

Whisper finders: Learning from Shoreditch. March 2017

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Abstract

Whisper Finders: Learning from Shoreditch is a personal reflection after ten years of research about the Art History of Street Art in Shoreditch, paying special attention to the iconological level of analysis and the several social and historical circumstances that made Shoreditch one of the most iconic places for Street Art as an art movement. The tone of the paper, pushing boundaries beyond academic borders and inspired by the ethos of Sir Eduardo Paolozzi, strives to reach wider audiences and engage fellow art historians and academics in an active social discussion.

Keywords: Art History, Art Theory, Shoreditch, Street Art, Tours, Paolozzi

1. Introduction

This paper, 'Whisper finders: Learning from Shoreditch', borrows its title from the book 'Learning from Las Vegas' (Venturi, et al., 1972). It is the result of ten years of research and personal reflection about the Art History of Street Art in London, mainly focusing on its development and evolution within the area of the East End, taking Brick Lane and Shoreditch as the centre of the investigation. For this research, the equivalent of the Summa Artis would be Hookedblog (www.hookedblog.co.uk) and Vandalog (www.vandalog.com); the main libraries would be The Black Rat Press, Pure Evil Gallery, and the Stolen Space; and the school, Shoreditch Street Art Tours with NoLionsInEngland¹ as the tutor. For that reason please allow me to depart from my academic tone of Art Historian for the prestigious University Complutense of Madrid, and be a little bit more casual in this paper.

After five years in the study of the History of Art, and three of a traditional doctorate in Contemporary Art, all in the University Complutense of Madrid, this research fixed London as the centre of the matter of study. The fieldwork was established there because there was something special happening particularly in the East part of town. Over time, Hip-Hop Graffiti gave birth to Post Graffiti movements (i.e.

Abstract Graffiti, Calligraphiti, or Hyper-realistic Graffiti) and other bastard sons, more disrespectful to the non-written rules of traditional graffiti, that together started to create a visual landscape closer to the paintings that could be studied at a university degree in history of art. Also, there was this artist called Banksy doing very unusual artistic interventions. Several interesting circumstances were showing that, following the humanistic spirit, it was necessary to know more about this entire social and artistic panorama. Moreover, to reach an understanding of the Iconological level (Panofsky, 1939)² it is necessary to understand the culture, in a holistic sense, of that art movement. And why Shoreditch? Because it was considered as one of the international capitals of street art (Schacter, 2013)³, and thanks to its level of pieces, and pictorial quality of the artists who painted there, it is easy to believe that.

2. A tour around Shoreditch

When talking about Shoreditch and street art, the next word that usually comes to mind is tours. So, please allow yourself to be taken for a tour in Shoreditch so we can talk about the things happening there and why this is relevant to us today. To understand why this art movement finds a place in the East End we need to understand a little bit of the history of Shoreditch. At the Old City of London extra

muros, legend (and Wikipedia) says it owes its name to Jane Shore, mistress of a king, who was buried in a ditch in this part of town⁴. Shoreditch was also known as Suburbs of Sin during Shakespeare's times, who as a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men would have walked the streets of Shoreditch. Next to both The Theatre and The Curtain is now a wall with street art.

It is important to talk also about the different waves of immigration that made this area special. If we talk about Street Art, the map is not just the Shoreditch that is actually part of Hackney Council, but also the Brick Lane area, that belongs to Tower Hamlets Council. The fact of their separation by council does not take the feeling of being part of the same place. The Old Nichol, the slum that hosted Boundary Estate, which is one (or the) oldest council estates in the world, was perhaps also part of this same neighborhood. Obviously, it is not the same Old Street as Heneage Street but the whole area feels connected somehow. That area around Brick Lane historically has received several waves of immigration (Cox, 2013). First were the Huguenots, then the Jewish community, after them

the Bangladeshi one, and nowadays, among many other young people, are the Europeans (many of them Spaniards) who populate those streets, at least until Brexit. The fact of being one of the most historically deprived neighborhoods in the United Kingdom doesn't help the traditional popular perception of the neighborhood as a dangerous place. As an excuse for that opinion, the sole mention of Jack the Ripper makes sense but it is not only the legendary killer who used this area for his crimes. Prostitution and drug dealing were historically present around Brick Lane. In fact, the infamous gangsters, the Kray twins had their local pub, The Blind Beggar, just around the corner. Near there is Bethnal Green Station, "the worst civilian disaster of World War II" that was actually not a bombing - some still consider it a case of public negligence⁵. This was an area full of industry. The silk weaving of the Huguenots and the small leather factories of the Bangladeshi community, plus the big complex of the Truman Brewery made the traditionally working class spirit of Bethnal Green extend around this area. Many of these small and big factories will become artist's studios over time (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Artists studios, Old Truman Brewery, London 2013. Will Edgecombe.

When a neighborhood is perceived as dangerous, the rent is cheaper and therefore more affordable than in other parts of town, and this is an area that was a clear example of that. Also, the limited public investment in an area with traditional criminal activity left room to maneuver for the graffiti writers and street artists who prefer to practice without having to ask for permission, (with the philosophical, logistical and practical effects which it implies). All these circumstances make this Old Nichol a perfect breeding ground for this artistic movement. However, something else is needed.

Sometimes it is the individual and collaborative effort of several individuals or groups that makes all of this possible. It would be worth mentioning here Jonathan and The Foundry, now Ew Leal and The Red. This is necessary because to understand Street Art in London, to understand the exhibitions is important. And the first ones used to be at The Foundry. Then the phenomenon of the artist-run galleries started in the area with the Stolen Space of D*Face, Pure Evil and the Pure Evil Gallery, Dale H Grimshaw and the Signal Gallery... And Pictures on Walls, maybe also with artists involved (as Steve Lazarides says in the program: "Rear Window: Art for Everyone? Elite Art in Age of Populism

by Professor Julian Stallabrass)⁶. Artist-run galleries are essential to understanding why Shoreditch has such an important place in this art movement. And it's because, while in Barcelona or Berlin there are always walls, there were not so many places to do art exhibitions, or at least not in the same conditions as in London. International artists came to London to do amazing shows, and from there the sky was the limit.

3. A different way of art

Artist-run galleries are very special places. When you go to see art you usually go to museums and it is almost like going to the temple, to the church. These are spaces where people behave politely and sometimes kids don't feel very comfortable, unless the gallery, like the wonderful Whitechapel Gallery, actively welcomes children. You also have the chance to go to commercial art galleries. Commercial art galleries tend not to be very welcoming places either. If you look like someone who might not have the budget to buy art there, sometimes the personnel are not very nice. An anonymous visitor might complain that they are looked at judgmentally and asked if they are a friend



Fig. 2. Martha Cooper at Stolen Space, London, 2016. Will Edgecombe.

of the artist. But artist-run galleries, especially around this mentioned area usually tend to enjoy a much more relaxed and welcoming approach. This is especially present during the openings of new exhibitions when fans could have the chance to meet the artist while asking their questions and taking photos with them (Fig. 2).

Graffiti and Street Art are also very special in this sense. And it is because when things are in the streets they are special. Why do some people come to Shoreditch and freak out? Why do they love it so much? Probably because in this small world, art is not just for the few. Art is something you go to see in museums and art galleries and the general neighbors of deprived areas like Tower Hamlets don't usually pay a visit to these kinds of places because they don't feel very welcomed there. If you go to see contemporary art without having any previous knowledge of what are you going to see, it could happen that you get stuck in front of a painting until you get a meaning, but it usually doesn't really work that way. When art historians developed high modernism, conceptual art, and the way to talk about it, they also created a big gap between Art History and society.

And suddenly art is there, in the street, visiting you without prior notice, or even permission, and you are a participant in an artistic experience. Suddenly art is part of your day. There is a special magic in that feeling. Comparing art to sound, sometimes the art piece is as big as a shout, other times it is what some like to call whispers, small hidden pieces that to be experienced you have to keep your eyes peeled - like Javier Abarca's mention in *Urbanario* of Lachlan McDowall's *Pokemon Go* article (MacDowell, 2016). That is a nice thing to try to teach when doing street art tours: to show the guests how to keep their eyes opened. To do that the metaphor of the *Matrix* film is a great example: imagine seeing with the tour guide's eyes. It usually works, the guests then come to a new world, where they talk about many things related to Street Art as an art movement. One of the most fulfilling parts of doing street art tours is to have the chance to talk with guests from all backgrounds, for example, a conversation with grandmas about the difference between a tag, a throw-up, and a piece; apart from the fact that usually, the guests clap at the end. Also at the end, talking about Banksy, it is good to talk about poking bubbles. Artists use a sense of humor to help us process the social critique, like the sugar coating of the pill. They poke the bubbles of our comfort

zones, to make us awake. That awakening is not only social and political, it is also physical. It refers to our relationship with the street.

In the modern urbanism where places of play and meeting like the square and the park are replaced gradually by shopping centres and commercial interests, it is harder to find "the urban flâneur" that Javier Abarca mentioned in his conference about Graffiti and psychogeography on May 2016 at the Facultad de Bellas Artes of Universidad Politécnica of Valencia. Cities are usually perceived as dangerous and their non-commercial streets as hostile. Fear is a major part of the relationship of general society with the streets. That perception of the space changes when you have art on it. And if you can relate to that piece of artwork the experience can be even more powerful and pleasant. Don Francisco Calvo Serraller used to explain in his classes of Impressionist Painting at the Complutense University of Madrid, how to look at art showing the alumni the beauty of a single asparagus. If you can see the paint over the matter, the beauty over everything else, you are in that *Matrix* mentioned before. It seems different worlds to talk about Manet and Graffiti, but they belong in the same world. It is a world where we can see deeper and where the human experience is more human, and so are we.

There is something special in transmitting that experience, in transmitting your passion. Art historians tend to be very passionate, maybe because when you are an art historian there is not much of another option. You have to be passionate about art. Why the passion? Because it is a very difficult profession, you have to study a lot and it is not one of the most demanded ones, usually there are not so many (even minimally paid) relevant job vacancies for art historians. So you really need to love art. If you are just a traditional art historian you will be someone that does not create art yourself. So you have to be "really, really, really passionate, crazy about art" to become an art historian. If so, you have to be madly passionate to be into Street Art. We - critics and art historians - tend to be perceived as very snobby people. We like our big words; we like to use them at all possible times. We feel an almost "internal pleasure" in showing how intelligent we are, and how cultured we are, and how much we dominate language and knowledge. But I understand art and I understand knowledge as a language, a language that the more you know the better you talk. And at the end talking is transmitting a message (thoughts or feelings)⁷.

Traditional History of Art has created a big difference between high culture and low culture, and we are now moving in a very close line between them both. For that reason sometimes we need to revisit our relationship with what was considered low culture and touch it to embrace it. To make us remember that we are here not only for the ones that would read our papers and the other art historians, if not for the interest of the general public, for the society in general, and society as a whole. Post-modernist discussion created a kind of high snobbism in contemporary art that changed the way art historians speak to people. Creating a contemporary art full of codes which if you don't understand you are lost. Maybe art historians can take some of those codes away. It seems a cry of attention: we need to be able to transmit our knowledge. But for that we need people to understand us.

4. Paolozzi and the separation between high and low art

It is not necessary to go too far from Brick Lane to better understand the tension between high and low culture. In this theoretical tour, a visit to the Whitechapel Art Gallery can fit properly. Created next to the Whitechapel Library, a "lantern for learning" in the East End⁸, and always dedicated to the showing of Contemporary Art, the Whitechapel Gallery has in its list of exhibitions some of the greatest artists of the last hundred years. The first exhibition on Rothko in Britain was there. Frida Kahlo had a show with Tina Modotti there too, and even the most famous painting of Picasso, The Guernica, was shown there in 1938 (and visitors paid with boots)⁹. Following a more recent exhibition list that includes Gillian Wearing and Sarah Lucas, and just after William Kentridge's 'Thick Time' exhibition, the Whitechapel Gallery presented a retrospective with over 300 pieces of artwork by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi.

That closeness between high art and low art has a strong presence in the art of Sir Eduardo Paolozzi. As seen in this retrospective exhibition during 2017, Paolozzi had a deep taste for primitive art. He used to complain about the lack of understanding for that kind of art in Britain in his introduction to the exhibition 'Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl. An exhibition at the Museum of Mankind' in 1985 in London titled 'Primitive Art, Paris and London.' There, Paolozzi commented:

"In those days most people in England were just not interested in carvings from Africa and the Pacific and art students were rarely (..) encouraged to go and look at such things. (...) This neglect of the primitive was, I feel, part of a wider English insularity. It is that insularity, for example, which still feels that such things are- with the exception of Henry Moore not part of the history of modern art. There was and is a dislike for both the primitive and the modern."

(Paolozzi, 1985)

Paolozzi, as commented in the essay *Pop Art Redefined* by Daniel F. Herrmann, curator of the Whitechapel show, was an "avid reader of Amédée Ozenfant's 'Foundations of Modern Art', an introduction to art that did away with stylistic genealogy. Instead, it posted structural semblances between all cultural forms of the centers of artistic production (..). Here art (..) was to be found in the vast repository of "everyday life experience" from aerial photography to mechanical drawing" (Herrmann, 2017)

Paolozzi himself commented in the catalog of *Lost Magic Kingdoms* about finding a copy of the original book in the public library while stationed at Buxton "that was a revelation". (...) "There was that special French sensibility which was able to embrace all those different sorts of things at once, at the same time, each with each." (Paolozzi, 1985) That is the contemporary spirit in Paolozzi, that holistic understanding. That is what gives him a seat in the glorious list of talents that advance History of Art:

I still find that French approach, the need, the passion, to consider and handle things at the same time quite endearing, and very necessary for me. And it also justifies the reason I had to leave London in the 1940's and go to France - just to show I was not such an oddball. And I have lived by that ever since, the concern with different materials, disparate ideas and to me that is the excitement: it became almost a description of the creative art to juggle with these things. (ibid)

It is probably this sensibility for all things at once that gave to Paolozzi the "primogeniture" (Herrmann, 2017) of Pop Art as an art movement. When talking about Street Art it is normal to mention Pop Art and compare both art movements. The same happens with the artistic figures of Banksy and Andy



Fig. 3. Paolozzi murals at Tottenham Court Road Station, London 2017. Dave Stuart.

Warhol that have been compared in several exhibitions and that share the understanding of how society works and how to talk back to it. But in Paolozzi the level is deeper. Pop for Paolozzi references popular culture, but in the bigger sense of the term, popular culture as general culture. And general culture as all forms of culture, from the primitive to the futurist, from science to fantasy, from bronze to screen print, from fishermen to pin-up girls. Paolozzi knows how to find beauty in the asparagus and is trying to show us.

With his taste for 'non-art' shared with Independent Group friends and his "drive" in the Bunk! lecture, with "his method of collaging sculpture that blatantly disregarded the sculptural dogma of older generations" (ibid), with 'Patio and Pavilion' at the This is Tomorrow exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956, and the Hammer Prints Ltd (1954), Paolozzi acted as a hidden Picasso, an artist who opened many doors for following artistic generations. He would be a great street artist. His taste for the wall can be appreciated in his large murals (like the ones in Kingfisher

Shopping Centre, Redditch done in 1981)¹⁰, and his love for the tube in the designs for Tottenham Court Road (Image 3). He also left us a nice collection of public sculptures, so he shared our taste for art in the streets.

5. Conclusion: Art for everybody

Maybe it is from Paolozzi that we can understand how to find a new tone. Maybe, sometimes, as academics we go to our very high chairs in our very high academic places and we forget that this kind of art, graffiti and street art, is meant to be for people in the streets. For everybody. To make us realize that it is important to know that we are living in very special times. When I'm in the tour I usually tell people that when I was a student I used to imagine how cool it would be to live in Velazquez's time and seeing *The Meninas* for the first time and think "oh, how risky!", or living in Picasso's time and seeing the *Guernica* for the first time and find yourself thinking "what is this?" and seeing the first trains crossing New York in the Subway and saying "why does it say Dondi there?, why is there a Mickey Mouse on a train

saying Merry Christmas?”, and all this crazy, magical stuff. Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to confess, I really think we are living in Banksy’s time. I really think we are very, very, very lucky arty people. Because we are living through one of the most amazing art movements of all times. When Ben Eine is interviewed for the video of OUTSIDE IN Art in the Streets MOCA exhibition, he said that Graffiti “is bigger than Pop. (...) it is the biggest art movement ever” (OUTSIDE IN The Story of Art in the Streets, Ben Eine- min 2.40)¹¹.

And I always think that this is the quotation that I’m going to put on the cover of my doctoral thesis. Because I truly believe it. I truly believe that we are very lucky arty people who are living a very special time. A time when art doesn’t need to be in the temple, doesn’t need to be in the market, suddenly it is on the streets, and suddenly we can relate to it in a very different way, suddenly it can catch us off guard like the bronze sculptures of British artist Jonesy (Image 4), those whispers as we called them before. All these new artistic experiences make a really new generation with a very different visual landscape. And hopefully, let’s try to be positive, I want to believe, that all that we have passed from the history of Graffiti with Taki183, and Dondi and Futura, and to the 90s generation, and the 2000s, and Banksy, and Faile, and El Mac, and Swoon... to all of these wonderful artists making their art on the streets for the enjoyment of the general public, have created a new way of art. That is a massive call from society to get down from our chairs, to change our tone, and be able to transmit our knowledge because this world needs art historians, this world needs us, this world needs academics... this world needs art. We also need to poke their bubbles. To wake them up. We are creating zombie societies that are only driven by commercial status, or forces. During one of the most exciting moments of the universal history of art a large percentage of society is unaware. *Panem et circenses* have created an over stimulated, over saturated society that has lost surprise, imagination, and empathy.

As art historians it is also our job to educate the public. To make them realize what is happening and how they can participate in all of this. And we, art historians, academics and public in general, need to be people of our time, and we need to participate in our culture. It is important to go to your local art gallery, to join their mailing list, to support your local or international artist, to buy some artwork. If I can do it, you can do it too.

Finally, I would like to take Mr. Jeffrey Deitch as an example. Deitch is the mastermind behind the prestigious art organization Deitch Projects (www.deitch.com), one of those projects was the ‘Street Market’ of Barry McGee, Steve Powers, and Todd James. He is also the curator along with Aaron Rose and Roger Gastman as associate curators, of the 2011 Art in The Streets exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Francisco, while he was also the director of the museum. That exhibition helped to raise the level not only of display and the transmission of knowledge that an art exhibition presents, but also the deep understanding of an art movement and all those aspects of intangible culture that comes with it. Those aspects that are essential to its being. These two being the main topics of this Urban Creativity III congress call for papers, I feel the obligation to acknowledge Jeffrey Deitch publicly in a forum like this, someone who might not be a Ph.D. laureate but is a master for all of us who have the chance to learn from his work, to learn how to take this art movement to the place that it deserves in Art History, to the place where it belongs in society.

Because again, as Eine said in that video for Art in The Streets at MOCA (OUTSIDE IN The Story of Art in the Streets, Ben Eine- min 2.40):

When I first got into graffiti and it was like thousands of kids all over the world doing it. I was like - This is such a massive art movement, it is unbelievable. And it has taken, like, 25 years for it to get here. And reading one of the posters in the art gallery and it said “possibly the largest art movement since pop”, and it is bigger than pop art. And it is gonna, yeah, it is the biggest art movement ever.



Fig. 4. Jonesy sculpture, London 2017. Dave Stuart.

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Notes

¹ Dave Stuart. See acknowledgment. www.shoreditchstreetarttours.co.uk

² Panofsky (1939 - 30), from *Studies in Iconology: Intrinsic meaning or content*. It is apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.

³ Schacter (2013:153) Northern Europe, Cept: the Shoreditch and Hackney areas of east London—now a world center of graffiti and street art.

⁴ This legend is commemorated today by a large painting, at Haggerston Branch Library, of Jane Shore being retrieved from the ditch, and by a design on glazed tiles in a shop in Shoreditch High Street showing her meeting Edward IV.[2] Clunn, H.P. (1970) *The Face of London*. Spring Books: London: 312, 493. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoreditch>

⁵ 300 people were crushed into the stairwell within a few seconds, 173 of them died and over 90 were injured. Available at: <http://www.stairwaytoheavenmemorial.org>

⁶ Stallabrass, Julian (2017) *Rear Window: Art for Everyone? Elite Art in Age of Populism*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Sm4UxQkQQg&app=desktop>

⁷ The expression of or the ability to express thoughts and feelings by articulate sounds (Speech definition Oxford Dictionaries). Available at: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/speech>

⁸ Whitechapelgallery.org Available at: <http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/downloads/AMP.pdf>

⁹ The gallery was, and remains, free to all but in this case there was a proposed admission charge: a pair of workman's boots in good enough condition to be donated to the republican cause. They stood beneath the picture in massed ranks. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/mar/29/whitechapel-gallery-picasso>

¹⁰ Eduardo Paolozzi Kingfisher Shopping Centre, murals Redditch. Image available at: <http://c20society.org.uk/murals-campaign/22-eduardo-paolozzi-mosaic-murals-1981/>

¹¹ Ben Eine min 2.40; OUTSIDE IN The Story of Art in the Streets. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/61768230>

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