
Art of serenity. Aesthetic function of humor in Street Art

Agnieszka Gralińska-Toborek

University of Lodz, Institute of Philosophy.

ul. Lindleya 3/5, 90-131 Łódź, Poland

grala@filozof.uni.lodz.pl

Abstract

“That which allows us to see the trivial within the officially important and the important within the officially meaningless is comic and stimulates laughter” (Marquard, 1989: 54). There is no doubt that many Street Art activities, small interventions in the existing public order, play just such a role—disrupting the hierarchy of importance, reversing official relations for a while. Thus, Street Art evades serious tasks attributed to the arts and in a perverse way reaches its objectives. Sometimes the goal is only pure enjoyment, but quite often also an attempt to release and remove bad emotions through laughter. Even the most socially and politically engaged Street Art usually wins when laughter is its only weapon. Without preaching and imposing a new order, it uncovers what we do not want or fear to see in public spaces. Ludic, naive, childishly simple forms of Street Art confound critics and art curators, disarm viewers, and transform strained expectation into nothing (Kant, 2007: 161). Perhaps that is why Street Art thrives in places of the most serious conflicts and tensions.

Keywords:

Street Art, Odo Marquard, Humor, comical, Aesthetic values

Introduction

In 2014, a blogger who writes about city art asked me to make a short statement explaining what Street Art is for me. The blog is called *Artique* and the statement I gave was as follows:

“I am a theorist of art, so Street Art poses the biggest challenge for me. And up till now, with a great deal of pleasure – I have been losing against this type of art. You cannot create a definition, distinguish genres, trends and approaches or their representatives; it is impossible to create a trendy theory or to agree on common views. Street Art is for me the best proof of the unbridled instinct of creativity that defies all educational methods and attempts at institutionalising. (...) I appreciate this kind of Street Art, in which I see spontaneity, sense of humor, insolence, diversity, unpretentiousness, respect for technique and which doesn't preach.” (Korzeniewski, 2014)

After two years of further research (Gralińska-Toborek and Kazimierska-Jerzyk, 2014), I still agree more or less with what I said then, though the issue of institutionalization of Street Art is raising my doubts more and more. However, I wish to present this feature which is difficult to name and which I tried to capture using some of the before-mentioned terms. In my opinion of a theorist of art, what distinguishes Street Art from mainstream art is serenity.

1. Serenity [Heiterkeit]

This term can be attributed to philosophical considerations on *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics* of Odo Marquard. Perceiving in philosophy a critique of reality, “passionate, sad and bitter knowledge” (Marquard, 1989: 48), he seeks in art a sanctuary for serenity. But not always, especially in the twentieth century, art has been serene. There is no doubt that the avant-garde, by becoming philosophy and art critique in one, and striving to merge with the reality, sided with seriousness. “If seriousness comes into power, it banishes serenity” (Marquard 1989: 48), and there, where art is “forbidden this serenity through critique, it emigrates to a specific area that in a compensatory manner (...) protects the serenity (...), to comic art, the realm of humor and laughter.” (Marquard, 1989: 53) I do not want to suggest here that Street Art was in principle the art based on the aesthetic category of humor, I just want to show its aspect of serenity, which we—theorists—increasingly often try to banish from this type of art, imposing seriousness.

1.1. Something trivial in something important

Many examples of more or less known Street Art works are based on the principle of humor, which Marquard aptly described:

“what stimulates laughter is that which allows to see something trivial in something officially recognised as important and to see something important in something officially meaningless” (Marquard, 1989: 54)

How many road signs have already been made into stories from the life of black stick figures? Especially prohibitory traffic signs have become a field for joyful and mocking activities, probably because of their most categorical original meaning and the ease of transformation of this simple form. The works of Jenkins, Clet or Dan Witz make you laugh because they change that which is important, functional, and creates order into something trivial. At the same time, they turn something straightforward and anesthetic for us into an ambiguous, narrative representation, which has no function apart from this particular one—to disarm functionality and seriousness. It is also very important for the signs to remain in their original place and continue to bear the marks of their original function in order for the humor to work. We can be amused by continually found on the internet photographs or collected, specially made, signs or reproductions of those signs that can be purchased like any merchandise in a gift shop. In this case, though, the comic aspect of surprise does not exist; there is no direct experience of this humor. This means it does not meet the principle of incongruity, “it is the perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations” (Morreal, 2012). This happens when, for example, the artist nicknamed Roadsworth transforms road lines and pedestrian cross walks into ornamental vines or zippers. Of course we can talk about a subversive action, deregulation, and criticism of overwhelming attempts to organize the reality according to rules that are imposed on us externally. However, the first and primary reaction of the passer-by—the recipient—is disbelief and then a smile. The transformed prohibitory or mandatory traffic sign becomes for us something trivial. Art is not able to lift the prohibition, but can make it shortly powerless.

“His intention was to disrupt the regulated code of the city streets not to cause harm, but instead to play with the images, to re-employ them in such a way as to communicate something abstract and humorous rather than something regulative, cold and calculative.” (Murray, 2014: 62).

This statement provides us with an important clue. The artist perceives something that is important to us (backed by the law), which has an unambiguous meaning, only as an image. Seeing the image—the form—he transforms it with the use of his imagination and allows us to see the play of images. This way, he frees the original image and us,

viewers, from seriousness. At least for a moment. In addition, admittedly, seeing such a sign turned into a story, we wonder if it is still in force as a prohibition.

1.2 Something important in something trivial

Returning to Marquard's definition of humor, we must remember about the reverse method—about seeing something important in something trivial. Street Artists, like children, have the uncanny ability of noticing small things and turning them into something meaningful, important or interesting. A stone, a gap in the wall, or a simple electrical box becomes something exciting and full of potential. That is how Street Artists work creating works that are often called interventions. Of course, transforming a tuft of grass into hair and a gutter into an elephant's trunk does not constitute an important change. It does not undermine anything or claim to save the world, and that is where the selflessness of the aesthetic experience of humor lies. This is only a flitting moment of attention being drawn by something trivial, something that was completely excluded from our life and worldview. Laughter is inclusive in its nature by including what has been repressed by our mind, excluded from rationality. Therefore, when the artist in a comical way makes a trivial, damaged or degraded object stand out, through laughter we embrace it; welcome it back to the world.

2. Infantilization

Street Art does not have to be complicated, sophisticated, and professional. It often seems childish, almost infantile, and in the context of anonymity still existing in Street Art, it is often difficult to distinguish what is the work of an adult and what was made by a child's hand. Light-heartedness and childishness are part of the serenity of Street Art. The very activity—guerilla, illegal—may be considered immature and frivolous. If the democratic nature of this type of art lies in the fact that “anyone can do it” (Young, 2014: 27), this relieves the democracy from the burden of maturity. Of course, we can call it infantile, although it must be noted that this word is usually used not to define the natural childishness, but retrogression of what had been mature. For a long time, at least from the beginning of the twentieth century, artists have stopped being treated deadly serious:

“Were art to redeem man, it could do so only by saving him from the seriousness of life and restoring him to an unexpected boyishness (...) All modern art begins to appear comprehensible and in a way great when it is interpreted as an attempt to instill youthfulness into an ancient world.” (Ortega y Gasset, 1968: 50)

Of course, over time the avant-garde became more serious due to its theoretical and critical attitude, which is the phenomenon of banishing the serenity of art that I will mention further. Marquard argues that nowadays in the era of accelerated pace; we all become childish through detachment from the world (Marquard, 1991: 75–76). As in the case of children, we increasingly lack personal experience and only make use of the experience of hearsay, we live based on fiction and illusions. Perhaps Street Art with its risks and illegality is just return to the world, a search for our own experience?

3. Game

Ortega y Gasset meant the avant-garde when he said:

“Other styles must be interpreted in connection with dramatic social or political movements or with profound religious philosophical currents. The new style only asks to be linked to the triumph of sports and games. It is of the kind and origin with them.” (Ortega y Gasset, 1968: 50–51)

Even today, after more than 90 years (first published in 1925), this quote can be used to analyze Street Art. Especially, I would like to recall 3D images evoking a playful gaiety or anamorphoses painted with the use of the traditional technique. Illusions of space that nowadays become tourist attractions are primarily there to surprise, and hence entertain. What is humor if not the way we perceive these representations? Perhaps the definition of laughter presented by Immanuel Kant best explains it “Laughter is an all action arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing” (Kant, 2007: 161). If from a certain distance, we see precipices, waterfalls, or multi-level dungeons opening up before us, we are surprised. Our surprise is associated with tension. Approaching closer, we see that this is only a painting. The wait turns into nothing, but is followed by ludic fun. Like other play activities, it sometimes takes the form that would not be mistaken for serious activity (Morreal, 2012). The viewer ceases to be just a passive observer, but is caught up in the game, becomes its participant. The viewer usually enters the painting as another element of illusion, adopting unnatural poses, pretending, cheating. 3D paintings are perhaps the fulfilment of the theory of art as a game presented by Hans-Georg Gadamer:

“The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players. (...) The real subject of the game (...) is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself.” (Gadamer, 2004: 106)

Gadamer points out that the game is a representation that actually presents itself. Illusion of space presents itself as a trick, and the participant that “makes it real” is only another element. What’s more, the participant of the anamorphosis presents it for others, for people photographing this person, for its inactive recipients. This person agrees to this game for a while, pretending to be someone else, leaving the usual role of observer to present this trick to others. In fact, the person’s behavior is justified only by this illusion perceived by the viewer set in the right place. Others, unaware passers-by, may laugh not because they recognize the trick, but because of the surprise caused by an odd behavior of a stranger. This is its ludic nature—the participant goes beyond the conventions of behavior in the public space, co-creating the quasi-reality, is subjected to its rules, and serves the illusion. Moreover, as Gadamer points out, participation in the game “is experienced subjectively as relaxation” (Gadamer, 2004: 105). Fun brings pleasure, although in this case it is burdened by a big dose of risk connected with breaking the established form of behavior.

4. Laughter brings relief

“Humorous is or has to be something which we cannot cope with – in a cruel or nice way (...) in this temporary situation of lack of burden, we enjoy the privilege of taking on the status of powerlessness.” (Marquard, 1989: 55)

Usually, economic and political crises evoke ironic defense mechanisms. Everywhere where a crisis is growing, humorous commentary also appears on walls. Political humor has the longest tradition in Western civilization, as well as political graffiti.

“Political humor has something of a folk nature, and the same story will appear in different guises with different characters but the same point over the years. It is a testimony of certain enduring features of politics to continue to the object of ridicule or aggressive humor.” (Schutz, 1977:26)

Whether in Athens or Palestine, Belfast, Istanbul or Cairo, you can always find mocking and humorous works among politically engaged works of Street Art. Those are often caricatured presentations of politicians that is why they can be read as funny only in the local and time context. Political allusions, usually difficult to grasp clearly, save us expenditures necessary for real collision with official relations (Marquard, 1989: 55). The fight with the use of images and inscriptions, or jokes, has no chance of victory in the political reality, but it gives instantaneous relief, by putting it temporarily upside down. Throwing flowers instead of stones will not cause a sudden change, but in the future, when this change occurs, in historical and cultural reflections, those images will become its main symbol.

During the rule of martial law in the 1980s in Poland, apart from the strictly political underground opposition, a strong youth guerilla movement developed. The most spectacular were happenings organized by students participating in the underground anarchic movement called *Orange Alternative*. In places where authorities painted over political inscriptions, clear patches of fresh paint remained. On those patches, representatives of *Orange Alternative* painted the dwarfs.

“Twice Major and his friends were arrested while painting dwarfs. During one of these times Major while detained at a police station in Łódź, proclaimed (...) artistic manifesto of the so-called “dialectic painting” in reference to his own graffiti art. “The Thesis is the [anti-regime] Slogan, the Anti-thesis is the Spot and the Synthesis is the Dwarf” - he announced, furthermore defining himself to be the greatest successor in the Hegel and Marx tradition. - „Quantity evolves into Quality – the more Dwarfs there are, the better it is.” (orangealternativemuseum.pl)

Happenings of *Orange Alternative* were full of absurd actions. To this day, many participants of this movement, and even scholars, claim that it was the alternative movement, not the political opposition that dismantled the communist system in Poland. Street images won the war for the memory, especially since they became the source of a new wave of graffiti and Street Art in free Poland. In those difficult times for the Poles, humorous inscriptions and images, though ephemeral, allowed to maintain at least some serenity.

Conclusion

The art critique is dangerous for serenity of art, because critics blame it for escape

“from that absolutely serious task which - (...) it must not shrink: from the alleged and total duty to turn sad relations into better ones, the best ones, hence seek to contribute to the improvement of the world.” (Marquard, 1989: 51)

The critique wishes to call art back to seriousness, make it accountable, drive out the spirit of serenity with a distrustful question what its relationship to this absolute task is (Marquard, 1989: 51). Indeed, a large part of Street Art manifests its commitment to improving the world and itself becomes its critique. If Street Art does so in a witty way, we are dealing with irony and satire. Artists taking the satirical attitude consistently and uncompromisingly fight with what they deem wrong. Ironists from a distance and with a sense of their own superiority negatively relate to the objects of their criticism. Apart from them, there are also more serene ones in Street Art, those that can be called humorists. Polish novelist Boleslaw Prus described this attitude as follows:

“A humorist, in a grand style, does not try to gain anything, does not convert anyone and does not submit to anyone, instead watches everyone and everything with indulgent calm. A humorist, in a grand style, does not recognise any dogma, does not think that something is necessary or impossible, just probable...” (Prus, 1890).

The main objective of a humorist is to evoke our smile, which is a manifestation of acceptance. Even if the artist is trying to be rather a humorist than a satirist, often art specialists or public space experts, seeing in this art a rebellion, which they cannot take up themselves, strip it off its serenity. We need a really great sense of humor and compassion for the world to escape propaganda or critique meeting the requirements of art. We should remember, that analysis is the most deadly thing for humor. I can't say that I have found in serenity the essence of Street Art. Unfortunately, serenity remains only a small part of Street Art, which we should enjoy, at the same time being careful not to frighten and chase it away.

Translated by Marta Koniarek



Fig. 1 - Clet, London, 2017, photo: A.G.-T.



Fig. 2 - author unknown, London 2017, photo: A.G.-T.

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