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Street Art: A Reply to Riggle

1 Introduction

In "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces," Nicholas Alden Riggle provides a definition of street art – a discussion very much needed when considering street art's growing popularity and the lack of philosophical literature on the topic.¹ Riggle argues that, like Pop Art, street art is a critical response to the Modern separation of art and life. Pop Art challenges Modernism by allowing everyday objects in the museum. Street art, on its part, does it by taking art out of the museum and "into the fractured stream of everyday life".²

Riggle believes that, like artworks in museums, street artworks are formally intriguing and capable of engendering sudden *disinterested* aesthetic experience in passersby. Street artworks are distinguished by their significant relationship with the city: they are part of the urban texture, and necessarily incorporate elements of the urban landscape in their

respective structures. Riggle argues that the relationship with the city streets is the definitional aspect of street art and proposes the following real definition: "An artwork is *street art* if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning."³ To say that the use of the street is internal to a street artwork's meaning is to admit that it contributes essentially to the artwork's significance and that removing the artwork from its original location would cause its destruction. Riggle claims that it is a virtue of this definition that it has positive implications both at the art-critical and at the art-historical level.

When considering street art's criticism, Riggle believes that his definition correctly forces critics to go beyond aesthetic formalism. In effect, by confining appreciation to aesthetic features alone, formalists must ignore street art's essential nonaesthetic feature, that is, the artist's use of the street. Overlooking such a feature has two fatal consequences. First, it makes impossible to grasp those non-aesthetic (moral, religious, etc.) values that street art can acquire by incorporating "shared spaces, ignored spaces, conflicted spaces, political spaces."⁴ Second, it obscures street art's challenge to the Modern separation of art and life: the use of the street as an artistic material is what allows street artists to integrate "art into the everyday."⁵

A further virtue of his account, Riggle maintains, has to do with its art-historical upshot. Whereas many see street art as a development of New York graffiti from the 1970s and 1980s, Riggle suggests placing street art in a different art-historical position.⁶ On Riggle's

view, a historical narrative about street art is both more accurate and more illuminating when it places street art in continuity with the works of artists who made significant use of the street. Such artists include, among others, Vito Acconci, Robert Smithson, and Krzysztof Wodiczko and Jeanne-Claude. Riggle's account achieves just this.

Riggle's definition has the merit of emphasizing street art's deep engagement with the city. However, as we shall see, it overlooks an essential feature of street art: its subversiveness. This omission obscures an important aspect of street art's nature, and raises a fatal classificatory concern: it makes impossible distinguishing between street art and site-specific art.

2 Subverting Public Space

When affirming street art's essential subversiveness, I am not suggesting that all street artworks are politically conscious. Protest street art is surely common, and widely deployed as a tool by social movements across the globe. However, politically explicit street artworks are only a subset of what we intuitively recognize as street art. Many iconic examples such as Invader's colorful mosaics, MOMO's *Manhattan Tag*, and Alice Pasquini's portraits of young girls do not convey any explicit political message.

Street artworks, including those who are not politically conscious, are subversive in a different and more profound sense: they challenge norms and conventions regulating

acceptable uses of public space.⁷ In particular, street art primarily opposes commercial advertising's dominion of urban visible surfaces and monopoly on visual communication in the city. Since the 1980s, things like commercial billboards, poster, and neon signs have been occupying an increasingly larger percentage of the urban space, transforming our cities into branded hubs.⁸ By turning walls, fences, and other urban spaces into showcases of free artworks, street art essentially opposes that transformation, reclaiming a right for individuals to express themselves visually in public space. In this sense, I suggest that street is not only art using the street as artistic material, but also challenging dominant commercial uses of public space.

For instance, when MOMO creates its *Manhattan Tag* on the streets of New York City or Invader glues one of his ceramic tiles to a wall in Paris, they do not just make significant use of urban elements: they disrupt the nature of those locations by altering significantly (some of) their expected uses.⁹ In those spaces, commercial advertising dominates visual communication. Through their own contested presence, those artworks destroy that order, though perhaps only momentarily.¹⁰ What street artists like MOMO and Invader do, is hijacking public space and redescribing its function: they transform the city from a billboard stand into a canvas for self-expression, and offer a "gift" to its communities.¹¹

It is worth emphasizing that many street artists explicitly endorse a critical attitude against dominant uses of public space and advertising's dominion of its visible surfaces.

Among others, Garrison Buxton, CDH, Tom Civil, Ad Deville, Ron English, and Jean Faucher, all see their work as critical of commercial uses of urban spaces.¹² Banksy has recurrently returned to this theme in his writings, where he explicitly admits that the wall is the weapon of choice in his personal war against advertising.¹³ In a recent interview, Alice Pasquini claims that her art wants to give to the city and its people something “completely different to what we have in the street, with [its] advertising....”¹⁴ Blu has recently offered the most radical testimony of this view. Rather than seeing his celebrated *East-West Murals* used in “marketing campaigns” promoting gentrifying developments in Berlin, he covered them with black paint.¹⁵ Disrupting standard uses of public space and its visible surfaces is then an explicit motivation for a very large group (probably the majority) of street artists.¹⁶

Though relevant, these motivations are not enough to establish that street art’s subversiveness is essential to it. Let me offer two pieces of evidence that shall do that. First, many agree that commercial appropriation undermines an artwork’s identity as street art.¹⁷ In this respect, Shepard Fairey’s OBEY posters are an instructive example. Since starting his clothing company in 2001, Fairey has been using the design of his iconic posters as brand logo. Riggle agrees with others in suggesting that Fairey’s decision jeopardizes the original posters’ identity as street art since, at least to some degree, it transforms them into forms of “commercial plea.”¹⁸ But, if street art were not essentially opposing advertising and its profit-oriented use of public space, such a transformation would not have that impact. When an artwork fails to antagonize

commercial uses of public space, it seems, it is not street art.

Second, when not entering public space in a subversive way, street art is easily absorbed within the artworld, becoming an artistic style among the others. Many – including Riggle – sees that assimilation as a challenge to street art’s status as such. This is the case of street art in Mainland China. In that context, urban styles generally associated with street art (e.g., graffiti, stencil-graffiti, etc.) are “toothless.”¹⁹ Afraid of repercussions, artists intentionally avoid creating controversial pieces. Moreover, the abundance of concrete surfaces that are free from advertising makes easy for them to create art in the city without interfering with commercial uses of public space.²⁰ Finally, traditional practices of wall writings have made Chinese people indifferent to graffiti and less likely to see them as disrupting common uses of public spaces.²¹ Deprived of their subversiveness, “urban styles” are merely a fashionable trend in Chinese mainstream art.²² Zhang Dali, allegedly the first street artist in China, has denounced this metamorphosis. In his view, street art “is the fashion in China these days and has lost its meaning as protest.”²³

Unfortunately, Riggle’s definition obscures the constitutively subversive aspect of street art, thus failing to capture this essential aspect of its nature. By acknowledging the significance of street art’s deep engagement with the city, Riggle’s definition is pointing in the right direction, but not far enough. The artistic use of the street, as Riggle correctly claims, contributes to street art’s meaning. However, street art also affects the

significance of the places that it occupies: it *transforms* them into contested spaces.

Before concluding this section, I need to emphasize a further shortcoming of Riggle's definition, a shortcoming that follows from ignoring street art's subversive essence. As I anticipated, Riggle's definition cannot distinguish street art from site-specific art. In effect, since he treats "the street" merely as a "site" for street art, Riggle cannot tell the difference between street artworks and site-specific artworks by artists who make significant use of the street such as Krzysztof and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Monuments* or Acconci and Steven Holl's *Storefront for Art and Architecture* project.²⁴ However, as an act of artistic resistance against commercial uses of public space, an urban carnival where power relations are inverted through wildly funny visual culture, street art has its own counter-narrative that is appreciably separate from other "official" artistic narratives, including that one of site-specific art. In this sense, a definition like Riggle's, which is incapable of separating street art from other artistic genres that incorporate significantly urban elements within their forms, fails to capture some of street art's essential peculiarities. Adding its subversiveness as definitional corrects this lacuna.

In the following section, I point out that, because of its subversiveness, street art challenges the Modern separation of art and life more radically than Riggle foresees.

3 Street Art and Life

As stated in above, Riggle believes that, by introducing aesthetically interesting artifacts

into everyday life, street art challenges the museal separation of art and life. In his view, the challenge does not extend to another formalist principle: the disinterestedness of art's contemplation. Riggle believes that experiences of street art "disengage us from our practical concerns and lift us to a higher place of disinterested contemplation ... of art itself, apart from the quotidian concerns of everyday life."²⁵ Street artworks, Riggle claims, trigger sudden and unexpected *disinterested* aesthetic experiences that re-awaken one's mind while casually walking down the street.

However, in light of its essential subversive power, I argue that street art does not distract us from our practical concerns, as Riggle suggests. By disrupting common uses of public space, street art engages with social, political, legal, and economic aspects of urban contexts. When experiencing street art, we then become aware of that conflict between competing interests characterizing public space.²⁶ By redescribing (temporarily) everyday uses of urban sites, street art plays a significant role in that conflict, revealing itself as an instance of how societies shape and manage visibility – "a huge work that human beings do tirelessly."²⁷

When acknowledging its role in our everyday lives, it clearly appears that street art's appreciation cannot be limited to a disinterested contemplation of beautiful forms. In order to fully grasp its value, a viewer needs to attend to its essential subversive function, and to grasp how it challenges dominant uses of public space, in particular those of a commercial nature.

In "Paintings and Their Places," Susan Feagin describes what happens when artworks exit the domain of disinterested contemplation.²⁸ I believe that her account offers a better starting point for understanding street art's appreciation and its challenge to the Modern separation of art and life. When escaping contemplation, Feagin argues, artworks enter the domain of human action. As objects in that domain, rather than distancing from our practical concerns, artworks project us into our mundane businesses, thus reinforcing "certain habitual modes of acting and thinking".²⁹ For instance, when an altar-piece such as Duccio's *Maestà* (1308 – 1311) enters the sites of human action – as it was intended to – it does *not* elicit disinterested contemplation in its viewers: it rather inspires devotion, and invites them to perform certain rituals that are part of a devotee's quotidian concerns.

Street art behaves similarly to those artworks that Feagin discusses. However, it presents a peculiarity, which contributes to further distinguishing this form of urban art from other artistic genres challenging the separation of art and life. Street art does not reinforce but rather questions habitual modes of thinking and acting. By intruding into the urban texture, it challenges our unexamined assumptions about visibility in public spaces, shaking our ways of thinking about the city. The transformation that street art engenders in the nature of public space also questions passersby's usual behavior. The unexpected forms of street art primarily contrast passive spectatorship, while appropriating urban areas for social uses.

By appreciating the preceding, Riggle's claim about street art's challenge to the Modern separation appears too weak. Street art does something more than breaking the walls of the museum, and fulfills in practice the theoretical task that John Dewey assigns to his pragmatist aesthetic. Its subversive power denies that art "is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement."³⁰ In this sense, street art challenges the idea that art functions as a prop for disinterested aesthetic experience. As a social and political stimulus calling into question current uses of urban space, street art is rather "an integral part of the ethos and the institutions of the community."³¹ Thanks to its nature, it recovers in a contemporary fashion an ancient view of art as socially and politically purposive. By doing so, it "restore[s] continuity between the ... works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings".³²

The account of street art that I defend in above amends Riggle's definition. Street art is not just art using the street as an artistic resource, but also art questioning habitual uses of public space. Street art intrudes on the urban texture, challenging advertising's dominion of visual communication in the city. In this sense, my proposal sees street art as essentially subversive. By adding this condition, my view well accords with the intentions of prominent street artists and widespread intuitions about street art's nature. Moreover, it offers conceptual resources for distinguishing street art from site-specific art, resources that are lacking in Riggle's definition. In emphasizing the political

dimension of street art, my account also proposes an alternative and more radical understanding of street art's challenge to Modern separation of art and life. Street art does not merely take art out of the museum, as Riggle suggests. It rebelliously carves a space for art within our daily lives.

¹ Nicholas A. Riggle, "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (2010): 243–257.

² *Ibid.*, p. 243.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁷ Martin Irvine, "The Work on the Street: Street Art and Visual Culture," in *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, ed. Ian Heywood et al. (London: Berg, 2012): 235–78; Alison Young, *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), p. 27.

⁸ For a recent discussion of this issue, see Kurt Iveson, "Branded Cities: Outdoor Advertising, Urban Governance, and the Outdoor Media Landscape," *Antipode* 44 (2012): 151–174.

⁹ *Contra* Riggle, my view is compatible with the possibility of street artworks existing in public spaces other than the street as long as they disrupt established uses. For instance, I consider the pieces that Banksy illegally introduced in museums and in Disneyland as street art. These artworks could qualify as counterexamples against Riggle's definition.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Momo's interview at <http://blog.ekosystem.org/2009/08/momo-interview/>.

¹¹ Many emphasize the link between street art and gift economy. See Irvine, "The Work on the Street," p. 252; Young, *Street Art, Public City*, pp. 26–27.

¹² Irvine, "The Work on the Street," p. 251; Young, *Street art, Public City*, p. 28.

¹³ Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Century, 2005), p. 2.

¹⁴ Interview available at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=II0yOycC02s&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

¹⁵ Lutz Henke, "Why We Painted over Berlin's Most Famous Graffiti," *The Guardian*, December 19, 2014, accessed March 25, 2015,

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/19/why-we-painted-over-berlin-graffiti-kreuzberg-murals>.

¹⁶ Young, *Street Art, Public City*, p. 28.

¹⁷ See, among others, Jo Confino, "'Fake Street Art Sucks': Perrier Replaces Williamsburg's Nelson Mandela Mural», *The Guardian*, September 26, 2014, accessed March 27, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2014/sep/26/fake-street-art-sucks-perrier-replaces-williamsburgs-nelson-mandela-mural-with-huge-advertisement>, and Hrag Vartanian, "Street Art Politics & Commercialization...How Far Is Too Far?," *Hyperallegic*, February 25, 2010, accessed May 30, 2015, <http://hyperallegic.com/3415/street-art-politics-commercialization/>.

¹⁸ Riggle, "Street Art," p. 256n8. See also Erick Lyle, "Shadows in the Streets: The

Stencil Art of the New Argentina,” in *Realizing the Impossible: Art against Authority*, ed. Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007), p. 87.

¹⁹ David Volodzko, “Graffiti in China, Part Two: The Writing on the Wall,” *The Diplomat*, May 27, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/graffiti-in-china-part-two-the-writing-on-the-wall/>; Minna Valjakka, “Graffiti in China – Chinese Graffiti?,” *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (2013): 61–91.

²⁰ Ally Thibault, “Beijing’s Thriving Graffiti Culture May Surprise You,” *Public Radio International*, April 21, 2014, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-04-21/beijings-thriving-graffiti-culture-may-surprise-you>.

²¹ Valjakka, “Graffiti in China – Chinese Graffiti?,” pp. 71, 77; and Lu Pan, “Writing at the End of History: Reflections on Two Cases of Graffiti in Hong Kong,” *Public Art Dialogue* 4 (2014): 147–166.

²² Valjakka, “Graffiti in China – Chinese Graffiti?”; James Lally, “Emerging Voices. Graffiti Begins to Make Its Mark in China,” *All – Da Meishu*, 2007.

²³ Volodzko, “Graffiti in China, Part Two.”

²⁴ See <http://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/wrapped-monuments> and <http://stevenholl.com/project-detail.php?id=24>.

²⁵ Riggle, “Street Art,” p. 249.

²⁶ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1991).

²⁷ Andrea Brighenti, “Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences,” *Current Sociology* 55 (2007), p. 327. See also Andrea Brighenti, “At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain,” *Space and Culture* 13 (2010), p. 329.

²⁸ Susan Feagin, “Paintings and Their Places,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1995): 260–268.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

³⁰ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), p. 3.

³¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 8.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 3.