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Assignment Title: History, Technologies, Regulation and Policy

Group Presentation Evaluation. Street Art

Course and Year: MA Media, Communication & Critical Practice, 2011 (London College of Communication, University of the Arts)

Due date: 31 March 2011

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Introduction, Methodology and Self- Evaluation

In the past decade, street art has unquestionably become an integral part of metropolitan visual culture. There is no city in the world without walls covered in a mixture of artistic creations and it is practically impossible to disregard the existence of this art movement. As Armstrong states, “street art is a visual culture of the city, an artistic expression that appears, disappears and reappears” (Armstrong, 2005: 1). It is an ephemeral movement in which creations emerge, get observed and vanish in the swift way. However, in the past few years the street art’s fleeting and rebellious nature has been modified and shifted towards the mainstream art industry.

As a group we decided to investigate street art culture in London and to discover whether it is possible for this rebellious movement to resist profit governed social and political structure. We also looked into the main issues connected to the recent commercialization of this movement, such as the new emerging presence of street art in the gallery institutions, the transformation of the context and occurred similarities to the previous art movement in terms of their commercial developments and popularization.

To find out about what is hidden behind the curtain, which separates the ordinary viewers and the artists is undoubtedly a challenging task. Not much academic literature focuses on the commercialisation of the street art and there are many graffiti artists who wish to keep their identity unrevealed. However, we have managed to get underneath the surface of the scene and have met several London based street artists.

The subject of street art is highly based on visual perceptions, following that we have decided that the best way to approach this project would be to make a short documentary film. It is

important to state that the process of making the documentary required a good time management, sufficient organization and communication skills. We also experienced a series of difficulties that we had to overcome such as acquirement of equipment and editing facilities.

In spite of the difficulties, we have gained a very extensive knowledge of filmmaking and video and audio editing. Working as a group we have gathered a better understanding of compromising, flexibility, and appreciation of each other's judgments. We have also gained much clearer perception of the street art movement in general terms as well as in terms of its commercialization. Furthermore, we realized that there are as many opinions as there are artists. Nevertheless, we found that the one thing they all agree on is that street art, as we know it, belongs to the street. Even though, the gallery display of street artwork has the right to take place and resolve in profit making, the work on the streets is "not for sale... It can't be bought, and it can't be owned" (Witz quoted in *Street Art, The Graffiti Revolution*, 2008:79).

To conclude, a single most valuable thing we have gained is the broad network, which opens us new future opportunities in media industry and documentary filmmaking.

The Analysis

"Graffiti is not the lowest form of art. Despite having to creep about at night and lie to your mum it's actually the most honest art form available." (Banksy quoted in Another kick to the wall, Guardian website)

Postmodern graffiti, particularly in the 1970's to the 1980's developed as a means to self-expression for people who had no recourse to formal public outlets such as galleries and exhibitions for their creativity. It used a deformed logo-based imagery combined with fantasy art and it was a kind of a rebellious illegal act of challenge. The static (city walls) and non-static (train carriages) elements of the urban landscape served as canvases. There were elements of competition in the quality of work and also in the extremity of the placement of the work. For the reason of spray painting on various private surfaces graffiti has been seen as a form of vandalism or a social crime. Arguably, graffiti did not find as many followers amongst the ordinary mainstream viewers as the street art, therefore a big part of the graffiti culture remains to be seen as underground.

It could be stated that the street art movement emerged from graffiti art in the 1990s when various graffiti artist began using different techniques such as stencilling, painting or wheat pasting. Although graffiti and street art have the same roots and their visual form is undoubtedly similar it is important to make a distinction between these two art movements. Even though street art is also illegal it seems that, in comparison to graffiti, is not seen as a social offense and obliteration of private property. It is rather perceived as an expression of ideas and attitudes towards society that is presented in more understandable, acceptable or even appealing way. Street art often expresses deprecatory attitudes towards capitalistic societies, war and social classification. There is still controversy as to whether street art is vandalism or purely an artistic form of expression. In the past several years, street art has become an important part of commercial scene. Right now major companies use street art for advertising in a grand scale, which results in street art movement becoming an essential part of mass media.

Arguably, the most known example of commercialization of the street art is the artwork of the infamous British artist Banksy. He was the first true celebrity amongst street artists and throughout his commercial career he has been criticized for being ‘a sell-out’ (Another kick to the wall, Guardian website).

Banksy's stencils carry images of anti-establishment that decry war, capitalism and promote freedom of the individual. Banksy's work is constantly incorporating symbols of modern day capitalism. His political work is very similar to that of Adbusters, a movement that is solely committed to anti-capitalist activity. By changing the intended context of corporate advertising, its message gets transformed into a new image with a powerful and ironic meaning. He uses this sarcastic transformation to capture and point out the contradictions inside our commercial culture.

As Banksy's voice grew in modern day society he began to organize large-scale exhibitions where motifs of capitalism were incorporated. There is a high global demand for his work and it sells out within minutes. Many high profile celebrities are interested in his work and it was reported that Angelina Jolie paid \$226,000 for ‘Picnic’ piece. (Appendix) The image shows a white family having a picnic under an umbrella whilst starving Africans watch. Therefore, being a commodity, art has an inherent weakness if used as a tool against corporate society. Any artist who sells their work for large sums of money will find it difficult to justify an anti-capitalist stance. It is a paradox that Banksy's work stems from a voice that cries out against capitalist profit, yet his work is being intensely capitalized through mainstream commercial channels. It contradicts the fundamental ideas inserted into the street art culture, which initially had a meaning of giving away the art for free to wider audiences and standing up

against capitalistic norms to reclaim an environment in which every bit of land is exposed to advertisers and where everything can be bought and sold.

The location is largely an important factor when it comes to creating street art. The piece and its surroundings should work as one and compliment each other, while constructing meanings, messages, social or political contexts. However if you take the piece out of its natural environment and place it on the wall in an art gallery with a price tag next to it, a lot of the foundational meaning would be lost.

Consequently, the displacement and repositioning of street art raise a lot of questions, such as what exactly happens once you remove street art from its original context and take it into the gallery space and what are the consequences of this act on a larger scale of commercial industries?

Going back to the phenomena of Banksy, Gareth Williams suggests, "Banksy kick started the market, firstly through the high profile media attention he has given to urban art and secondly through the prices he achieved at auctions and at the galleries". (Williams, *Street Art. Painting the city: London, Paris, Madrid*, 2008) As a result, it is evident, that Banksy has opened a new chapter in the history of street art. Through mobilizing the media's interest and reaching high amount costs for his work, Banksy has unlocked the door for the street art into the mainstream commercial market.

Despite the sceptical approach of some art critics regarding the idea that street art can gain the same level of success within larger gallery market, there are number of events which begin to prove them otherwise, such as openings of numerous street art galleries (in London: Pure

Evil, Stolen Space etc) and expositions (for instance, Tate's 'Street Art' exposition in 2008 and recently launched world's biggest Graffiti and Street Art exhibition in Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art). Therefore, as Ancoris Andipa suggests, we need to ask ourselves a question - Are we just seeing a history repeat itself? New movement comes along and quite a lot of misunderstanding, therefore a lot of questioning. (Ancoris Andipa, *Street Art. Painting the city: London, Paris, Madrid, 2008*)

The artists of previous generations wanted to prove that rules can be bend or broken: rules of society, rules of totalitarianism, rules of what considered to be good art or simply what considered art in general terms. Painters like Picasso, Dali or Matisse showed the world how diverse and how much more expressive art can be. However, it has to be taken in consideration that before those artists got accepted and praised, they were firstly, misunderstood, rejected and media crucified.

This battle between the world of good taste and 'the new' still rages on today. Art continues to be governed by cultural elite that finds it hard to accept or understand cultural movements from outside art's well-trodden lineage. ... Art works from nineteenth century that were once considered wild and scandalous are now seen as the height of good taste, and what was subversive or shocking has become generally accepted. (Street Art, The Graffiti Revolution, 2008: 130)

Therefore, looking back at history and following the events that are happening right here and now, there can be seen a lot of similarities between the two, which may lead us to the conclusion that street art is taking the same route as any modern art movement

(expressionism, cubism, pop art etc) did before. What was previously contemplated as vandalism is now being sold for hundreds and thousands of pounds at the leading art auctions to the high society art buyers and collectors all around the world. The movement of the momentary nature is now being monitored and preserved from every angle possible: gallery curators, buyers, collectors, advertisers and media.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the increase of the street art moving from public locations into private profit-making spaces as well as the art industry's interest in this phenomenon points it as the big art movement of our era. However, if this phenomenon called 'street art' is moving from the streets to the galleries, should we re-name it? As the street artist and gallery owner Pure Evil affirms, when street art is off the street "it is just art, is not street art anymore" (*Street Art... Whatever*, 2011).

Artist who use working on the street as a springboard into the commercial sector, then completely leave the street scene behind, can harm the reputations of other artists: it can lead to false perception that all street artists are looking for commercial acceptance. (Street Art, The Graffiti Revolution, 2008:138)

There has been ongoing debate about how pure is the street art showed in galleries instead of its original locations: the street. The opinions vary; some people involved in the scene strongly reject the idea of the street art becoming part of a gallery exhibition. These purists believe that street is the best and the only place for this kind of artwork and that it loses its meaning when moved. Others perceive street art as just another art movement, which deserves

to be shown in such institutions. The reality, based on the street artists we have meet and interviewed, is that many of them have managed to combine both (street and gallery) as their work places.

Finally, we should remark that the street art have become a tremendous popular and profit-making phenomenon, which have already taken an important part of the art industry. Big companies that usually include pieces of street art in their advertisement strategies are employing it because they know how appealing this movement is. If this movement achieves the title of 'Art' thanks to its presence in the galleries, will it lose its original transgression and rebelliousness? It is an open question that we will be only able to answer in the following years.

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Appendix

