

The myth of the “street artist”: a brief note on terminology

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Among researchers within the field of street art studies, a discussion crops up repeatedly, both in publications and in conversations at conferences. It is usually set off by someone asking one or more interrelated questions, including the following: How do we define street art? Is it still street art if it is shown in a gallery or museum? And what, precisely, makes someone a street artist?

The latest time I took part in such a discussion was during a session at the 2017 Street Art & Urban Creativity conference in Lisbon. Afterwards it struck me that while I have had numerous conversations about these issues over the years, both with other researchers and members of the wider public, some of my thoughts have never been put in writing. With this brief text, then, I want to sum up those thoughts. My hope is that this will be helpful – perhaps especially to those who are new to this growing field of research and who may, understandably, find the overlapping and inconsistent terminology confusing.

Defining street art is by no means an easy task. Inspired by the American sociologist Howard S. Becker (1982) and his concept art world, in previous publications I have proposed that the meaning of the term “street art” is evolving continuously and is dependent on its use by artists, critics, academics, fans, curators and everyone else who in some way engages with what they call street art. A consequence of this understanding of the term as socially constructed is that its meaning will never be settled once and for all (Bengtsen 2014). In this respect, the term “street art” is much like the term “art”.

Taking the position that we will never reach a universal consensus about the meaning of the term does not imply that researchers should disregard the importance of terminology. Quite the opposite; since the term “street art” has multiple meanings, it becomes all the more important to clarify what it means when each of us use it in our work. For my own part, I generally take street art to mean expressions in urban public space (including privately owned, but publicly accessible, space) that are of an unsanctioned, open and ephemeral nature (Bengtsen 2014). This is just the working definition I tend to apply in my research. I understand and accept that there exist other ideas about what street art is, just as there exist other terms that other researchers use to describe the phenomena I call street art.

In discussions about definitions and delimitations, the specific question about whether or not artworks presented in galleries and museums can be labeled as street art often arises. I have at times heard the response (both implicitly and explicitly) that artworks in these contexts are indeed to be categorized as street art since they are created by street artists. On the surface this may seem like a compelling argument. It does, however, immediately raise another query: what makes someone a street artist?

Most artists engage in multimodal and multifaceted practices. This means that any attempt to fit a certain artist – and by extension all of their work – into a single, neatly labeled box is problematic. When writing about street art, I have found it more helpful to focus on individual expressions and, importantly, their specific context and the network of expressions they are part of, rather than the people who

created them. In fact, over the years I have come to believe that the designation “street artist” for the most part is misguided.

My reasoning, by way of analogy, is as follows: Pablo Picasso worked in a range of different media, including ceramics, but is arguably best known as a painter. The fact that he is foremost known as a painter, however, does not mean that his ceramic works are categorized as paintings. Following this line of thought, the fact that an artist creates work in the street does not mean that this encapsulates their entire artistic practice. It therefore seems reductive and misrepresentative of the artist’s practice to call them a “street artist”. Likewise, their studio output – whether it is displayed in galleries and museums, or is sold directly to collectors – cannot, as a rule, convincingly be labeled “street art”.

This is the case even if the studio artworks replicate motifs from street works or incorporate materials or techniques commonly associated with street art. Some, myself included, have taken to calling such studio work by people who also create work in the street (and have a presence within the street art world) “urban art”. I would emphasize, though, that the term “urban art” is also frequently used synonymously with “street art”. Things become especially muddy in, for example, a French- or Spanish-speaking context where the term “street art” often is translated, respectively, to “art urbain” and “arte urbano”. As with “street art”, I do not expect that we will ever arrive at a consensus about the meaning of the term “urban art”, and I believe our energy as researchers is better spent on things other than attempting to homogenize our terminology.

When discussing street art, an advantage of focusing on the individual expression and its context, rather than the creator of the expression, is that this allows us to sidestep the issue of intentionality. Instead of deliberating on whether an expression was intended to be seen as an artwork, it is left to the individual viewer in a specific social, spatial and temporal context to decide whether or not something is street art. Thus, even expressions that were not initially created as artworks may come to be seen as art in the meeting with a viewer. Since we cannot create a generally applicable summary of all the variable traits and conditions that may cause someone to experience something as street art, the best we can do as researchers is to focus on the specific

expression at hand – as well as its context and, perhaps, other viewers’ experience of both – in order to convey as clearly as possible to the audience what is interesting about it.

Over the last decade or so, street art studies has really started to come into its own as an academic field (for more on this, see Bengtson 2016). As the body of scholars focused on street art and other forms of urban creativity has grown, so has the number of ways in which terms like “street art”, “street artist” and “urban art” are being used. Understandably, this can be confusing to newcomers and more established researchers alike. I believe, however, that the confusion mainly stems from the tacit presumption that we should all use the terms in the same way. What I am suggesting is that we lift this burden of expectation from our collective shoulders. As long as we use a given term consistently within the framework of a specific publication, and as long as we make clear to the audience what we take the term to mean in that publication, we can safely abandon the notion of a need for consensus and focus instead on producing interesting scholarship.

References

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