

From street art to murals: what have we lost?

Javier Abarca,
Independent researcher, Spain

Abstract

The mural festivals that have become common all over the world in the last five years are often called street art festivals, and the murals produced in those festivals are often referred to as street art. This use of the term creates confusion, since there are clear and fundamental differences between the smaller, unsanctioned works we used to call street art in the past decade and the huge institutional murals of today. The aim of this text is to try and identify the differences between these two practices.¹

Key words: graffiti, street art, murals, mural festivals, unsanctioned, commissioned

1. Working with the context

The street is not a blank canvas. It is an accumulation of objects, and each of them has a particular potential that stems from its physical qualities and from its relation to the workings of the city and local history. In a properly made street art piece these forms and meanings are not the backdrop, they are the working material.

First of all, the artist needs to choose a location, and this is actually half of the work. Of course, a location may be chosen out of a desire to work with existing textures and colours, and with the history embedded in them. But there are many more nuances at play.

A piece can be placed high or low, close to the viewer or far from him. It can be placed so it is very visible and reaches a large number of people, or in such a way that it is barely visible, in which case the message reaches fewer people, but when it does, it reaches deeper. It can be highly visible, but only from a particular vantage point. All these choices are effective ways to modulate the message, and having a good eye for them makes a good street artist.

Working without permission involves an particular set of problems when choosing a location, because the artist needs to find a balance between visibility, durability and risk: the visibility of the resulting piece, how long it can be expected to stay there, and how risky it is to work at that spot, both in terms of physical danger and the possibility of getting caught. For example, artists may choose to take great risks in order to attain huge visibility, or they may prefer to stay safe and produce works with little visibility but with a longer lifespan.

By making a sensible use of the context, artists can devise ways to get maximum visibility and durability while taking as few risks as possible. They can take advantage of the architecture by finding ways into places and choosing vantage points from which to work. And they can take advantage of the social behaviours surrounding the chosen spot, for example waiting for a particular time of the day, week or year when the spot may be unusually deserted.

In addition to all these physical aspects, working with a particular context also involves playing with the meanings and connotations of the objects that compose it. As is the

1 - In this text I will use the term "street art" to refer to the unsanctioned street pieces characteristic of the work artists such as Eltono, MOMO or Blu produced in the last decade, and the term "murals" to refer to the commissioned, building-sized paintings that have become ubiquitous in the last five years, most often created in the context of the so-called street art festivals.

case of any other form of public art, the final result of a street art piece is always the sum of the meaning put forward by the artist and that of the elements that were already there.

Therefore, many things need to be taken into account when making street art that works successfully with its context. And, in order to achieve this at any significant level, artists need to get to know the context they are working with, a process that necessarily involves time. The most contextually fruitful street art is often produced by an artist in his or her own city, or in a place s/he visits frequently.

With murals there is very little of all this. To begin with, facades tend to be painted white before a mural is produced. Therefore, there is no playing with the textural qualities of the surface or with their embedded history. But even more important is the fact that, for the production of a mural, an artist typically stays in a city for only a few days, just enough time to paint the piece. This affords little time to attain any intimacy with the context. Furthermore, muralists are very rarely afforded the opportunity to personally find the location for their work. They may be able to choose from a few pictures of possible walls, but by looking at an image of a building there is seldom much chance to learn about it or about its environment beyond the size and proportion of the wall.

For a street artist, adapting to the context often involves customising or even designing and building tools for specific needs. A particularly ingenious example would be the bike tool-set built by MOMO for pasting the posters of his series "The MOMO Maker" on elevated surfaces all over the city of New York.¹ In contrast to this, the production of a mural rarely involves the need to come up with any technical solutions. This huge creative potential is therefore lost, along with the aforementioned possibilities of playing with the unique characteristics of the working environment and surface.

The modulation of all these parameters is one of the main venues for a street artist to develop his or her particular voice. And, for the viewers, a good part of their enjoyment derives from appreciating this modulation. But these possibilities, which make street art unique, are largely lost in a mural.

2. The transversal quality of street art

One important aspect about working with contexts is the fact that they can be rearranged. Due to the unregulated nature of their practice, street artists can ignore the boundaries dictated by property that determine where they can or cannot act. A piece of street art can simultaneously cover two or more contiguous surfaces belonging to different properties, thus ignoring the division of matter and space demarcated by money. Street art can therefore make visible how these limits of action and physical demarcations are arbitrary and cultural. It can take space and matter back to its natural state, when everything was for everybody to use, and nobody actually owned anything.

Murals, conversely, confirm the limits demarcated by money. They validate the status quo by arranging themselves obediently where architecture and property dictate. Instead of questioning the logic of money, they reaffirm it, and do so in a very visible way.

Another crucial difference lies in the fact that street art changes the environment only symbolically. While power uses architectural materials to try and make its division of the world into a permanent physical reality, street art typically uses humble, temporary materials such as paint or paper, which transform space merely at a symbolic level. For this reason it can be read as a sort of parody of this allegedly permanent capitalist arrangement of the world, this presumptuous order that inescapably goes back to the amalgam from which it started. Street art can therefore be a sort of foretelling of the future state of a building. This is one of the reasons why it can be disturbing, because it can make visible how a prideful building is in essence just a miserable ruin.

3. The human scale

The physical size of a work is crucial, as is its relative position from the viewer. The manipulation of size and distance opens up a huge field for nuanced expression. A big work can tower over the viewer, or it can gaze across a long distance and still be readable. A small work can slip through the crevices of the landscape and suddenly appear, creating a surprisingly

1 - See Abarca (forthcoming).

intimate situation.

But it is paramount here to note that all this playing with size takes place, necessarily, within a human scale. Street art always works within a scale related to the human body. It can only go as big as the body allows. An artist can reach beyond that by using a ladder or a pole, but these portable tools work only as extensions of the body, therefore the scale of the resulting artwork is still visibly human.

In order to reach further than his or her body alone would allow, an artist can also take advantage of the features of the architecture surrounding a chosen spot. S/he can, for example, start producing an image from ground level and complete it by climbing up a ledge or leaning out a window. Taking advantage of this kind of architectural features is also useful to modulate the distance between a piece and its viewer, and is often used to great effect as a way to increase the visibility of a piece. But, again, this takes place within discernibly human limits.

As a consequence of these limits, a street art piece is always a trace of the act of measuring the physical scale of the environment with that of the human body. And this is, of course, something the viewer can perceive. Reading this trace is actually one of the things that can make street art interesting. A street art piece lets the viewer measure the physical dimension of his environment by projecting his own physical dimension on it.

Any street art piece is, therefore, the visible presence of a fellow human being. It becomes part of the environment in a natural way, as one more of the many human traces on it. These would include graffiti or posters, but also many others, maybe less perceptible and often produced in a wholly unconscious way. Things like, for example, small discarded objects, or marks caused by the repeated use of keys, doors or walking surfaces, as in the case of the so-called “desire paths”.² As a consequence of this, street art has a particularly pronounced potential for engaging passers-by in an intimate way.

Murals, conversely, exist in an inhuman, monumental scale, very far from the viewer. Creating any meaningful connection is therefore much more difficult. In murals there is little

2 - “Desire paths” are the paths across patches of grass produced when pedestrians repeatedly assume natural trajectories that were not accommodated in the design of a particular urban space.

possibility for the artist to play with scale and distance, since in most cases only one extreme of all the possible modulations of scale is used. When producing a mural, an artist is not forced to understand the working environment, because s/he does not need to adapt to it. Murals are deployed with superhuman devices such as scaffoldings or cranes, which operate on a scale that allows the artist to ignore the context of the artwork. Instead of coming from below, a mural comes from above.

A piece of street art is necessarily created in a way analogous to the way a path appears on a landscape. A path needs to adapt to the features of the terrain, it is the result of a dialogue between these features and the scale and potential of the human body. A mural, on the other hand, works as a highway or a viaduct, ignoring by its very nature all but the most prominent characteristics that define a place. A similar analogy could be drawn between a piece of street art and a medieval street, which takes form based on the features of the terrain and the decisions of its inhabitants, and between a mural and a Haussmannian avenue, deployed with the help of superhuman machines and blatantly blind to any human or natural characteristic of the place it appears on. A mural is, from this point of view, yet another instrument for exerting control over the environment and its population.

A mural reveals nothing about the possibilities and limitations of the relation between the human body and the built environment. It is no longer a portrait of the relation between a person and his or her surroundings, which is necessarily open to dialogue. It is, instead, a portrait of the way in which power relates to the environment, which is most often a blind, imposed monologue.

An important consequence of this is the fact that viewers can respond to a piece of street art, they can correct it or paint over it. Street art is therefore a call to action – it empowers the viewer. It brings us back to the time when each person was able to rearrange his or her surroundings as far as his or her bodily potential would allow, before the power of a few would start to determine the limits of action of everyone else. It evokes this inherently human reality whose repression has created the alienating scenario we now live in. In light of this, it is only natural that street art, and particularly the neighbouring practice of graffiti, have become more prominent and violent as the control over the environment exerted by architecture and advertising has

become stronger.

As opposed to the empowering nature of street art, murals force a passive position on the viewer. Like architecture or advertising, murals are a monologue that the viewer cannot respond to. Murals make clear that the viewer is a passive spectator, and a consumer. Street art can be a dialogue between people, while murals are essentially a one-way communication channel monopolised by power.

4. The geographic dimension: networks and paths

While scrutinising how street art and murals function with their context and with scale we have been considering the single piece of street art as the subject of our analysis. But a piece of street art rarely works in isolation. It is usually part of a series, or what could be called a series. The pieces of a street artist accumulate in space and time, and together they form a network. The network of pieces is, in fact, the natural manifestation of street art, and could be understood as the actual artwork.

This accumulation of actions expresses an artist's determination and work ethic, and defines a particular strategic approach to the propagation of pieces across the landscape and through time. But, even more importantly, it involves an accumulation of decisions that speaks about more or less intelligent, creative, and daring tactics for making use of each context.

In a network, all the modulations in the relation between artist and context I have referred to take place again and again. This allows artists unlimited opportunities to articulate a taste for choosing locations and working with them, thus giving shape to a particular view of the city. By following this accumulation of decisions, the viewer can gradually get to know and appreciate the artist's strategic approach to the propagation of his or her work, and his or her sensibility towards the built environment. It is by virtue of these repeated encounters with an artist's work through space and time that the aesthetic experience of most street art actually takes place. And only a network can provide this kind of experience.

Street art therefore involves a strategic work that could be described as geographic. A network of pieces forms an imaginary drawing on the map of the city that is, again, a

trace of the relation between the artist and the environment that the viewer can follow, but in this case the trace works on a geographic scale. Discovering these networks, and following the paths they form, gets the viewer closer to his or her surroundings. The viewer gets to touch all of it, even if not physically. This opens his or her consciousness to a new stratum of reality and, by extension, to many others, helping build a subjective environment different to the one that is imposed on us by capitalist space.

One valuable aspect of networked pieces is that, in order to accumulate encounters and experience the full artwork, the viewer needs to be attentive, and to search. And, since street art pieces are ephemeral, any hints viewers may have been given are temporary, therefore they have to explore on their own. Appreciating street art is, therefore, a call to action. Murals, on the other hand, are a call to obedience, to passive consumption. They are not something the viewer can actively search for. Rather, murals are forced on the viewer. Their presence is conspicuous, and in many cases they are featured in a printed map, and are part of the itinerary of a guided tour.

Another crucial point here is that, in many cases, street art makes use of the margins of the landscape. In the process of creating and searching for street art pieces, both the artist and the viewer often get to explore parts of the city they would rarely visit otherwise. Places such as alleys or empty lots, dead spaces below or around bridges and other infrastructures, even off-limits terrains such as abandoned tunnels. French theorist Guilles Clement describes how the distinctive value of these places resides in them being the only parts of the city free from the control of money, and how they thus become the only chance for the city dweller to find space for natural and human qualities such as indetermination or imagination.³

For both artist and viewer street art can end up being an excuse to discover and visit these kinds of ignored places, to follow unfrequented paths across the city. Being on the look out for street art consequently widens and enriches the viewers' awareness of their environment. Murals, conversely, tend to appear within the predictable spaces of power. They take the viewer along the official paths, through the alienating urban spaces of production and consumption.

3 - See Clement (2004).

5. Working with time

Due to their ephemeral quality, street art pieces are not static objects. Once a piece is installed it is abandoned to its fate. It can be worn out by the weather, get covered by another piece, or be erased. This can be a slow process, and pieces can offer very different, even unexpected graphic qualities through their lifespan. Some works are suddenly erased, while others gradually disappear into the landscape. A piece can surprisingly reappear after months, or even decades, when the posters or architectural materials that covered it are uninstalled. A work can stand in place for years witnessing huge changes around it, and as the connotations of its environment change so does its own meaning.

Some pieces even change their location before they disappear. This is often the case with pieces produced on construction site sheds or debris containers, which can suddenly move and appear in new, unpredictable locations. Of course, pieces produced on the surface of a train carriage are expected to move through space, and therefore through time.

Consequently, a street art piece functions as any other element in the landscape. It mutates and evolves like everything around it, including its viewers. It naturally intertwines with the evolution of its context and with the life of the people that repeatedly come across it. And this organic, temporal nature gives street art a great potential for engaging viewers in an intimate way. Murals, instead, are generally meant to remain. They exist in a plane different to that of the viewer. They are frozen in the atemporal dimension of the monument, of power, far detached from the real life going on around them.

A particularly important point here is that a street artist can make use of time as a creative device. He or she takes creative decisions in that dimension. There is a modulation of time that can be as decisive as the modulation of space and scale. Pieces can appear from time to time through a long period, or they can suddenly accumulate, or any combination of these. A project sustained in time delivers a very different message than a project that responds to a momentary impulse.

The ability to play with the temporal dimension of the artwork and its context allows countless other creative possibilities. For example, an artist with a good knowledge of his or her

working environment can choose a surface that is relatively difficult to reach, or relatively uncared-for, so the piece will remain in place longer. s/he can surprise his or her audience by colonising an untouched surface, or s/he can choose to locate a piece so it becomes part of a long and distinguished succession of holders of a popular spot. s/he can climb up an upper floor of a building slated for demolition to paint on a wall attached to the contiguous building, knowing that after the demolition the piece will appear, floating in mid-air. s/he can, thanks to the lack of bureaucratic filters of his practice, swiftly respond to particular issues related to the immediate context of the piece, or to the world in general.

In murals, this creative potential is largely lost. There are very few possible decisions regarding the temporal dimension of a mural, and even those are taken not by the artist, but by the arts administrators who commission the work.

6. The emotional dimension

When comparing street art and murals, additional differences can be identified in what could be called the emotional dimension of a piece, both in the experience of the artist and of the viewer. The most obvious of these differences has to do with the element of surprise: street art can appear in unexpected places and then unexpectedly disappear at any moment. While murals, instead, tend to appear on much more predictable spaces, and to stay there. But most of the differences in this emotional dimension would have to do with the energy embedded in an artwork during its process of preparation and execution.

The preparation of a piece of street art requires a hands-on approach to its context. The artist may need to find safe ways in and out of the location, and to come out with solutions for bringing the appropriate tools and materials there. In other instances the artist may decide to improvise after briefly surveying the context. The execution of a piece involves, in both cases, a friction with the environment. The situation is often precarious and tense, with the artist needing to work and be alert at the same time. It can be an exhilarating moment, particularly when it is the end of a long and complicated preparation process.

Both preparation and execution need to take place in situ, usually during the night. This can lead to unusual situations and to unpredictable encounters with bizarre but genuine

characters. The whole process often makes the artist delve fully into the environment, and can be experienced as an exciting adventure.

The preparation of a mural is very different. It tends to take place far from the context of the piece, often through email conversations with arts administrators, corporations and institutions with political and business agendas. The execution process rarely leaves much space for improvisation, and artists usually need to conform to tight schedules. It tends to be a predictable kind of process during which artists are perched on huge cranes for several days, largely isolated from the environment around them.

Street artists often work with cumbersome materials, and in many cases they need to come up with solutions for transporting them by foot or on a bicycle. As we have seen, they may need to customise or even design and build specific tools for their needs. In the production of a mural, conversely, there is a kind of blind omnipotence. And, as many artists report, a lack of resources generally spurs creativity, while an excess of resources may stifle it.

Due to all of these differences, street art and murals tend to have contrasting emotional contents. Contrasting processes, situations and values become embedded in the aforementioned emotional dimension of the pieces, something an attentive viewer may be able to perceive. There is little in common between negotiating your way in situ and discussing with arts administrators via email, between working precariously using makeshift tools and working with the powerful machines of architecture. Consequently, the resulting energies may differ greatly.

7. Freedom of content

One last difference, probably much more obvious, would have to do with the freedom of content. Corporations and institutions tend to be the forces behind the production of a mural, and they of course have their own interests, which can translate into censorship. But, more interestingly, artists can also censor their own work simply because they feel that it is their responsibility to do so when working on a prominent, permanent piece, or when working with public money. In contrast, in the conception of a smaller, ephemeral street art piece an artist will usually feel more free to use difficult images or messages.

8. What have we gained?

Of course, not everything is a loss in this transition from street art to murals. In some ways, it can be considered to be an improvement. One apparently clear benefit would be that mural making is a source of employment for street artists. While this can be true, it also means that many artists abandon their street art activity simply because they are too busy with murals. The transition may therefore be good for street artists, but not for street art. This is particularly detrimental in the case of up-and-coming street artists who are swiftly introduced in the mural circuit before being able to spend some years delving into a particular environment without hurries or expectations, which is the foundation of many of the most interesting projects that have come out of street art.⁴

On the other hand, it is not clear that street artists are the ones getting the mural jobs. In fact, a significant proportion of the many new artists that have appeared in recent years to fill the needs of the exploding mural circuit come from the fields of illustration, design and gallery art, and have no background in street art or graffiti.

It has also been said that the mural circuit provides visibility for the work of street artists. And, of course, their work becomes more visible in a way. But the visibility of murals is very different to that of street art. As we have seen, playing with visibility is an important part of the game of street art, and this is lost in the predictable world of murals. Furthermore, while street art is usually smaller and less prominent than murals, it is also closer to the people, therefore its visibility can be understood as being more valuable. The visibility of murals, on the other hand, is that of architecture and advertising – a kind of visibility imposed from power that many have learned to distrust.

One more certain argument in favor of murals is that they make it easier for women and stigmatised groups to work in the street. Practising street art can involve wandering through unfrequented areas and getting exposed to all kind of dangerous situations, and thus it is in fact easier for heterosexual white males to produce work under such conditions than it is for everyone else.

4 - See, for example, the works by American artist MOMO featured in Abarca, J. (forthcoming).

But, while murals have their own inherent virtues, there is a problem when they become so prominent that they take over the very term “street art”, creating a pernicious terminological confusion, and when they become so ubiquitous that they occupy the entire scene, making unsanctioned street works disappear from the media, and even from the street.

9. Exceptions and solutions

It would be fair to say that some particularities of street art are still present in some murals. For example, in some cases facades are not painted white before the piece is produced, and murals are often not actively conserved. But even in those cases we are still missing the most crucial elements of street art. There is still little space for the artist to get to know the context and play with it, there is no network of human-scale pieces encouraging the viewer to explore, and there is no possibility of playing with time.

Very few festival organisers would want to take the trouble to have artists in residence for a month or more so they can immerse themselves in the environment, or to arrange permissions for a network of small locations. That would mean spending more money, and it is clear that the surge of mural festivals can be largely explained with the fact that murals are extremely inexpensive compared to the visibility they afford to governments and corporations. And, most importantly, it would be less profitable in terms of virality and touristic appeal, as we will see in the conclusion to this paper.

Of course, some exceptions to this rule exist. The most valuable would arguably be *Bien Urbain*, a festival held since 2011 in the city of Besançon, France. It includes the production of murals, but it also allows artists to reside in the city for a substantial amount of time, to develop experiments based on the local context, and to produce networks of human-scale pieces scattered across the city.

Some artists have tried to open up space by themselves for this kind of production. The most persistent and successful is Spanish artist Escif, who has recently come up with several tactics that allow him to play with the context in meaningful ways even within the meagre time frame usually allowed for a mural piece.⁵ More importantly, he has lately been able to

produce networks of human-scale, context-based pieces even when working for a mural festival or an institution.⁶

10. Conclusion

Art has always been one of the attractions that make areas undergoing gentrification desirable for the middle class. Street art soon proved to be more effective than galleries because of the gritty “street credibility” it can lend to the areas it appears on. A latest step in this direction is the mural, arguably the most compelling art-related tool for the whitewashing of an area. Murals work as a safer and more efficient alternative to street art. This is because they are more visible, they are more appealing for casual observers whose awareness of the context is only superficial, they are free from any excess of contextualisation that would divert the attention of consumers to the actual environment, and they lack any transversal quality that could call into question the limits demarcated by property.

There is one concluding question that this analysis needs to address: if murals are less interesting than street art in so many ways, how is it possible that they have taken its place? The answer is simple: because murals work better in a photograph. And, for many years now, street art has been experienced mostly through photographs.

The reason that murals work better than street art in a photograph is because they have so much less to lose. As we have seen, most of the work of a street artist takes place in contextual, geographic and temporal dimensions. It has to do with playing with scale, playing with contexts, and with repeated encounters. To actually appreciate good street art viewers need to be physically there, they need to experience the whole context of the piece, and they need to accumulate encounters with the artwork by exploring through space and time.

0), painted in Aalborg, Denmark, in 2014.

6 - See Escif's (2014 - ongoing) *Promenade* series.

5 - See for example Escif's mural work *Free Gaza (slow wall / km*

A photograph captures only a very small fraction of all these dimensions. It records just one particular instant in the life of a piece, it leaves out of the frame most of the visual context, it fails to capture any other sensorial feature of the environment, and it fatally isolates the piece from the network it belongs to. Conversely, the main value in a mural tends to be its scale, and that works perfectly in a photograph.

Due to its ephemerality, street art used to have a very limited audience. By allowing the immediate and widespread sharing of images, photography and the internet vastly widened the potential public of street art pieces, and thus caused a huge rise in the production of street art. But this eventually backfired, because in the realm of photographs – of decontextualised art – a piece of street art is seldom as attractive as a big mural. It has been our reliance on the photograph as the main tool for experiencing street art that has eventually caused the demise of the practice.

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