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## HOW LONG IS NOW. STREET ART AND VANITY

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**Résumé :** Le Street Art est ici défini comme mouvement majeur de l'art contemporain caractérisé par une pratique auto-autorisée dans l'espace public, dont les œuvres, adressées à un large public, sont vivantes, exposées à la détérioration, naturelle ou intentionnelle, et donc souvent éphémères. Le Street Art est un art de l'*hic et nunc* et non un art de conservation : la défiguration et la mort des œuvres fait partie de leur réalité d'art vivant, de leur beauté et de leur intérêt. Il renouvelle ainsi le genre des Vanités, car les œuvres ne se contentent pas de représenter la fuite du temps mais portent la périssabilité dans leur forme même. Art spéculaire des sociétés riches des vingt dernières années, il est par ailleurs la meilleure expression artistique du paradigme contemporain.

**Mots-clés :** art contemporain, street art, graffiti, urban art, art *in situ*, présentisme, vanités.

**Abstract:** In this paper, Street Art is defined as a major movement of contemporary art characterized by a self-authorized practice in the public space. It consists of works addressed to a large audience, exposed to natural decay or intentional deterioration: the works are living, therefore often short-lived. Street Art is an art of the *hic et nunc*, not intended to be preserved and stored: erasure is a intrinsic part of the works' reality, beauty and interest. Street artworks are new vanities, which not only represent the passage of time, but also express it in their forms themselves. They are also products and reflections of the current time's wealthy societies.

**Keywords:** contemporary art, street art, graffiti, urban art, site-specific art, presentism, vanities.

## INTRODUCTION

## WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

There is still no consensus about what Street Art is or is not. Schematically yet, two points of view have emerged. According to the first one, Street Art is an umbrella term that includes various types or genres of art, especially:

1) Graffiti (or Writing, Graffiti Writing, Style Writing Graffiti), whose specificities are –including but not limited to–: the artist's signature as main part of the piece, the execution on various media (walls, trains, all kinds of street furniture), the location in the public space, usually in derelict sites of the cities and outskirts or in transit zones (like stairs or tunnels), the absence of formal authorization, the style of the writing (unlike graffiti made without aesthetic purpose), the encryption of letters, providing tribal nature to the communication, therefore, the limited audience (writers themselves);

2) Urban Art, which is part of Public Art: it is composed of commissioned artworks for the public space, which can be intended for either a temporary exhibition (as in Paris the M.U.R. in rue Oberkampf, France, or the Wynwood Walls in Miami, USA) or a permanent one (like in open-air galleries such as the Blue Wall in Lisbon, Portugal, or in cities with regular festivals like Stavanger, Norway);

3) Contemporary Urban Art, in which, unlike the other two types, the artworks are not situated outdoor and freely available to the public. Instead, they are transportable and intended to galleries for sale, or to museums for exhibition and conservation. Artists come from the Graffiti or Urban Art scene, though, and may keep working in the streets.

According to the opposite point of view, Street Art is a *specific* type or genre of art. The various criteria to define it are not necessarily seen as a collective requirement even though they are not individually relevant: the pieces are situated in the public space; they are often site-specific (i.e. designed for a specific location that gives them their meaning, at least partly), as in *Les expulsés* (1977-1978) by Ernest Pignon-Ernest, for instance, where the location on a wall of a demolished building tells the story of the two figures drawn on the piece: that of being evicted from their flat for political decision. In this context, they are also self-authorized (Blanché, 2015), executed for free, and intended to a wide audience, unlike Graffiti. Street Art includes a great variety of media (walls, furniture, doors, sidewalks...), tools and techniques (spray paint, stencil, sticker, carving, yarn bombing, adhesive tape...), and intentions. It often carries out a political claim but, unlike what we could call street creativity or street communication (for instance graffiti, political statements or private advertisements), Street Art also meets artistic requirements for it is ambiguous, poetic and/or playful. Of course, *art is in the eyes of the beholder* and it is impossible to decide where art starts or ends, particularly since Marcel Duchamp's art revolution. This is why the border between Street Art and Street Creativity is always questionable, and this is why still today, after some years of academic research on a not so young phenomenon anymore, there is no consensus about what Street Art is or is not: « term Street Art cannot be defined conclusively since what it encompasses is constantly being negotiated » (Bengtson, 2014).

Yet in this paper I will consider the specific point of view excluding Graffiti, Urban Art, Contemporary Urban Art, and Street Creativity. In view of the topic of this journal issue on short forms and modernity, I will try to answer two questions. First, is Street Art

short-lived, and, if so, does Street Art need to be so? Secondly, does this characteristic make it part of contemporariness?

### IS STREET ART SHORT-LIVED?

Mostly yes. Many pieces are tightly bound to a specific context, either political or cultural. When the context changes, so does the meaning and function of the Street Art piece. Most people still remember the terrorist attack in *Charlie hebdo*'s editorial office in Paris, on January 2015 the 7<sup>th</sup>, about ten years after the French satirical newspaper decided, in the name of freedom of the press, to publish some controversial caricatures of Mahomet that had been published three months before in the Danish *Jyllands-Posten*. Therefore, even today, most people can still relate the artworks produced to their original context of the aftermath of the bloody attack. However, the ability for future generations to understand all the visual and textual references seems quite unlikely. In the following example (fig. 1), the drawing of two V-shaped pen-fingers relates to the draughtsmen targeted by the killers and the conviction that freedom of speech will win despite opposite attempts to gag it. The writing relates to two references: one is the slogan «*Touche pas à mon pote*» (don't touch my pal), SOS Racisme's motto, meaning solidarity with immigrants and fight against racism; the other one is the «*liberté d'expression*», one of the fundamental human rights expressed in the 1789 *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (although the literal expression was officially born in the Article 10 of the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights).

Figure 1 – Obsolescence



*Touche pas à mon expression !!!*  
paper glued on wall, 21x30, Nice (France), 2015<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All photographs were taken by the author.

Apart from the contextual meaning of many pieces, Street Art is also a transient form of art because the works usually do not last long. This is due to the vulnerability of their media, materials, techniques, and to the fact that they are not protected by the four walls of the White Cube but exposed to the corrosion of bad weather and sun (fig. 2).

*Figure 2 – Natural decay*



*Untitled, paper glued on wall, ca 50x40, Marseille (France), 2014*

Many artists deliberately use very fragile tools such as chalk (like Philippe Baudelocque or David Zinn) or newsprint (like Ernest Pignon-Ernest). This choice is intrinsically poetic: the artwork changes with time, like all living things. The Italian artist Nemo's uses paint for bones and newsprint for skin and flesh: when the fragile paper has gone, the skeleton appears.

Another cause of fast deterioration is the location. Some pieces are executed on transitory sites, like buildings to be demolished or rehabilitated. Some are situated at foot level, so that they get damaged and gradually erased, like this Levalet's work (fig. 3 and 3 bis) that, within one year, was partially torn out.

*Figure 3 – Involuntary erasure (Before)*



*Untitled, paper on wall, ca 130x80, Paris (France), December 2013*

Figure 3 bis – Involuntary erasure (After)



Untitled, paper on wall, ca 130x80, Paris (France), April 2014

Figure 4 – Voluntary erasure (Before)



Real eyes Realise Real lies, spray on door, ca 90x120, Nice (France), February 2014

Some are “cleaned up” because situated on sensitive props, such as the entrance door of a University, symbol of the institution itself (fig. 4 and 4 bis).

Figure 4 bis – Voluntary erasure (After)



Nice (France), October 2014

There are other ways in which Street Art is a transient form, particularly regarding the evolution of the work. Since it is located in the public space, a Street Art work is open, «shared» (Bertini, 2015), participative, constantly in progress, dialogic and multiplied (Bertho, 2015): it is the object of a «conversation» (Hansen & Flynn, 2015, p. 27) amid artists and people with peaceful and dialogic intentions (fig. 5 and 7) or not (fig. 6, 8 and 8 bis).

*Figure 5 – Peaceful conversation amid artists*



Untitled by Jérôme Mesnager & Julien Seth Malland, stencil and spray on wall, ca 200x150, Paris (France), 2013

*Figure 6 – Non-peaceful conversation amid artists*



Untitled, stickers on traffic light, ca 20x20, New York (USA), 2015

*Figure 7 – Peaceful conversation with the public*



Untitled, stickers on traffic light, ca 10x15, New York (USA), 2015



Figure 8 – *Non-peaceful conversation with the public (Before)*



*Pasolini 40 ans après* by Ernest Pignon-Ernest, paper on wall, ca 170x150, Rome (Italy), 2015

Figure 8 bis – *Non-peaceful Conversation with the public (After)*



*Pasolini 40 ans après* by Ernest Pignon-Ernest, paper on wall, ca 170x150, Rome (Italy), 2015, detail

Furthermore, as a result of the artification (Heinich & Shapiro, 2012) of a significant part of Graffiti and Street Art, several pieces have become pieces of Urban Art, when protected by a plastic sheet in the street (like that of Miss Van, fig. 9), or Contemporary Urban Art, when removed from their natural site and exhibited in a museum or any art institution (like Banksy's *Radar Rat* in Bologna exhibition in 2016, fig. 10).

Figure 9 – Street Art transferred to Urban Art



Untitled, paint on wall and plexiglass, ca 110x90, Rome (Italy), 2014

Figure 10 – Street Art transferred to Contemporary Urban Art



Radar Rat, stencil on wall, 45.5x38x3.5, Exhibition Street Art Banksy & co.  
*L'art allo stato urbano*, Bologna (Italy) 2016

Last but surely not least, an incalculable number of works have mainly turned into various images of themselves, «Internet Art» (Glaser, 2015), through specialized and not specialized websites and social networks.

#### DOES STREET ART NEED TO BE SHORT-LIVED?

In the opinion of many artists and scholars, Street Art works need to be preserved: their «ephemeral nature» implies their «abandonment in the streets» (Garcia Gayo, 2015,

p. 99). The artists usually take a photograph of their work as soon as it is finished to keep an image of it before it starts decaying and eventually disappears. Nevertheless, is the image of the work still Street Art? If defined as I did before, it isn't. When a work has been removed from its original location and status as an ephemeral, shared piece of art in the public space, it is no more Street Art: it may become Urban Art, contemporary art, Internet art, or any other labels still to be created (especially for these pieces which were transferred from one genre to another). A preserved, lasting piece of art that used to be Street Art is no more but a trace or reminder of a Street Art piece. The latter existed at some point but is no more. It has become something else.

There are at least four reasons why a Street Art piece should stay in its original context, therefore exposed to an ephemeral lifespan.

First, capturing a Street Art piece either by taking a photograph of it or by extracting it from its environment and transport it into a place of exhibition, for instance, denies its nature of a living artwork. Life is movement, constant change. Additionally, taking a photograph implies selecting a specific state of the work, at a particular moment in time. Significantly, many different photographs of a same piece co-exist and are spread on the Internet: which one is the piece of art? Shouldn't a transient shape of the work captured by a photograph be considered as one transitory image of the work in its living process, and not the work itself?

Second, taking a picture of a Street Art work or removing it from the public space to make it transportable and perhaps marketable, even virtually, implies choosing a point of view from which the piece is supposed to be seen, denying by default all others. It also implies a framing: but where does a Street Art work end? As a site-specific artwork, a Street Art work certainly does not end with the limits of its edges. A sticker has clear edges, so do paste-ups or stencils, especially when they are reproduced in number and spread over the city with apparently no care for the location. But what if these pieces are *in situ* and their context contribute to their meaning? The curators of the exhibition *Street Art Banksy & co. L'arte allo stato urbano* in Bologna (Italy) in 2016 had to tackle this insoluble issue for the pieces removed from their original public location and labelled as «street piece[s]». The «solution» they came up with varied: sometimes they included part of the original environment as it was—or was supposed to be—when the work was removed, sometimes they didn't. Banksy's stencil titled *Anarchy rat* (fig. 11) shows the stencil of a rat and, upon it, two other productions very likely not to be Banksy's: a circled A written with a red marker pen, symbol of anarchists, and a sticker representing the figure of Moore and Lloyd's Vendetta and the words «Regime Change». Another Banksy's «street piece», though, the *Radar rat* (fig. 10), includes nothing but the stencil.

Third, the size and the location of the work usually have a significant part in the meaning-making process, especially in those of small dimensions, such as Slinkachu's installations. The real dimensions and location of a work often does not appear on a framed image, like a shot. If Borondo chose to put the work reproduced below close to the sidewalk (fig. 12 and 12 bis), this is not random: this monochrome scratched painting takes part of its poetry –i.e. its ability to trigger thoughts or emotions in the viewer– and its meaning –of vulnerability and melancholy– from such a location, additionally to its small size and fragile matter.

*Figure 11 – Framed Street Art*



*Anarchy Rat, spray on metal, 166x27.5, Exhibition Street Art Banksy & co.  
L'art allo stato urbano, Bologna (Italy), 2016*

*Figure 12 – Size and location (piece)*



*Untitled, paint on wall, ca 20x30, Rome (Italy), 2014*

Figure 12 bis – Size and location (context)



Untitled, paint on wall, ca 20x30, Rome (Italy), 2014

Finally, what is the matter of Street Art? Ernest Pignon-Ernest is often said that the drawing is one third of the piece of art, because his works are «des oeuvres *de* situation» more than «des oeuvres *en* situation»<sup>2</sup> –works of the site/situation more than works *in* the site/situation<sup>3</sup>. The wall, the medium, the environment itself with its social characteristics, the location with its memories and narratives, and even the reception by the viewers are the main parts of the piece. Street Art is not Internet Art, neither a photographic art, nor any kind of a framable piece of art. It is an ephemeral art whose proper matter and material (painting, wall, bench...) is nothing but a singled-out part. Genetically intended to interact with passersby, therefore sentenced to change fast and disappear, its lifespan is uncertain, and after its material disappearance its memory survives through representations, either material (photos, books) or immaterial (words, narratives, emotions). As Teresa Lousa puts it, «the anonimity, ephemeral, and transitory element» is a «key feature of [Street Art's] artistic creation» (Lousa, 2015). It is a key feature of the viewer's experience too. A Street Art work is a process rather than a piece, it is part of the real life of a given neighbourhood. Encountering a Street Art work is receiving an unexpected gift, which is unique at that given time, in that given area, in that random moment of one's life. Its power comes from intruding on your daily life, but it is also due to its being alive and promised to death.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Comoy Fusaro et Gaillard (2019) or the film by Patrick Chaput & Laurence Drummond, *Parcours* (2009). The artist paraphrases Guy Debord : « La beauté nouvelle sera DE SITUATION, c'est-à-dire provisoire et vécue » –The new beauty will be SITUATION-BEAUTY, that is temporary and experienced– (Potlatch, n. 5, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> I underline. All translations from French are mine.

## STREET ART IS AN ART OF THE CURRENT TIME

When photographer Wang Wenlan was asked «What is your philosophy in taking photographs? What makes a photograph an exceptional one?», he answered:

Every picture should be unique. [...] We first should not copycat or imitate, but look for differences. I like things that pass away immediately, or things that are changing. Something that is not yet born, or undergoing changes, such as a child. I also like something about to vanish. In a nutshell, the moment of change. (Briel, 2016)

There are at least five (and probably more) reasons why Street Art as an ephemeral art mirrors the rich western societies in which it was born and blossomed during the last twenty years.

First, these societies are those of transience, fast-food, fashion, planned obsolescence, consumption, speed, change, consumerism: now, consumerism is both stigmatized and stimulated by Street Art because of its ephemeral nature. Thus, it fits with a general trend to an «escalade de l'éphémère» -escalating of the ephemeral- (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2013) and an «accélération du temps» -speeding up of time- (Rosa, 2010). It expresses a type of «présentisme» -presentism- (Hartog, 2003; Laïdi, 2000) understood as the «*ethos* du moment contemporain» -the *ethos* of the present time- (Taguieff, 2000, p. 10), not only because like many works of contemporary art such as installations, happenings, performances or participative art, it is fleeting, but also because of the «raccourcissement des réseaux temporels entre le moment de la création et le moment de sa mise dans l'espace public» -the short time between the creation of the artwork and its availability to the public- (Heinich, 2014, p. 316-319).

Secondly, Street Art participates in another tendency of the present time, that of preserving and including into collective heritage material or immaterial items which were seen as not worth it in the past. In 2003, a Unesco Convention created the concept of «intangible cultural heritage», reaching a further step in the process started in 1972 with the seventeenth General Conference. The extension of museums is «un phénomène majeur de notre temps» -a main phenomenon of our time- (Tobele, 2005, p. 15) and the migration of Street Art towards Urban Art, Contemporary Urban Art, and Internet Art was easily predictable. We cannot accept that something changes and gets lost, we cannot accept aging and death, and we would better save a biased, partial, artificial image of a street artwork than let it be what it is: living, then dying.

A third characteristic of our time -within a longer period of time- is the breakdown of traditional hierarchies between media and the explosion of the borders between humanities and sciences, between art and non-art (Heinich & Shapiro, 2012), and between arts and applied arts (Talon-Hugon, 2017), in short transdisciplinarity and transmediality (Eder, 2015). Street Art, which includes a variety of media and mixes cultural references, from pop culture to high culture, is clearly part of such phenomena.

Street Art also echoes a significant phenomenon of the so-called Generations Y and Z, who had access to the Internet from an early age, in the wake of the DIY movement (Matson, 2008). These generations are those of hackers and makers, whose values are seemingly similar to those of Street Artists, like sharing, the pursuit of pleasure (rather than prof-



it), horizontal organization (instead of hierarchy), agile working methods, autonomy, freedom (Lallement 2016), and so is the way they experience the city as «une plate-forme de situations ouvertes» –a platform of open situations– (La Rocca, 2013, p. 195).

Eventually, after the age of the «exagération du deuil» –excessive mourning– with its «culte moderne des tombeaux et des cimetières» –modern cult of tombs and cemeteries– and its fear of the other's death (Ariès, 1975, p. 58) that characterized the nineteenth century, here is the age of a renewed consciousness of one's death, which looks like a denial of one's death, though<sup>4</sup>. Since Damien Hirst exhibited *For the Love of God* at the White Cube gallery of London in 2007, skulls have become invasive, either in everyday consumer products or in art. With or without skulls, contemporary vanities might express the fear of oblivion, like in Ben's artwork: *J'ai peur qu'on m'oublie*.

They might also use more allusive tools, following classical vanities, referring to the transience of life, the mystery of death or the transition to a new form of life:

Contrairement à la représentation, soumise aux principes du récit et de l'illustration dans la temporalité, la formule allégorique possède une souplesse permettant de sortir de l'univoque. La conscience du temps, la fragilité de l'existence et des biens comme énoncés, s'incarnent dans la visibilité, mais la forme énigmatique que prend la composition introduit l'essentiel, c'est-à-dire le sens de l'invisible. (Tapié, 2010, p. 10)<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary vanities are numerous in Urban Art, in Alexis Diaz's paintings (fig. 13), for instance, as well as in Street Art (fig. 14).

The writing «HOW LONG IS NOW», written in gigantic black letters upon YZ's artwork on the blind wall of the Kunsthaus Tacheles, in Berlin, is one of them<sup>6</sup>. The writing has no question mark, as if the answer was obvious. More than a question, this may be an invitation to be aware of the flight of time, and therefore to seize the day. «Now» is by nature elusive. These words might also refer to the precarious state of the community of artists and squatters who used to occupy the abandoned building until the police pushed them out in 2012. Everything ends at some point; hence we'd better enjoy the present moment. Among the various objects of classical vanities, those echoed by the Tacheles writing suggest the inevitable coming end (such as hourglasses, candelers or cut flowers) rather than transition and possible rebirth (such as butterflies).

<sup>4</sup> The emphasis of painful representations of death in the 19<sup>th</sup> century seems to be opposite to the recent multiplication of skulls, but from many points of view, romantic legacy of our current time is blatant. In particular, the current trend of short forms dates back to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: «La poésie est marquée, au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, par le déclin des formes longues –celles du premier romantisme– au profit des genres brefs, tels qu'ils sont pratiqués, par exemple, par un Baudelaire. Cette évolution est généralement rattachée à la nouvelle vision du monde, éclatée et atomisée, qui est justement celle de la modernité, et à la poétique de la *brevitas*, voire du fragment, qui lui est corrélée» (Vaillant, 2005, p. 9).

<sup>5</sup> Unlike representation, complied with the principles of narrative and illustration in temporality, allegory has a flexibility that allows it to get out of the univocal. The awareness of time, the vulnerability of existence are embodied in visible objects, but the enigmatic form of the composition introduces the essential part, that is to say the sense of the invisible (my translation).

<sup>6</sup> According to the webpage <http://filoart.org>, the piece is part of the *Globalodromia* project.

Figure 13 – Vanity in Urban Art



Untitled, paint on wall, ca 300x280, London (UK), 2014

Figure 14 – Vanity in Street Art



Untitled, paint on wall, ca 1000x500, Berlin (Germany), 2014

Moreover, Street Art works often represent self-portraits, which fight against death and oblivion: «Se peindre, c'est affirmer une présence *hic et nunc* [...]. Présent pour être reconnu toujours par la postérité. *Hic et nunc et semper*» –painting oneself is stating a presence *hic et nunc*, here, now, and forever- (Bonafoux, 2004, p. 24, 28). Graffiti Writing and Street Art are full of self-portraits, either with tags (that are signatures), hoodies (alter egos of Graffiti and Street Artists, like on fig. 15), or assertions of presence like the famous «Kilroy was here» and its countless imitators.



Figure 15 – Self-portrait



Untitled, stencil on wall, ca 150x40, New York (USA), 2015

#### CONCLUSION: «THE UPRISING OF THE UNEXPECTED» (VITRANI, 2016, p. 30)

Street Art is a living art, in sync with contemporariness or hypermodernity, as Lipovetsky put it (Lipovetsky, 2004, p. 60-61). The evolution, decay, and erasure of Street Art pieces are normal stages of their process. They play a part in their beauty and their meaning because, regardless of their subject matter, the piece is a vanity per se. In that respect, they solve the paradox of classical vanities, which represented the transient with non-transient artworks. Finally, Street Art lies maybe less in the material piece produced by the artist (with uncertain edges) than in all the material and, above all, immaterial things and processes around it: the artist's gesture, the viewers' reactions, talks, narratives, emotions, thoughts, and opinions. It might even lie in a new, curious, playful, participative, surprising way of experiencing the city.

Transforming the city into a huge playground [...]. Urban hackers want to break the dehumanizing way we experience big cities, where routine and visual saturation lead to see nothing, to desert one's own life. They demand a collective awakening, a recapture of reality. Their utopia is reachable by anyone. Their subversion is joyful: it merges with the freedom of reinventing the world at every step. (Pujas, 2015, p. 7)

As Swoon puts it, for the artist Street Art is about «this feeling of just wanting to create the surprise, this kind of openness, this beautiful moment that people are not expecting to find » (Bürger & Cantu, 2009). For the public, it is about opening one's eyes, looking for surprise and being surprised. Finding unexpectedly a beautiful artwork like the small stencil reproduced below (fig. 16 and 16 bis) while walking through the streets is receiving a gift on an ordinary day, feeling connected to the unknown artist and grateful for it, and being aware of the present moment and place. It is sharing, enjoying, and feeling alive. Maybe Street Art gives art its previous «aura» (Benjamin, 2007, p. 21 & 13) and *hic et nunc*-back, or maybe Street Art gives aura to the here and now.

*Figure 16 – Re-enchanting the experience of the city (context)*



*Untitled, stencil on sticker, ca 20x12, Stavanger (Norway), 2015*

*Figure 16 bis – Re-enchanting the experience of the city (piece)*



*Untitled, stencil on sticker, ca 20x12, Stavanger (Norway), 2015*

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