade is considered problematic and antithetical to the ethos of graffiti and street art (Ross, 2015). But in this case, the artist's removal of his own work was ethical for the genre. These attempts by BLU to stop the institutionalisation of his artwork have resulted him in taking away his art from the public as well, for whom it was created originally. Not all artists respond to the institutional control of street art in a similar way. Instead artists and art professionals have often voiced their opinion and their disapproval of such practices.

Academic attention to this art form has been forthcoming in the recent past, and the role of the street art festival in bringing this about is undeniable. Street art's incompatibility with existing art institutions is evident from the scenario where the art form has gone decades without being formally documented. With the rise of the internet and new media, street art catalogues have been created informally by the supporters of art through platforms like Instagram, and formally by street art enthusiasts that culminate in websites like the Global Street Art and the Google Cultural Institute featuring street art. While these developments are crucial for the longevity and the outreach of the movement, the role of street art festivals in the history of street art cannot be ignored. A festival can be looked at as a marker of success and celebration, which permanently records the proceedings of the festival making it traceable to a particular place, time and a particular people. It reflects upon contemporary tastes and serves as a statement of critique in the work's political, socio-economic, and aesthetic environment. It draws in not just an audience and artists, but also those critical of the practice and hence a response – whether positive or negative – thereby creating an academic footprint so to speak, enabling a review of the current trends.

From an art historian's perspective, this exciting new phase in the evolution of street art and graffiti, which is probably the beginning of the institutionalisation of a street art world, has led to a moment that calls for an in-depth study of this festival format.

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