

Urban Art: Creating the Urban With Art

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1) Urban art as an umbrella term

The aim of the conference and this publication is to discuss “urban art” in its broadest sense: as an umbrella term that encompasses a great variety of creative expressions in the urban environment on a global scale. I am aware of the use of the term urban art for products of the art market that are related to graffiti writing and street art. I do not disagree, but would like to propose a much broader field of denotations. Firstly because this term was used by artists and activists themselves at the beginning of the great renaissance of street art around the millennium. In Julia Reinecke’s first academic monograph on street art, submitted as a master thesis at Humboldt University in Berlin, we find the following quotation from stencil artist Logan Hicks: “(...) Urban art best describes the movement. The art that signifies this movement is influenced, and primarily lives within the city environment. (...) The people, the mediums, surfaces and showcases that exist within this movement are all born from the city streets” (Reinecke, 2007; Blanché, 2010). Onema points in the same direction: “It sums up what we’re doing: creating art in/for/inspired by the urban environment that we live in. It is simple and easily understandable to those who don’t do art, while still maintaining the idea of creativity and intelligence, not just ‘vandalism’” (Reinecke, 2007; Blanché, 2010). Curator Adrian Nabi also coined an encompassing term for the Backjumps exhibitions in Berlin after 2003 by naming the phenomenon at large as urban communication and aesthetics (Nabi 2003).

The broad implications of the term “urban art” allow summarizing very different outcomes, styles, media, and techniques ranging from illegal graffiti writing to performative, participatory and architectural interventions (Hildebrandt, 2012), from adusting to legal murals and so forth. We do not need to be imprecise by describing the single form of urban creativity, but neither do we have to restrict them by definitions. To adhere to terms, as graffiti writing and street art is on the one hand useful to stress their critical potential, on the other hand it can be excluding, if the artistic or just creative expression does not fit in their characterization. If we use the term urban art in its broadest sense as a model for analysis, then it is also possible to overcome polarities that were already described and criticized by several authors, that is to say, the oppositions between art and vandalism, art and non-art, high and low art or art and advertisement and so forth. The objective here is, of course, not to overlook these discussions, but to acknowledge them as part of the phenomenon itself. The aim is to deal with every creative expression that appears on our large urban screen. Also, for this reason the interdisciplinary approach is so important as it offers a multi-perspective of urban practices, produced by many and often anonymous authors using a great variety of media.

The multitude of expressions poses a great challenge for scientific research, especially for art history, which still privileges monographic approaches and has difficulties to recognize, e.g. street art as a genuine form of art. Even though academia as well as the established art world have claimed to overcome the categories of high and low long ago, both are still working with hierarchies. Here methods of visual culture studies or the German Bildwissenschaft

come into play by allowing us to analyze non-artistic forms of creativity or just signs in the urban fabric, moreover the reception of urban art through photographic and film documentation. These images find their ways mostly into the internet and in photo books, and in return shape the urban imaginary. The idea is not to elevate forms of urban art artificially, but to consider the phenomenon at large and see it as a contemporary epistemic model for a way of processing knowledge via images in a dynamic way. The challenge here is to think about a form that includes many forms, a multitude of perspectives, which are constantly networking visually and virtually.

2) Creating the urban

Furthermore, the term urban art opens the field toward the discourse on the contemporary city that has precisely changed in the period of the street art boom since the 1990s. Actually, the static notion of the (post)modern city was given up for a much more flexible conception of the contemporary urban, understood as a process, which is constantly changing, ephemeral, mobile, entertaining, virtual/digital and also chaotic and difficult to control (Bourdin, Eckardt, Wood, 2014). These characteristics meet perfectly the criteria of urban creativity as the contributions of this publication demonstrate. Street art, in particular, has shown to be not only constantly changing, ephemeral, mobile and entertaining, but also developed at the same time and together with the web 2.0, and is therefore also virtual. It represents and produces the contemporary urban multidimensional space. This process is of course not linear, but implies oppositions and contradictions, such as gentrification. Street art is very often accused (or praised) as a motor of urban renewal because it attracts people to live in such an environment, which in turn allures to real estate developers. However, after the process of gentrification is completed, especially graffiti writing and street art disappear from the respective area, a process that has happened in Berlin. The intensive investment is accompanied by control of property that leads to the again more static notion of the city. Processes like this show how conflicts within the contemporary city very much depend on the urban imaginary: Who has the power to decide about the overall image? Who is permitted to develop the ideas about communal living (Bourdin, Eckardt, Wood, 2014)?

From this follows that the urban is also political in different ways: it has begun to assume the meaning of the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit). Recently, it wasn't just in European cities that opinion polls during election campaigns named a so-called "urban electorate," which cannot be defined so clearly. After the controversial media law in Poland was enacted early in 2016¹, the Polish foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski stated in an interview that the law would cure Poland of different kinds of diseases, such as the new mix of cultures and races, a world of cyclists and vegetarians, who want to use only renewable energy and fight against any form of religion.² In this neoconservative position, which we encounter these days not only in Poland, we see a reflection of this urban public that apparently is hard to define. Of course, I think that this kind of urban public is the prime audience of urban art, maybe even the agents of it. They and their urban culture constitute forms of a global development that challenge many people and lead them toward neo-conservative parties or even further.

Finally, the discourse on the urban has replaced the one on the city itself and has its own semantic history. Until the end of the 20th century "urban" had a positive connotation: It was idealized as the Mediterranean city with the central piazza in the tradition of the Greek agora, representing the ideal of historic democracy. Strangely enough,

1 - It puts the national broadcast companies directly under the influence of the government that claimed his right to appoint the directors directly. For more information see: <http://www.humanrightseurope.org/2016/01/poland-jagland-raises-media-law-human-rights-concerns-with-president-duda/> (24.07.2017).

2 - For the original text see <http://www.bild.de/bildlive/2016/14-polen-minister-44000764.bild.html> (24.07.2017).

this concept was only realized in shopping malls and artificially built districts like Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. These models are not urban in themselves; they artificially just represent urbanity. Participation here is clearly limited to consumerism and controlled labor. These concepts were criticized by contemporary urban theory that stresses more the conflicting aspects of urbanity. From this perspective, the urban is not conceived as a concise space, but more as an open process negotiating claims on urban territories and the struggle on the symbolic significance of its places. However, it is at this point that we see again the potential of urban art as a creative tool to influence and shape the symbolic meaning of urban space itself, and in doing so reclaiming that very space. Its inclusive characteristics often tackle static notions of city planning and oppose policies of governance, as was also the case in Birgit Mersmann's talk about Korean practices (Mersmann, 2018). The analysis of urban art is therefore a valuable tool to make such processes visible. The contributions to this volume show an understanding of the contemporary urban that takes into consideration the inconstancy of the public sphere (Helbrecht/Dirksmeier, 2013) and the possibilities of its shaping.

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