

The 'Place to Be' for Street Art Nowadays is no Longer the Street, it's the Internet

Katja Glaser

DFG Research Training Group 'Locating Media'

University of Siegen, Artur-Woll-Haus,

Am Eichenhang 50, 57076 Siegen

glaser@locatingmedia.uni-siegen.de

Abstract

The current practice of photographic presentation, documentation, circulation, reception and negotiation of street art (pictures) online leads to a reconfiguration of both the global and the local, and therefore, to new norms and power relations. This article discusses the reciprocal constitution of local street art practices and global art discourse, with special attention to the concept of location and placement. As will be shown, central photographers as well as bloggers and administrators of Facebook pages position themselves – and are positioned – as decisive experts, opinion makers and gatekeepers. By defining 'the global view of individual cities,' they significantly influence – and continuously reinforce – the formation of a somehow globally accepted street art canon. Whereas Facebook's positively connoted real time stream emerged into some kind of ubiquitously present 'street art monitoring system,' a dominant lack of profound critique and far-sighted contextualization can be observed regarding the negotiation of street art and urban art festivals. These 'trends,' in the end, allude to more general questions addressing topics of the creative city, gentrification processes, urban policy and (de)centralized infrastructures. Subsequently, it becomes apparent that debates about spatial appropriation, advertising, legal restrictions, institutionalization, domestication, censorship, the quest for freedom and privacy as well as the questioning of hierarchies – which in the context of today's street art remain tied to the framework of the physical city – must be transferred to the internet. The internet and its central nodes are places of decision making which inevitably display the current (infra)structures of power. Therefore, a possible future, decisive and consistent step for street artists might be to both reclaim the city and the internet.

Keywords: Street Art, Street Art Photography, New Media, Social Networks, Creative City, Net Policy.

This paper is about recent developments of local, situated street art practices in the context of globally networked media technologies. For, in the course of ongoing globalization processes and mobile, portable and digitally networked media technologies, one can definitely detect significant changes in both the perception and production of street art. In a certain sense, one could even assert that it somehow 'leaves' the streets.

Instead of languishing in its temporary and ephemeral existence in the street, street art is more and more both located and situated on the internet. What happens is that, today, people can take street art pictures – let's say – 'on the run', passing by and strolling through the city space. Instantly,

they are able to upload their digital photographs, almost in real-time, into the data stream of the internet. Consequently, street art shows its presence on specific photo management sites like Flickr or Instagram, on street art blogs, websites, apps, or may be embedded into digital street maps. Its upload, circulation and distribution in or through social networks, in particular Facebook, plays an important role in this phenomenon. As will become clear, online practices (re) shape, retroact and reconfigure offline practices, and vice versa. Within this paper, I would like to pay particular attention to the global conception of local street art practices. I particularly want to highlight the reciprocal constitution of local street art practices and global art discourse, with special attention to the concepts of location and placement.

1.1 The 'Place to Be': Offline and Online Environments

Street artists are aware of the benefits that online documentation and circulation can bring for them. With this in mind, local street art practices change: If street artists want to make sure that their work will be seen, they place it on so called 'street art hubs'; or on spots where local street art tours pass. Generally speaking, there is no need for street artists to frequent risky spots anymore, if ever. A backyard, if well documented, could be equally valued.

Among other things, this leads to the development of so called 'street art for the internet.' With this term I refer to works that (almost entirely) manage to exist without physical presence. This means, I relate to works that could have been realized in remote areas, in abandoned buildings, in one's own backyard or even at one's home. Additionally, some artists use their online channels to exclusively upload sketches, graphics or illustrations. In these cases, the notion of street art acts as nothing but a label. The fact is that both of these kinds of works do not necessarily need a 'street' to work as street art pieces, as long as they are documented and circulated adequately. Their place to be is the internet; what now matters is not the physical location, it is the digital one – that is, its URL. This means that, now street artists do not necessarily aim to position their works on highly frequented spots and streets. Rather they tend to situate photographs of their works on the internet. Due to these developments, location and spatial positioning have to be thought differently. The most popular locations – or web addresses – are websites, blogs and Facebook pages with lots of user traffic (Rushmore, 2013). 'Addresses' that possess a lot of relevant followers and actors from within the street art world's network are of particular interest. The digital audience, consequently, has become the far more attractive one from which they often expect 'instant internet fame' (Rushmore, 2013; Bengsten, 2014). In the course of this development, street art has somehow emerged into a kind of universal, stylized phenomenon without local attributes.

However, the emergence of 'street art for the internet' is only one aspect of this phenomenon. It must be emphasized that the negotiation of street art online is having a massive impact on the whole art form in general. Street artists are gradually adapting to the locative and situational conditions and

requirements of these 'new' – or, stated differently, additional and interrelated – environments. Photographic documentation, online presentation, circulation and reception have to be understood as constitutive parts of their work. Street artists think about the way their work will look on the screen; that is why they choose locations tailored to their individual needs and their own artistic aspirations. My thesis is that street artists may even reject individual spots if it turns out that photographic documentation doesn't work there in an appropriate manner. Simply put: What doesn't work in the photo will not prevail. Conversely, it must be highlighted that photographic documentation practices are also having beneficial effects. Photography offers artists, and street art recipients yet unknown, possibly unnoticed point of views. Consequently, by dealing with photography, street artists are also beginning to perceive both their works and locations in new ways. Herein lies one of the future potentials that street artists may take advantage of to advance artistically.

In this context, it can be noted that some artists already use their Facebook page or wall in a similar way to the way that they interact with the streets. Photos are meticulously selected and only pictures of both high quality and artistic value are uploaded onto their page. This means that street artists do not only upload photos onto their Facebook walls that serve as documents of past interventions, but as self-contained compositions. Often, these pictures are taken by photographers that they have befriended, who pay special attention to aesthetic values. With this in mind, street artists often acknowledge external support, especially when they can thus benefit from photographic know-how, skills or professional equipment. Of special interest are photos that take into account photo-aesthetic values; that is to say, which pay particular attention to the street art work's physical situatedness, provide an interesting perspective or framing, and which thus overcome a pure, documentary style. These kinds of photographic skills, for instance, can be observed by the example of Germany based artists TONA and ALIAS. And this seems to be hardly surprising. ALIAS, who is well known for his meticulous selection of spots and site-specific adaptations, transfers his street art practice onto the online environment: If you have a look at his Facebook page, it becomes apparent that he somehow interacts with the provided online architecture in a way comparable to the streets. Only photos with noticeable aesthetic added value

are selected and 'pasted' onto his wall; whereas the use of "Facebook Places" contributes to a reactivation of their physical location and context. Another increasingly popular photo-documentary style relates to photographs that show street artists at work – in their studio; or at night, 'on the run'. Besides TONA and ALIAS, Berlin based artist El Bocho also applies these kinds of documentation practices. Often, his photos do not only show his finished artworks, but the process of pasting them; and, additionally, he himself as artist and author. His documentation practices, consequently, are characterized by methods of double exposure offering a diverse framework of multi-perspective viewpoints.

1.2 The Rise of Gatekeepers: The Role of Photographers and Bloggers

In the course of this development, the relevance of (professional) street art photographers increases. It is important to note that these photographers always make choices considering what to photograph, what to show, and whose work to promote on their website or social network site (Rushmore, 2013). Consequently, they do not only document street art, they also (re)produce it. By selecting single pieces and ignoring others they make subjective valuations – sometimes consciously, sometimes not. Although their choices apparently seem to represent the present state 'of the local streets', they only show a subjective selection. In doing so, they somehow define (the global view of) individual cities. In this context, RJ Rushmore, founder of the street art blog "Vandalog," states:

Just because a street artist gets up in Brooklyn doesn't mean that anyone outside of Brooklyn will know about that artist if photographers don't pay attention and the artist doesn't post [his or, KG] her own photos. For some, who have never been to New York, but still consider it a street art capital of the world, the influential street art photographers of New York street art define the city (Rushmore, 2013: 82).

This means that people who are following individual street art 'scenes' or cities exclusively online – because they live far away or abroad – are strongly influenced by the subjective selection and upload of single street art photographers. Or stated differently: Their impression of individual cities is exclusively based on what they can see online.

In this way, central street art photographers do not only shape the global view of a city, they also significantly influence the formation of a somehow globally accepted street

art canon – in a similar way bloggers do. Both of these actors (re)produce the relevant (local) art works of selected cities and artists. In her study, art historian Heike Derwanz (2013) analyzed the frequency with which street artists were mentioned within ten different media platforms, including four blogs and six books, between 2002 and 2009. By doing so, she unfolded the international street art canon of the beginning of the 21st century. As she has shown, Above, Blek le Rat, D*Face, Faile, Miss Van, Shepard Fairey, Swoon and The London Police appeared to be the most popular, or at least most mentioned, artists of these years.¹ Just as interesting is the fact that almost 50 per cent of all street art books were published by just eleven authors; out of 67 in total, excluding scientific publications. This means that about 20 per cent of all street art authors are responsible for almost half of all publications during this period (Derwanz, 2013).

Given the above, the relevance of (central) street art photographers should not be underestimated. Especially photographers who have been thrilled by the movement right from its beginning are now enjoying a global reputation – in particular Martha Cooper who is well known for her passionate documentation of the New York graffiti movement of the 1980s. Luna Park, a photographer from Brooklyn, is particularly mentioned in newer publications. Much like Berlin based photographer Boris Niehaus aka JUST, she represents the younger generation of graffiti and street art documentarists. Getting your street art photographed by one of these photographers can be read as a sign of approval (Rushmore, 2013). This is one of the reasons that street art photographs must be understood as digital documents or 'goods' which do not only incorporate subcultural capital, but are linked to economic and (art) market-related interests. At the same time, its authors assume the role of influential selectors and gatekeepers (Rushmore, 2013; Derwanz, 2013; Bengsten, 2014). This fact has to be seen in contrast to the argument that street art originally ran counter to the logic of gatekeepers. Thus, one of the main reasons street artists used to use the streets as their presentation platform was to undermine the central and selective role of gallerists, curators and methods of getting up that surrounded institutions in general. In bigger cities like Berlin and Hamburg this may probably not be that worrisome, since the subjective selection of individual photographers tends to matter less. Moreover, there are lots of tourists who also contribute to the production and aggregation of a great amount of street art pictures; especially

when they take part in one of the many, newly established and quite popular street art tours. In smaller cities, however, the documentary efforts of individual photographers tend to have an influence (Rushmore, 2013).

Overall, it is apparent that street art photography has somehow become a popular hobby. Today there are a lot of people out in the streets who are constantly trying to be the first in capturing the latest street art pieces in their city. Sometimes there appears to be an unspoken competition in uploading the first photos of new work online before someone else does (Rushmore, 2013). Immediacy seems to be linked to qualitative values. In this context, one artist from Berlin states:

There are some fans who post pics of my works the following morning I pasted them. I don't know how they make it – and they don't overlook or miss anything. Sometimes they're quicker than I am (interview KG, 6/2013).

This additional argument has shown that very often, new work can be seen online the same day it hits the streets. Online platforms like Facebook and Instagram, consequently, must be understood as some sort of real time “[street art, KG] monitoring system” (Rushmore, 2013: 80; quoting KAT-SU on Flickr and graffiti).

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of central bloggers. Marc and Sara Schiller for example, a couple from the US, started their street art blog in 2003 out of sheer enthusiasm for street art and in order to share some pictures with their family and friends. The Schillers, nowadays, are not only generally respected within the scene, they also publish books, release prints, organize events and curate shows (Derwanz, 2013). Today, their blog can be compared to an ‘exclusive club’ where only the highest, or supposedly highest, quality artists enter. In her book “Street Artists. Careers on the Art and Design Markets” art historian Heike Derwanz states:

In contrast to most street art fans, they [the Schillers, KG] possess a certain kind of ‘monopoly’ on information [...]. Artists share their pictures for attention, bloggers share their daily work for a position of power and recipients obtain participation on contemporary art history (Derwanz, 2013: 149).

This constellation leads to the rise of two independent, but at the same time interrelated processes: On the one hand, artists sometimes reach out to bloggers and photographers to announce their latest work (Rushmore, 2013). In doing so, they hand over exclusive image rights while at the same time strategically fostering their work’s appearance on relevant street art blogs or online platforms. Street art blogger RJ Rushmore can report from his own experiences: “Most of the time these tips are friendly, but occasionally artists try telling the bloggers and photographers what to do, as if the artists employ the photographs of street art” (Rushmore, 2013: 82). On the other hand, it can also be observed that bloggers – and probably also photographers – reach out to artists in order to tell them what to do and how to act; in a similar way that gallerists sometimes do. One possible offshoot of this process of mutual interdependence and influence can possibly be observed in the emergence of Facebook’s ‘share 4 share’ practice; a practice which became quite popular among individual Facebook users, including artists, photographers and bloggers.

About six months ago, Marc Schiller twittered that street artists should exercise their voice more on the street; that they need to once again ‘steal space’ and become a voice of dissent. He subsequently elaborates why he doesn’t post on the Wooster site anymore: Because it seems like nobody has anything to say that is provocative. He explains that he enjoys seeing amazing murals in real life, but hates seeing them online. They have no emotional power online, he adds, because they rarely say anything.² Due to the fact that Schiller once was, or still is, one of the leading figures of this whole development, these statements are quite surprising. Within this context, one could – or should – at least question whether he himself wasn’t instrumental in creating the street art scene that exists today; an opinion which is shared by several actors of the street art world and which has thus become an inspiring source for further discussions and polemics.³

1.3 Street Art Festivals, Creative Cities and the Lack of Critique

At this point, let me turn to a related point. Besides private institutions, municipal associations and free curators, it is more and more up to bloggers, photographers and other re-

lated 'experts' to organize events, to curate festivals and to have a voice. Since about four years now, it seems like street art festivals are popping up in almost every city or country around the globe (Rushmore, 2013). These festivals are characterized by the realization of a great amount of murals, preferably located in the seemingly fancy, arty-farty districts of the cities. Their line-ups are mainly based on online research (Rushmore, 2013) which means that bloggers and other organizers do not only confirm the street art canon they themselves created, but continue to reinforce it. In doing so, they favor the consolidation of a somehow globally accepted street art canon which, at least initially, may be perceived as a fairly static formation. These touring muralists have to travel a lot in order to fulfill all of their invitations and appointments. Often they have – or take – no time to get informed about local situations, discourses or polemics. So what they do is put up a nice, decorative mural that works everywhere, but has no relation to the local streets and its inhabitants. Although their works are characterized by a high level of artistic skill, they often lack one of the main characteristics street art was once popular for: site-specificity. Since most of the works circulate online, there seems to be no demand to act differently. A lot of festival curators seem satisfied with convincing the local city marketing with luminous colors and don't seem to pursue further objectives.

This, or at least a similar phenomenon, may have been the case in Hamburg. In September 2014 there was a street art event called "City Canvas" (City Canvas, 2014). According to the project's website, the event aimed at turning a 70 meter long wall into a canvas for five large-scale murals. Therefore, five national and international artists were invited to paint the temporary walls of the construction site at Spielbudenplatz in Hamburg St. Pauli. The project received a lot of positive feedback since the colorful, quite decorative murals seemed to please a great amount of passers-by, tourists and not to forget, online audiences. Berlin based "Graffitiarchiv" (Engl. "Graffiti Archive"), nevertheless, voiced some criticism by directly highlighting the sociopolitical relevance of its venue. In an corresponding online article they state that the venue is – or respectively was – the location of the so called "Esso-Häuser", a housing complex from the 1960s which hosted over 100 flats, a hotel, retail stores, clubs, bars, an underground car park and the petrol station "Reeperbahn," which was kind of a cult object for the whole neighborhood (Graffitiarchiv, 2014). Just a couple of months

before the event took place inhabitants were ordered to leave the complex and it finally got demolished. The "Graffitiarchiv" consequently frames the event as a stage for a concealed sociopolitical issue: While the walls attracted with luminous colors, they covered the predominant gap in the local cityscape. They assume that the real estate company responsible intentionally misappropriated the affirming, fresh visual imagery of street art with the intention to distract from previously outlined urban policy measures. In doing so, they allude to phenomenon – known as "art washing" – to which future street art festivals and similar events should turn their attention when fathoming (out) their objectives.

In the light of this case, more general questions regarding the negotiation of spatial appropriation, the legalization of walls and the creative city can be raised. In the end, it should be critically questioned what kind of negotiation processes take place in the course of such art projects – and where? What are the key assumptions which frame a responsible, sustainable, and preferably globally oriented city development? And who is in charge of the decision-making process? Besides their seemingly favorable and decorative upgrade of individual districts, should street and urban art festivals not at least try to grasp urban dynamics and take up local themes? Regardless of this, it remains unclear as to why the creative city, especially in the course of festivals, seems to regulate itself quite frequently instead of gaining, appropriating and conquering (new) space(s). Following this idea, it could be even stated that the creative city somehow alienates itself from the original 'mission' or self-conception of street art. Drawing things together, this may not be that surprising. Elaborating on street art festivals and its underlying policies, one is probably confronted with the same dynamics and controversies today's cities are generally known for: On the one hand, they promote themselves as welcoming, responsible, open-minded, lively and creative location factors – a self-description which both satisfies inhabitants, delights tourists and attracts investors. On the other hand, they constantly try to stifle any creatively used or transformed industrial wasteland. One of the first artists, maybe the first, who actively responded to these 'trends' was Italian artist Blu. In December 2014 he covered two of his iconic large scale murals in Berlin Kreuzberg – 'unauthorized', unannounced and by night: "After witnessing the changes happening in the surrounding area during the last years, we felt it was time to erase both walls," according to the artist's statement (Blu,

2014). By blackening his murals – then one of Berlin’s most iconic landmarks – he sent a clear and unambiguous message towards the city, its investors, the real estate company responsible, and gentrification processes in general. Thus, it must be highlighted that the location and its surrounding area – which also got vacated just some months before – represented (and still represents) a lucrative building site for new luxury apartments which were not only supposed to profit from their privileged situatedness near the river Spree but also from their unique view.

Secondly, these events allude to another closely associated point: It somehow seems as if there is a serious lack of profound discourse regarding the negotiation of street and urban art festivals, in particular with respect to the contextualization of large scale murals. It is noticeable that almost every project is emphatically featured and promoted by a variety of different actors from the street art world’s network. Even its ‘experts’ who are supposed to take into account heterogeneous criteria and parameters tend to comment on almost every large-scale project in a quite one-dimensional way. Due to the fact that artists often definitely do demonstrate artistic expertise, this attitude may be legitimate. In contrast, it could be argued that the recently outlined lack of critique, far-sighted discussion, and profound contextualization may not be beneficial in the long run. By not applying differentiated criteria and neglecting multi-perspective points of view, street art festivals and related artworks, in the end, lose more of their impact than the general downscaling that the now common, web based pixel standard already accomplishes. Could this affirming – if at first sight seemingly blunt – attitude be the first offshoot of the exclusively positively regarded Facebook culture and its related real time stream? In his book “Das halbwegs Soziale. Eine Kritik der Vernetzungskultur” (Engl. “Networks Without A Cause. A Critique of Social Media”) net critic and activist Geert Lovink (2012) points towards a newspaper article by Jonathan Jones from The Guardian, which states:

It is the job of a critic to reject the relativism and pluralism of modern life. All the time, from a million sources, we are bombarded with cultural information. [...] In fact, in this age of overload, indifference is the most likely effect of so many competing images. If we do make an aesthetic choice it is likely to be a consumerist one, a passing taste to be forgotten and replaced in a moment (Jones, 2010: n.p.).

Against this background it might be claimed that the unification of complex feelings and their reduction to the like-button may have contributed to the general leveling of (aesthetic) judgment and individual taste at large. Careless optimism reduces one’s ability to question things critically. At the same time, it must be taken into account that both in academia and popular culture, art critique isn’t truly meant to provide encompassing qualitative judgments or impose rules of normative value. Whereas academic theorization tends to remain neutral, dealing with aesthetic qualities within a clearly framed, mostly self-referential discourse; popular culture very often reports on (internationally) celebrated artists and their related market value.⁴ How else can we explain that the general media landscape seems to know little about the sociopolitical meaning of Banksy’s latest work in Gaza, but knows best about the winning amount of his last auction?

1.4 Conclusion and Outlook: Reclaim the City – and the Net(s)

In summary, it should be emphasized that this recently expressed, global conception of street art definitely leads to a reconfiguration of both the global and the local, and therefore, to new norms and power relations: Within the street art world’s network, central bloggers, street art photographers, as well as administrators of Facebook pages position themselves – and are positioned – as decisive experts, opinion makers, and gatekeepers. However, it should not be forgotten that blogging and street art photography originally were a bottom-up practice. In recent years, the number of street art photographers significantly increased, favored by the rise of smartphone technologies. Everybody with a phone can be a ‘photographer’ these days. This trend somehow contributed to rebalancing recently outlined, originally disparate constellations; in particular, platforms or websites that favor user participation have triggered the direction of such developments.

Generally speaking, there seems a basic necessity for today’s street artists to simultaneously address two different, but at the same time interrelated, environments: The streets and the internet (galleries and museums excluded). Usually, artists try to satisfy a double public: On the one hand, they try to satisfy the expectations of the constantly growing online audience; on the other hand, they do not neglect their output in the streets. Consequently, it seems to be a step of logical

consistency to assign online media a central role in (trans)forming and (re)shaping the present street art world. My research has shown that online practices definitely (re)shape, retroact and reconfigure offline practices, and vice versa. It is noticeable – and I would like to highlight this – that local street art practices cannot be analyzed adequately without paying close attention to global conceptions and discourses from within the street art world's network. This is especially worth mentioning when talking about street art festivals and their negotiation of spatial appropriation, selection of site/venue and legalization. At the same time, it applies when elaborating on the formation or consolidation of a street art and urban art canon. Prospectively, this may be an important topic of general interest – providing a broad variety of possible, interdisciplinary approaches – that further research projects, municipal discussions, and political debates can take up. Such a discussion, at the same time, requires that we directly address the present lack of critique and of profound contextualization.

The overall idea or concept of a sustainable, creative and preferably globally oriented city should fall under the active responsibility of many heterogeneous actors. It should be integrated into a society that favors participation – without obscuring its own editorial mechanisms of exclusion – and that respects different opinions (Lovink, 2012). Nevertheless, this can only be achieved if the underlying infrastructure complies with the requirements of a modern, open-minded and forward-looking society. Debates about spatial appropriation, advertising, legal restrictions, institutionalization, domestication, censorship, the quest for freedom and privacy, as well as the questioning of hierarchies – which in the context of today's street art are still tied to the framework of the physical city – have to be transferred to the net(s). The current but decisive challenge for street artists will be to critically scrutinize familiar conventions, mechanisms of control and exclusion within existing, (de)centralized network structures.

The fact is that the net(s) and their central nodes are places of decision making which inevitably display the current (infra)structures of power. Against this background it seems to be crucially important to no longer understand the internet as a tool, but as an inseparable part of our political, economic, social and cultural processes (Lovink, 2012). Walled gardens like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Google+, much like the

internet in general, no longer are – and perhaps never were – a free infrastructure. Rather, the whole cultural, political, economic and educational landscape is strongly influenced by its networking structures, its algorithms and its mechanisms of coordination. It seems to be no gesture of emancipation to disconnect from commercial and centralized platforms like Facebook. A much more promising approach lies in the usage of the internet and (yet available) online infrastructure; and not in its refusal (Lovink, 2012). A first step may be to utilize free software and support open source communities that have already brought into being initiatives like Diaspora, Ello, Lorea, Crabgrass and GNU Social (Lovink, 2012). The key point is that as critical thinking enters the level of networking, knowledge will be translated into code (Lovink, 2012: 96).

Notes

1 See Derwanz, (2013: 151-155). Banksy, however, is the undisputed number one of (mainstream) daily media (Derwanz, 2013: 153).

2 See Salman (2014) with reference to Schiller (2014).

3 See Dave the Chimp (2014).

4 See Lovink (2012) with reference to McDonald (2007) and Schreyach (2007).

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