

Curating street art

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Abstract

After being largely ignored for decades, street art has in the last ten years been increasingly assimilated by society and the art system. Numerous artists who started their careers producing street work on their own initiative and without seeking permission are now being commissioned to create official public art – mostly murals – and pieces for galleries, museums and collections. This paper looks at the differences between producing art in public space without permission and producing art for the gallery, and at the possible approaches to the commission of gallery artworks related to the street practice of an artist. It ends with an analysis of the problems and possibilities of commissioning pieces to be produced in the street without permission.

The meaning of the term “curating” has widened over the last two decades. While it originally designated a very specific task within the environment of museums and art galleries, it is now used in many other fields as a better-sounding substitute for “selecting”.¹ In the context of this paper the term refers to the act of selecting and arranging artworks in order to give shape to a particular way of understanding them, a process that is completed by writing theoretical texts to help shed light on this vision and on the artworks themselves.

The term “street art” has never had a fixed meaning, and in the last ten years it has become even more ambiguous. It is now regularly used to refer to institutional murals, as well as to artworks created for the white cube of galleries and museums. Within the context of this paper, though, we will use it to refer to pieces produced in public space without permission, as it was predominantly used in the first years of the last decade.

1. Where, when, how and why

Producing a piece of street art is mostly about playing with its context, and the same can be said about graffiti², a direct precedent of street art. From the smallest tag or sticker to the biggest roller piece, the artwork is not so much about what is being written, painted or pasted, but about where, when, how and why this appears. The visual element added to the context can be understood as an excuse to trigger a

game of choosing spots and working with them – playing with existing forms, colors, textures, meanings, connotations and history, playing with scale, distance, visibility, intimacy, surprise and risk, among other factors. The core of the artistic process deals with exploring the landscape, discovering and adapting to different contexts, and thus giving shape to a particular understanding of the built environment.³

This adaptation to contexts is often achieved through the finding, customisation and design of tools and materials. In order to access surfaces and writing on them in fast and safe ways, reaching farther and leaving more permanent marks, graffiti writers had to come up with ways to customise the aerosol – not originally conceived as an art tool, they had to come up with the shoe polish applicator filled with homemade ink, the marker filled with glass etching liquid, the combination of pole and roller or the fire extinguisher filled with paint. Street artists have adopted these resources and created their own long list, including the stencil, the wheatpasted cut-out paper, and project-based approaches such as Invader’s tiles or MOMO’s bike-mounted tool set for pasting posters on high surfaces.⁴

Street art pieces are better understood not as objects but as events.⁵ They are not static, they evolve and degrade together with their viewers, as genuine parts of their environment. The practice of street art involves the modulation of time, artists take creative decisions in that dimension. For example, pieces that appear occasionally throughout a long

period of time deliver a very different message than those which accumulate suddenly. Also, an artist with an intimate knowledge of her working environment can choose surfaces that will allow works to last longer.

An additional and even more crucial quality of street art has to do with the idea of propagation. A street artwork rarely exists in isolation, it usually functions as part of a series of related pieces scattered through space and time, forming networks and paths. For the viewer, enjoying street art involves repeated encounters through space and time. This allows an excuse to explore, to visit places one would have unlikely visited otherwise, to experience the environment with new eyes.

2. The white cube versus public space

The white cube of galleries and museums is purposefully empty and inert. This is of course a very loud and clear message in itself, meaning the viewer has left the ordinary world and entered the hierarchical space where art is supposed to exist. But if we forget about that and agree to play the aesthetic game of the white cube, it is as inert as a space can be. Its purpose is to let the artwork display its values without any forms or meanings interfering. The artist is expected to fill a void with forms and meanings, all of them detached from life by virtue of the inertness of their setting.

In the white cube there is little chance for working with a context, with existing forms or textures, meanings or history. There is far less chance to play with scale or distance than there is in public space. The artist is not forced to come up with tools. There is no exploring, no reinventing a whole environment. There is no modulation of time, nor any witnessing how a piece naturally evolves. It is not about where, when or how – it is mostly about what. In the white cube the artist is expected to create self-contained messages frozen in time. Public space, on the other hand, is far from being inert – it is a chaotic amalgam, as different from the white cube as it can be as a setting for art making. When intervening in public space the artist faces a whole scenario full of superimposed shapes, messages and connotations, and tries to take these into account while adding a new element that plays with them. Therefore, to simply reproduce the images of graffiti or street art on a canvas and in a white cube has never

been a successful approach to art making. The problem is that graffiti and street art images are not self-contained messages, they rely on their contexts to fully work. When observed as detached elements they typically fall short and feel obvious. By virtue of the same logic, many complex and nuanced artworks conceived for the white cube depend so much on an inert environment to be appreciated that they would all but disappear if placed in the street.

The import of street art images into the white cube can, nevertheless, be done in more successful ways. A good example of this can be found in the work of Californian artist Barry McGee, who has produced gallery artworks using the black and white rendered faces he typically painted in the streets in the early 1990s. These images are fairly straightforward, probably not interesting enough to function by themselves. The artist's approach has then been to paint them on multiple small, framed supports, and then use these elements to compose the kind of complex installations expected in a white cube.

The result of this tactic, though, is artworks with no direct relation to the artist's street practice. Like McGee, many graffiti and street artists nowadays have become more or less fluent in the language of contemporary art and developed a studio-based line of work with no explicit links to their street practice. This activity would plainly fall within the scope of contemporary art-making, and curating this kind of pieces could not be accurately described as "curating street art".

There are approaches, though, that can allow a curator to select objects intimately and meaningfully related to the street practice of an artist. However, most of these approaches are not in the hands of curators but of the artists.

3. Importing street artworks

Some strategies allow to import into the white cube not the images used in an artist's street art output, but the street artworks themselves. These would include, of course, the increasingly common method of tearing pieces from buildings, wall and all. This procedure has nevertheless the same flaws described in the preceding section, since the piece becomes frozen in time, detached from the series it belongs to and from the contextual experience that gives it meaning.

A common method is to photograph a street piece and exhibit the resulting image. In the decade of 1960 land art, performance art and other artistic approaches that aimed to flee the white cube were brought back into it through photography, and this has been the case too with street art. But photography has a very limited ability to capture a context-based piece, as pioneering street artist Daniel Buren discussed in depth decades ago.⁶

A photograph records an artwork from only one arbitrary point of view. It captures only one arbitrary part of the visual context, and frames out the rest. It captures only one arbitrary moment in time – one particular circumstance around the piece, one particular weather, light, one particular state of the piece. Also, a picture cannot capture smell, it does not allow the viewer to touch or hear. Curating street art through photographs thus reduces a multidimensional artwork into something far detached from the original experience.⁷

4. Importing tools and materials

As we have seen, an essential aspect of street art is how the artist gets to produce the artwork. Therefore, importing into the white cube the tools used in this production process can be an effectual way to get the viewer closer to the street piece. A good example of this approach would be North American curator J. R. Rushmore's exhibition *All big letters*,⁸ which aimed to portray the methodologies of graffiti by displaying tools used for that practice together with photographs of artists engaged in different techniques.

A related tactic would be to bring materials from the street into the white cube. North American artist Brad Downey has often made use of this approach, for example in *House of Cards* (2009), where he exhibits a sculpture built with pavement tiles taken from the street, or in *CCTV Takedown* (2007), where he exhibits a CCTV camera he stole from a building's facade. In both cases the collectable artwork is completed with a photograph that gives proof of where the objects displayed at the gallery were originally located, thus portraying their relation with the artist's street practice.⁹ This approach was explored by land artists in the 1960s, among them Richard Long, who became known for sculptures produced in the countryside using materials found on-site. Apart from photographing these pieces and exhibiting the resulting images, the British artist has produced analogous

sculptures as gallery artworks by importing the materials into the white cube.¹⁰ Even the coupling of an object taken from the street with a photograph that proves the relation of this object with the artist's street practice was part of experiments in the 1970s. This was the case, for example, of the piece *Office Baroque* (1977) by North American artist Gordon Matta-Clark, resulting from his homonymous intervention produced in Antwerp in the same year.

5. The white cube as archive

A particularly successful formula makes simultaneous use of various tactics described above and uses the white cube as an archive of objects and documentation related to a street project. Swedish artist Adam's exhibition *Slussen*, produced at Berlin's art space Urban Art Info in 2009, is a good example.

The homonymous street intervention project portrayed in the exhibition consisted in locating and entering a forgotten maintenance shed in the middle of the city, fitting its door with an ingenious locking system anyone could open by following some simple instructions, furnishing it as a living space, then installing a trap door and a folding ladder that gave access to a network of tunnels existing underneath. The exhibition included photographs of the inside and outside of the shed, a life-size floor plan of the shed painted on the floor of the gallery to give an idea of scale, and some objects used in the intervention, such as the folding ladder.

6. Hybrid projects

One last approach to the problem of importing street pieces into the white cube are experiments that could be described as "hybrid". These are art projects produced specifically for the art space which simultaneously function as street artworks. An example can be found in Spanish artist E1000's exhibition *Tras la superficie*,¹¹ for which he produced a series of small and simple sculptures he then hid in various nooks and crannies around the city. What visitors to the exhibition could see and purchase were photographs of the sculptures displayed together with envelopes. Enclosed in each envelope the collector would find directions to follow in order to gain access to the object, and in some cases the key needed to open the small maintenance hatch in which the piece hid.

But if there is one artist who has worked steadily and successfully in devising this kind of hybrid tactic, it is French artist Eltono. The earliest example of this line of work is his project *Pubblico*.¹² For this project Eltono produced several runs of posters featuring one of his characteristic geometric designs, using a different color combination in each run. He then shuffled the posters into stacks and pasted these in the streets, leaving the corners of the posters unpasted. After allowing some days for passers-by to naturally and gradually tear the posters off, unveiling random parts of the different coloured layers, the artist chose a particular moment in this evolution and took the stacks down to be exhibited at the gallery.

Eltono knows his outdoor pieces are interesting in part because they are living things that evolve due to forces he cannot control, and in this project he found a way to harness these forces and make them work for him. A way to capture the dynamic nature of street art pieces, and of public space in general, and making it crystallise into an artwork conceived for the white cube.

After this first experiment Eltono has produced several others that follow analogous mechanisms. I have been lucky enough to curate two of them for two Spanish museums, respectively *Branco de España* in 2010 and *Deambular* in 2012. In this last exhibition Eltono expanded the formula, conceiving a diverse series of mechanisms which gave shape to indoor artworks based not only on actions of passers-by but also on street activities of the artist himself.¹³ This essentially similar but more multifaceted line of work has been developed since then by the artist in several exhibitions.

7. Curating street art outdoors

Large scale, institutional murals have little to do with street art. Although they are nowadays usually advertised under the term street art, institutional murals would be more accurately described as a form of public art. Public art and street art are two fundamentally different approaches to making art in public space, and they result in contrasting experiences for both the artist and the viewer. A detailed account of the differences between these two practices can be found in my contribution to the preceding volume of this journal.¹⁴ These differences have to do with the where, when, how and why

– with the contextual, temporal, and geographic dimensions discussed above, and with the contrast between the monumental scale of murals and the human scale of street art. Nevertheless, some alternative approaches exist that can actually allow the curation of street art outdoors.

The first approach involves curating after-the-fact, that is, developing a curatorial project around pieces that already exist and have been produced outside of it. One example of this can be found in the New York-based Street Museum of Art, who describes its activities with the term “guerrilla curating”. For each project the team behind the Street Museum of Art selects a series of street art pieces existing in a given city and writes short texts about them, then prints these texts on labels mimicking those found next to canvases in galleries and museums. The labels are installed on street walls close to the pieces they comment upon, and the interventions are located on an online map.

A much more common form of curating after-the-fact is the street art guided tour, in which a person guides a group of people around the city showing them street art pieces and speaking about them. The street art tour could be considered a form of curating in that it involves selecting a series of pieces, proposing a particular order, and using words to give background on the pieces, and conceivably also on the selection. One usual criticism of this formula, though, is how it involves a loss of the elements of exploration and surprise in the experience of the viewer.

This would lead us to the final subject of analysis of this text, that is, creating a curatorial project by commissioning an artist to produce a street art project. It could be argued that the model of street art project described above, composed of a series of smaller, site-specific pieces, could be produced with permission. But seeking permissions for numerous locations can become a long and difficult process, which would fatally hinder the flexible, even improvised nature characteristic of the work of many street artists. Also, street artists tend to favor neglected surfaces, whose owners can be difficult to find.

Is it possible then to create a curatorial project by commissioning an artist to produce a series of pieces in public space without seeking explicit permissions? It is indeed, and such projects have taken place many times. Most curatorial

projects of this kind, though, come not from the street art scene but from the world of contemporary art. A good example would be the event *Art in Odd Places*, produced yearly since 2005 in New York City, as well as in other cities. For each edition, a group of curators commission artists to produce site-specific performances and interventions – typically of a small scale– without permission and under a certain topic, then publish information and texts about pieces, artists and topic.

Only a handful of events within the street art scene have developed projects involving the commission of street pieces to be produced without permission. Among the few festivals known for doing this systematically are *Nuart* from Stavanger, Norway, and *Bien Urbain* from Besançon, France. Both events organise the production of big murals, as is the case of the numerous festivals linked to the street art scene, but also invite artists to freely roam the city to produce series of human-scale, site-specific pieces without seeking explicit permissions. Nevertheless, a lack of in-depth texts examining the commissioned artworks, and in some cases also the ideas behind the commission, would distance these projects from the understanding of curation described above.

One artist to mention here would be Escif from Spain, who in the last few years has often tried to follow this methodology when invited by events or institutions. I was privileged to commission him to produce a project of this kind for an event in Spain in 2015¹⁵ and the results were nothing short of fantastic – proving that curating street art outdoors is not only possible, but necessary in these times of institutional murals, monetised exhibitions and overall denaturalisation of the practice.

8. Conclusions

What could the differences be, then, between curated street art and street art that takes place on its own? What can curators and arts managers contribute? A curated project can cover an artist's travel, accommodation and expenses so she can work in different environments. It can provide her with tools, materials, and a studio from which to work. But, most importantly, it can contribute three things: it can get documenters to thoroughly capture the process and results of the artist's work, it can add a critical dimension to the

project in the form of texts, and it can put all these results together in a publication that can give the project a much larger reach.

As described above, photography has a very limited ability to capture the multidimensionality of a piece of street art. This can be circumvented to some extent by taking not one but multiple photographs – by capturing the pieces from different points of view, with different framings, in different moments of the day or the year, under different lights and weather conditions, with different circumstances around them, and at different stages in their life as they gradually disappear. Such thorough documentation work can rarely be undertaken by the artist, but it could conceivably be done as part of a curated project.

It is in texts, though, where a curated project can really make a difference. Texts can convey many aspects photographs may not be able to portray – they can describe aspects of the context, of the process of creation of the piece, of the relation between piece and context, of the life of the piece, or of the experience of the viewer. And, more crucially, theoretical texts can help understand the artwork by offering a critical view on it and situating it in its historic and artistic context.

A concluding question would be, why so very few of the numerous existing street art-related festivals work in this direction? A first, obvious reason are the potential fines, a problem that can be largely avoided by hiring artists known for a tactful approach to selecting locations, scale, content and working materials. A second reason has to do with money. Getting an artist to study an area in order to produce a series of contextually meaningful pieces requires inviting her for an extended period of time, which would be significantly more expensive than the short stay typically allocated for the production of a mural. A third reason is related to ease of production. Securing one permission instead of many involves of course less work, and owners of prominent walls are usually easy to find. But, maybe more importantly, a mural is a more obviously valuable addition to a piece of real estate than a small intervention, therefore getting the permission for it can be easier.

A fourth reason has to do with how attractive the resulting documentation is for the fast online consumption

characteristic of today's culture in general, and of the street art audience in particular. While a photograph falls short in the capture of a street art piece, it can easily portray a work's spectacular large scale, which tends to be the main value in today's murals. As a result of this, a mural can be much more profitable in terms of online virality, which is how the success of a street art-related festival is often gauged.

A fifth, final reason is related to the fact that fully appreciating a street art project involves coming across it repeatedly and being familiar with its context. It is therefore unlikely that viewers whose relation with an area is only superficial will perceive its values, or even notice it. Consequently, tourists and customers of bars and restaurants, who visit areas to quickly consume them rather than to live them, will be more attracted to a conspicuous and easily-digested mural. This can explain why street art-related festivals favor murals, since facilitating gentrification and other forms of commercialisation of an area is often among the goals of either their organisers or of the city officials who allow the events to take place.

Notes

1 See Williams (2009).

2 With the term graffiti we refer here to the name writing culture that originated in New York city in the decade of 1970 and was later exported to the whole world.

3 For a detailed analysis of all these factors see Abarca (2016).

4 See Abarca (forthcoming).

5 The idea of street artworks as events instead of objects was mentioned by North American artist Swoon in Sudbanthad (2004).

6 See for example Buren (1988), p. 5.

7 Some artists have found strategies that allow them to give

photographs a closer link to the street artworks they capture. Among them is French artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest, who in the early 1970s pioneered the wheatpaste technique. The litographic prints he typically pastes in the streets are based on charcoal sketches, and he has created studio artworks that couple a sketch with a photograph of the resulting print installed on a wall. See for example *Etude Johannesburg* (2002).

8 The exhibition took place in 2017 at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford.

9 French artist Invader came up with a related formula in the studio pieces he calls *alias*. An *alias* is one of his trademark mosaics encased inside a block of plexiglass. Each of Invader's street mosaics is different from all others and is identified with a code name. Each *alias* is a unique and exact replica of one particular street piece, and it includes information of where and when the original was installed.

10 See for example *Cornish Slate Ellipse* (2009).

11 The exhibition took place in 2015 at the Antonia Puyó gallery in Zaragoza.

12 The exhibition took place in 2009 at Rojo Art Space in Milano.

13 For a full description of the projects see Abarca (2012). The publication includes an in-depth essay about the projects, and about the problems of working with street art in the white cube.

14 Abarca (2016).

15 *Escif en Font de la Pólvora* for Milestone Festival in Girona, Spain, 2015.

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