

Street Art and the Nature of the City¹

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, street art has become an increasingly prolific part of the urban landscape. Concurrently, street art has received growing attention from scholars from a number of disciplines such as art history, sociology and philosophy. One important point of discussion in academic literature has been the role that the street as a site plays in the viewer's interpretation of artworks and how the artworks may in turn influence the viewers' perception and use of urban public space. This chapter expands the established notion that street art can have an impact on how we relate to urban public space, and argues that street art is particularly well positioned to affect the way we think and act with regard to the environment. This is demonstrated through the visual and contextual analysis of a number of site-specific street artworks by Spanish artist Isaac Cordal that address and problematize how human beings relate to nature in the urban environment.

Keywords

street art, visual ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, biocentrism, environmental art.

Introduction

The trees along this city street,
Save for the traffic and the trains,
Would make a sound as thin and sweet
As trees in country lanes.

[...]
Oh, little leaves that are so dumb
Against the shrieking city air,
I watch you when the wind has come, —
I know what sound is there.¹

Since the beginning of the 21st century, street art has become an increasingly prolific feature of the urban landscape. Concurrently, street art has received growing attention from scholars from a number of disciplines such as art history, sociology and philosophy. Street art is here understood as artworks that are created or placed in public space, or are visible from public space, and are perceived as unsanctioned ("perceived" because it will often be unclear to the casual viewer whether or not an artwork is actually sanctioned). It should be noted that the term "public space" in this chapter is taken to include so-called "publicly accessible spaces", which is to say spaces that appear to be public but that are in fact privately owned.

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One important point of discussion in academic literature on street art has been the role the context of the street plays in the viewer's interpretation of the artworks and how the artworks may in turn influence the viewer's perception and use of urban public space (Riggle, 2010; Waclawek, 2011). In previous publications, I have argued for what I call street art's potential to turn public space into a site of exploration. The basic idea being that if an artwork is perceived as unsanctioned and ephemeral, as something that should not really be there and might be gone soon, an unexpected encounter with such work can serve as an interruption that has the potential to pull the viewer out of the everyday and increase their awareness of their surroundings. In this way a street artwork can turn the everyday environment into a site of exploration and make people question how they see and use the city (Bengtson, 2013; 2014).

This chapter expands on the already established notion that street art can impact how people relate to urban public space, and argues that street art is particularly well positioned to affect the way we feel, think and act with regard to the environment. While, for example, news stories, popular science documentaries, and information campaigns based on research conducted within the natural sciences are useful for transmitting facts and findings about the environmental challenges the world is facing, art broadly can involve an audience more subtly on an emotional level. It can address attitudes and lifestyle choices, as well as societal, existential and ethical values that inform our actions and that might therefore have an impact on the environment. This is a point I have previously made when writing from an ecocritical perspective about the studio work of American artist Josh Keyes (Bengtson, 2015, p. 4). A central argument in the present chapter, however, is that street art holds a special potential when it comes to influencing how we relate to the environment because it is often encountered unexpectedly in the setting of physical urban public space, where surprising shifts in perspective and meaning may inspire further reflection.



Fig. 1 - Isaac Cordal, no title (2015). Street installation in Stavanger, Norway as part of Nuart Festival. The sculptures in this image are approximately 10 cm tall. Photo: © Isaac Cordal.

Considering how art can affect people's understanding of the relationship between human beings and the environment is vital. As Professor of American Literature Lawrence Buell, who is seen as a pioneer in the field of ecocriticism, argues, "[i]ssues of vision, value, culture, and imagination are keys to today's environmental crises at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how, and legislative regulation" (2005, p. 5). Thus, even though offering the public an intellectual understanding of environmental issues like climate change is undeniably important, eliciting an emotional response in viewers to, for example, the estrangement of human beings from nature may be even more instrumental in facilitating an actual change in behavior.

In this chapter, the relationship between street art and the environment will be explored through the visual and contextual analysis of street artworks by the Spanish artist Isaac Cordal, who is best known for his ongoing project *Cement Eclipses*; since around 2006, Cordal has been placing in public space small sculptures of human beings – often balding, briefcase-carrying, white men in suits – that are either painted in drab colors or are left in the grey tones of the raw material they are made from. While cement was used to create the sculptures at the beginning of the project, the artist has more recently shifted to mainly working with resin.

A common feature in *Cement Eclipses* is the juxtaposition of the small, dreary-looking sculptures with urban plant life (see for example Figure 1). Given the attire of the sculptures, which brings to mind that of archetypical bureaucrats, businessmen or politicians, Cordal's installations can be interpreted as critical comments on the unsustainable, growth-based capitalist society which currently dominates the world economy. The artist's work can be seen as a call for people to re-assess their anthropocentric values and reflect on the affinity of human beings and the rest of the biotic community – that is to say a community founded on biocentrism that includes as its members "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (Leopold, [1949] 1987, p. 204). Biocentrism is understood here as the idea that human beings neither stand outside the biotic community, nor above its other members (which all have intrinsic value), and that the collective interests of the biotic community should therefore govern human interest and inform human action (Buell, 2005, p. 134). In stark contrast to the views expressed by Leopold and Buell, according to sociologist Jacklyn Cock, the World Bank has described "soil, water, air, flora and fauna" as "natural capital" (2014, p. 28). Cock argues that this perspective "implies that nature should be measured and valued according to the 'services' it provides (for example, the capacity of wetlands to filter water, the capacity of forests and soil to capture and store carbon and so on)", which "means the expansion of the market into all aspects of the natural world: an attempt by capital – in the name of protection – to effect the last enclosure of the commons – that of Nature itself" (ibid). In other words, the consequence of the World Bank's description, according to Cock, is that nature is valued solely as a resource for human need and profit. Cordal's installations in urban public space can be read as a critique of a legal-rational-oriented bureaucratic system that would produce in people such a utilitarian attitude towards nature, rather than recognize the intrinsic value of non-human members of the biotic community regardless of their perceived usefulness to human beings. This critique can also be related to German sociologist Max Weber's notion that a system based primarily on legal-rational authority leads to a disenchantment of the world and traps the individual in an "iron cage" of bureaucracy ([1905] 2005, p. 123). While Weber's text is more than 110 years old, the modern state is still characterized precisely by its reliance on legal-rational authority, which leaves little room for types of social action that might involve a less utilitarian attitude towards non-human members of the biotic community.

Isaac Cordal: perspectives on the city as a biotic community

The installation depicted in Figure 1 is quite typical of Cordal's more explicitly environmentally oriented artworks created in urban public space. In this and similar installations, the artist seems to be problematizing human estrangement from

nature and the limited space the latter is afforded in the city; Cordal has here placed the sculptures of two balding men clad in grey suits so they are facing what appears to be a dandelion that has pushed through the tarmac of a city street. The men are kneeling, their heads slightly lowered and tilted to the side, and they are both somewhat awkwardly holding up a briefcase in front of their stomachs. The arrangement of the sculptures next to the small green plant, as well as the kneeling position of the bodies, creates an air of reverence on part of the depicted humans in relation to the installation's non-human member of the biotic community. The scenario also invokes a sense of nostalgia and even romanticism, as the seemingly worn-out men gaze with sunken eyes at this vivacious element of plant life that has forced its way into the human-dominated world of the city. The cheerlessness of the scenario is further emphasized by the two decrepit slabs of concrete that, from the vantage point the photo was taken from, constitute the backdrop of the installation.

As is the case with many artists that produce work in the street, Cordal's installations in part create meaning by playing with perspective and existing elements of the urban environment; in virtue of their scale, the human figures draw attention to details such as small pieces of uncultivated plant life, which otherwise often are negligible in size and easily overlooked by people moving in the city. The combination of the miniature sculptures and existing elements of the urban environment creates a visual shift that enables people that come across one of Cordal's installations



Fig. 2 - Isaac Cordal, no title (2014). Street installation in Malmö, Sweden. Photo: © Peter Bengtsen.

to see themselves and their surroundings from different point of view. As a statement on Cordal's website explains, facilitating such a shift is an important part of the work:

With the simple act of miniaturization and thoughtful placement, Isaac Cordal magically expands the imagination of pedestrians finding his sculptures on the street. *Cement Eclipses* is a critical definition of our behavior as a social mass. The art work intends to catch the attention on our devalued relation with the nature [sic] through a critical look to the collateral effects of our evolution. With the master touch of a stage director, the figures are placed in locations that quickly open doors to other worlds. The scenes zoom in [on] the routine tasks of the contemporary human being.²

Through the use of perspective shifts and surprising visual disruptions of daily routines, then, Cordal deliberately calls attention to generally overlooked elements of the city in order to create a space for reflection. In the case of the installation depicted in Figure 1, by identifying with, and mentally and emotionally putting themselves in the stead of, the miniature human gestalts, viewers might come to consider their relationship not only with the specific dandelion the artist has incorporated, but also with other non-human members of the biotic community of the city. Further, the combination of the micro-scale of the sculptures with the macro-scale of the city has the potential to create in viewers at once a sense of affinity to, and alienation from, their everyday surroundings and routines. While the drab sculptures can be seen as embodiments of what happens to human beings who are caught in the routines of a reigning paradigm of rationality and efficiency (something that approximates Weber's before-mentioned iron cage), the dreary concrete slabs may represent the contemporary city. The latter is itself a result of the rationalization of society, which has led to the gradual suppression of aspects of all members of the biotic community, human and non-human alike, as the value of actions has come to be measured on a short-sighted, purpose-rational scale.³

While some of Cordal's installations in a very explicit manner address the relationship between human beings and nature and promote a biocentric agenda, others are more subtle and may not immediately call for an ecocritical reading if seen in isolation. For example, Figure 2 shows a 17 cm tall standing version of the artist's signature balding man in a suit and tie on a street in Malmö, Sweden. A number of sculptures like the one depicted here were placed around the city as part of the street art festival *Artscape* in 2014. The sculpture is positioned on a row of protruding bricks approximately three meters above the pavement. The size of the sculpture in conjunction with its elevated placement creates the impression of a man standing on a ledge high above the street.

The way the man is depicted – body pressed up against the wall, feet sticking out over the side of the ledge, and head turned to the side as if he is averting his eyes from the drop before him – adds to the sense of the precariousness of the situation. The scenario is reminiscent of someone either being involuntarily trapped on a ledge and trying to avoid falling to their death or apprehensively contemplating suicide. While the installation does not visibly include any non-human members of the biotic community of the city, the human gestalt dressed in dreary-looking business attire can still be interpreted as a representative of our current growth-based capitalist society. His placement on the ledge, then, may be seen as a visual metaphor for the dangers of relying on an unsustainable economic, political and societal system that is too taxing on the environment, and his looking away may be illustrative of our collective unwillingness or inability to face the issues in front of us. The man's possible fall could represent the plunge into an abyss of environmental disaster that may await us all if no viable alternative to the current anthropocentric societal paradigm is found in time. This interpretation is of course further substantiated when the installation is seen in the context of Cordal's larger body of work.

When considering the artworks so far analyzed, it is clear that the context of the city plays a key role in Cordal's installations. Art that seeks to highlight urban public space – and, by extension, the world – as not just host to a community of human beings, but to a wider biotic community, gains poignancy from being embedded in that everyday context, rather than appearing within the confines of the traditional “white cube” of the gallery or museum.



Fig. 3 - Isaac Cordal, no title (2013). Street installation in Nantes, France. Photo: © Isaac Cordal.



Fig. 4 - Isaac Cordal, *Remembrances from nature* (2015). Resin, plastic and concrete, 19 x 38 x 15,25cm. Photo: © Isaac Cordal.

That the context of urban public space adds meaning to the street artworks becomes very clear when considering the installations depicted in Figures 3 and 4. Whereas the former shows an installation on the street in Nantes, France, the latter is an image of a sculptural work exhibited in a gallery setting. The artworks each feature a different variation of Cordal's men in grey suits, both of which seem to be contemplating a small patch of green grass.

The difference between the two artworks partly comes down to material properties. For example, the use of synthetic grass arranged by the artist in the gallery work creates a less evocative and convincing juxtaposition between the elements that stand in for culture and nature than the inclusion in the street work of real, wild grass that pushes through the tarmac of what looks like a parking lot. Equally significant is that the gallery work is unable to replicate the effect of the expansive space that is the context of the street installation. In the street, it is unclear exactly where the boundary of the artwork is. This makes it easy for the viewer to mentally extend the scenario arranged by the artist to other parts of the everyday environment. Conversely, the base of the gallery work, which seems to be made from a slab of concrete, is clearly delimited. This sets the staged scenario apart from the surrounding environment inhabited by the viewer and contributes to removing the artwork from an everyday context – an effect that is augmented by the placement of the artwork on a white plinth in the white room of a gallery. While it may still be able to convey to the viewer an air of nostalgia regarding the relationship between humans and nature, the isolated gallery work – with its fixed dimensions and inclusion of only human-made elements – betrays the fact that everything is under the strict control of the artist. It does not encourage the viewer to look beyond the artwork itself like the street installation does. As previously pointed out, in the vast context of urban public space the addition of Cordal's sculptures brings attention to otherwise easily overlooked non-human members of the biotic community. The incongruent scales of the elements of the street installation and its surrounding environment play an important role in creating a shift in perspective that can open up a space for critical reflection. For example, the patch of grass can at once be seen as very small (if considered in relation to the expansive context of urban public space) and larger (if seen in relation to the human sculpture). In the gallery setting, on the other hand, the diminutive size of the grass patch is not apparent in the same way because there are no differently scaled elements of everyday life extraneous to the installation that can create a visual disruption.

Documenting the artist's perspective

This chapter has so far discussed how encountering Cordal's artworks in the street may influence the way people relate to the environment and instill in the viewer a more biocentric attitude. It should be noted, however, that photographs of street installations form an important part of Cordal's oeuvre, and that the artist does not always leave his installations in place after they have been documented photographically. In other words, sometimes a street installation will be staged mainly as a means to produce a photograph, rather than as an end in and of itself.

The artwork depicted in Figure 2 is an example of an installation that is intended by the artist to be relatively permanent. This is evident by its elevated placement, which, along with its attachment to the wall with what looks like rubber cement, makes it hard to reach and remove. In comparison, the installations depicted in Figures 1 and 3 are less permanent. They are placed in a vulnerable position on the ground and are not physically affixed to the site. It is possible, then, that these installations were mainly staged for the purpose of Cordal creating photographs, and that the artist took the sculptures with him after the photos were taken. However, while some of Cordal's installations may be present on the street for only a short time (even by the standards of ephemeral street art), they still have the potential to attract the attention of passersby while they are there.

Seeing the artist's photographs of installations in a gallery or online is very different from experiencing the installations in person in urban public space. First, in accordance with the arguments previously made in this chapter, significant meaning is lost when installations are experienced outside of the everyday context of the street. As I have discussed elsewhere, unexpectedly coming across seemingly unsanctioned artworks in urban public space can be an interruption that instills in the viewer a sense of exploration and encourages engagement with both the artwork and the everyday environment (Bengtson 2014, p. 150). Second, a photograph offers a single vantage point and a specific framing of an installation, leaving out the majority of the wider context the artwork is embedded in. As with the gallery installation depicted in Figure 4, this can make it harder for the viewer to mentally connect the depicted scenario to other parts of the everyday environment.

The use of the photographic medium may, however, also have potential positive implications for the dissemination of a biocentric way of thinking. A photograph allows the artist to frame the sculptural work and emphasize certain details in a way that helps ensure that the viewer sees precisely what the artist wants them to see. An example of this is the inclusion of the concrete slabs as a backdrop in Figure 1. Exposure to photographs of installations that explicitly deal with the relationship between human and non-human members of the biotic community can also form a background for understanding the installations that are left in place in public space, including those that are more subtle and that would not otherwise immediately call for an ecocritical interpretation. Further, a photo that is spread online may reach a significantly larger audience than the depicted installation itself would have. For example, on Instagram alone, Cordal has more than 28,000 followers who might see, comment on and even repost the images of his street works. In addition, whereas on the street the installations have to speak for themselves, on Instagram (as well as in similar media contexts) images are often accompanied by a text that can steer the viewer's interpretation by making explicit the biocentric agenda of the artworks. While a digital context can in this way add an explicitly ecocritical layer to the depicted artworks, it should be noted that in the constant flow of images on Instagram and other apps, it is unclear what kind of impact the shared material really has. This is of course also difficult to measure in relation to street artworks. However, the argument in this chapter is that the experience of unexpectedly discovering an artwork in urban public space is more likely to create an interruption of the everyday than seeing a post on social media, and therefore also more likely to engage the viewer on a deeper level.

Conclusion

Through a discussion of selected works by the Spanish artist Isaac Cordal, this chapter has argued that street art is in a special position to affect the way people feel, think and act with regard to the environment and non-human members of the biotic community. While artworks in a designated art space like the "white cube" of a museum or gallery certainly can address environmental issues, the particular context of urban public space enables ephemeral street artworks to reach people unexpectedly in their everyday environment. Such encounters can create interruptions in the daily routine of viewers and cause them to pay attention to, and question, their surroundings and values, including contemporary society's predominantly anthropocentric and legal-rational basis for relating to other members of the biotic community.

In the street, Cordal's combination of miniature sculptures and the large spaces of the city creates a visual shift that enables people to see themselves and the culture they are part of from a new point of view. This is an effect that would be difficult to replicate in the confines of a gallery. The context of urban public space adds meaning to Cordal's installations in part because it is not an artificial construct, made solely for the benefit of the artwork or the viewer, but

rather is an organic and integral part of the everyday environment where people live. Likewise, while posting images of street installations on social media can help further a biocentric agenda, the impact of seeing depictions of the street artworks in this context is not directly comparable to encountering the installations in urban public space.

As the chosen cases have demonstrated, Cordal's street artworks visualize and problematize environmental issues in different ways. While some installations can be interpreted as speaking to human estrangement from nature by directly juxtaposing sculptures of people with elements of urban plant life, others are more subtle. In the latter cases, however, the frequent inclusion in the artist's installations of dreary-looking, balding, white men in grey suits can be seen as a visual allusion to the impact of an unsustainable, growth-based and legal-rational society on both human life and the wider biotic community. Even when seen in isolation, then, such works may create an interruption in the everyday and cause viewers to pay attention to, and question, their surroundings and values, including their anthropocentric attitude towards other members of the biotic community.

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Notes

- 1 - Excerpt from the poem "City Trees" by Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Second April*. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1921, p. 3.
- 2 - <http://cementeclipses.com/about-2/> (retrieved 2016.12.19). The importance of the dynamic between the miniature sculptures and the expansive urban environment is also highlighted in the title of Cordal's monograph *Cement Eclipses. Small interventions in the big city* (2010).
- 3 - A symptom of this is a tendency to focus on short-term benefits of actions rather than their long-term consequences. This can for example be seen in the way contemporary society to a large extent is run by career politicians who often seem more concerned with their own personal interests (e.g. appeasing voter constituencies to ensure re-election, or securing profitable positions in the corporations and organizations they are meant to regulate) than with making value-based – and potentially unpopular – decisions they believe will benefit the biotic community as a whole in the long-term.