Street Art: Visual scenes and the digital circulation of images

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Abstract
Street art is introduced as a global visual scene that is local, trans-local, and digital, as well as a practice that often expresses various tensions of the visibility regimes in which it exists. This study specifically focuses on Arab-occidental expressions of street art in three locations: Paris (France), Djerba (Tunisia), and Montreal (Canada). The visibility regimes of these visual scenes are physical (Arabic and Occidental), but significantly they are also digital (found on social media, web sites, blogs etc.). The concepts of "visual practices," and more specifically "image practices" (pratiques de l'image), are used to study the spatio-temporal and digital evolution of street art to ascertain the changing nature of these visual scenes, in their specific stagings, as they reflect Arab-Occidental encounters.

Keywords: Street Art, Visual Scene, Visibility Regime, Digital Images, Arab-Occidental, Visual Practices, Theory-Practice

In this working paper, we address the issue of digital-image circulation in the staging of street art visual scenes. Many conceptualizations have been offered for cultural scenes, but for Kozorov and Stanojevic (2013) they primarily revolve around the idea of "things that matter," acting as a focus for all those involved in their scene-creation and staging. The concept of visual scenes is derived from the study of musical scenes (Shank, 1994; Straw, 1991; 2004). Characteristic of musical scenes are their spatio-temporal development (genesis, growth, maturity and decay), their effervescence, their "over-productive signifying community" (Shank, 1994: 122), and the *mise en scène* (staging) of their enactment. Moreover, musical scenes are increasingly becoming local, trans-local and digital (Bennett, 2004; Straw, 2001). Zahar and Roberge (2015) find these same characteristics in visual scenes, that is, scenes oriented towards this thing that matters through the production of images in local, trans-local and digital settings. In this regard, street art has now become now a widespread globalized visual scene.

Street art is a visual practice that confronts various different visibility regimes in which it exists. In this regard, visibility "is not merely a free-floating aspect of social interaction. Rather, it is structured as the result of the activities and practices of all the different actors who aim to plan it or, on the contrary, to resist planning. Visibility asymmetries are arranged in structured complexes, which we call regimes. Contemporary society is organized around regimes of visibility that concur in the definition and management of power, representations, public opinion, conflict and social control" (Brighenti, 2010: 125). Unsanctioned practices of street art contest the various visibility regimes that attempt to control them, and a process of spatial justice (Bengtsen and Arvidsonn, 2014) has thus emerged, resulting in the constant renegotiation of the visual nature of public space. In sanctioned practices of street art, this contestation of who has the right to define the visual culture of public spaces is reduced, but the "subversive" nature of street art can still appear in the different themes and site-specificity of the pieces put on public walls. Sanctioned and unsanctioned

practices very often mix in specific locales, resulting in visual scenes that reveal the spatio-temporal evolution of multiple forces and tensions that shape the visual culture of public spaces in contemporary cities. Apart from the contestation over the "ownership" of public space engendered by unsanctioned street art, other tensions like environmental and political issues or cultural contestations (Ross, 2012) are expressed in the encounters of street art with urban visibility regimes. Among these tensions, Arab-Occidental encounters as expressed in street art are the focus of this study. These encounters range from Occidental expressions in Arabic settings to Arabic cultural elements in Occidental settings. For instance, a piece from Brusk (a French artist) combined with the dome architecture of households in Djerba (Tunisia) creates an interesting assemblage in an Arabic regime of visibility while an Arabic calligraffiti by El Seed in the middle of Paris (Tour 13) does the equivalent in an Occidental regime.

While street art visual scenes are grounded in physical localities, their manifestation is now also expressed in an increasing amount of digital images. As discussed by Glaser (2015), the place to be for street art is increasingly on the net. This has significant implications for the evolution of street art in general, and an important question, raised by Glaser, lies in the influence of the digital circulation of street art images on their ability to be subversive. The net has its own visibility regime resulting from its network topology. As Brighenti (2010: 95) writes:

> The network should be better conceived of as a territory in which a specific visibility regime is instituted: in any network topology, the visibilisation emphasis is placed not on territorial boundaries but on some selected territorial flows – which of course does not at all mean that boundaries are absent; quite the contrary, boundaries are absolutely necessary to institute networks, at the very moment that attention is drawn away from them. Networks are territories in which certain flows are hypervisibilized while certain others are invibilized and hampered, or simply made impossible.

Digital images of street art expressing Arab-Occidental encounters in visual scenes are circulated among these different flows. But what exactly are these flows? What is their visibility? Which digital images do they carry? By whom? And do these flows reflect the cultural encounters of street art pieces on the street? Also, how do these digital flows compare with the physical flows of artists in their trans-locality?

The aim of this research project is to study these questions in three locations: Paris (France), Djerba (Tunisia), and Montreal (Canada). All these scenes contain sanctioned and unsanctioned street art, enacted by a diversity of actors (artists, gallery-owners, promoters, city politicians, as well as a large and diversified audience). To study these scenes, the concept of "visual practices," and more specifically of "image practices" (*pratiques de l'image*), is developed following the approach proposed by Shove and colleagues (2012) for a dynamic study of performance. A visual practice is here conceived as a block of interrelated elements, whereby when one of these elements change the whole practice changes.

For instance, if a digital image is captured by a digital SLR camera, stored on a computer and published on a web site, this constitutes a different practice than an image captured by a cellular phone and instantly circulated on Instagram. Image practices of a street art scene are then seen as dynamic, physical, and digital. They are in a constant state of evolution, which reflects the changing nature of these visual scenes. These image practices are the center around which gravitate participants, images (both physical and digital) and places (both physical and digital). Physical image practices are those that result in finished street-art pieces; digital image practices include processed recordings and digital images of street art works that circulate in various formats and digital locales.

A methodology of "connective ethnography" of these visual scenes, combining online and offline work in the field (Ardevol and Gomez-Cruz, 2014) will be used to describe past and current image practices. Past practices will be evaluated with photo-elicitation interviews with participants (Harper, 2012), and an iconographic analysis of physical works (and their digital images) will be conducted to evaluate their content and site-specificity. The analysis and comparison of past and present practices resulting in these digital flows will then attempt to ascertain the changing nature of these

scenes, and their specific staging of street-art pieces with reference to Arab-Occidental encounters. The political and cultural nature of these encounters should be reflected in the characteristics of images, participants, communities, and places that inhabit these flows.

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