

A brief history of street art as a term up to 2000

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Abstract

This working paper gathers the different understandings of the term “street art” found in books up to the turn of the millennium. Several opinions and theories about street art are nowadays proposed, often depending on working, cultural or geographical contexts. The idea of street art has also changed in the course of time. By a chronological analysis of the most important meanings referencing the word, the study outlines street art as a continuously changing term, with the purpose of providing an historical grounding to better frame the idea of street art today. The survey is conducted based on a literature search with the help of WorldCat (worldcat.org). The empirical material consists of printed books from 1950 to 2000 mentioning the term “street art” in their titles.

Keywords: Street art, Term, Understanding, Books, Literature Search, WorldCat, Mural art, Unsanctioned.

1. Introduction

Different theories about what street art is and what it should be are regularly propounded, both by scholars and fans. It comes as no surprise with such generic terms as “street art”, “urban art” or “public art”. Given its literal meaning, the term “street art” could refer to any artwork or artistic expression related to the street environment. Notwithstanding that today there seems to be a broad consensus on the fact that to be an artwork recognized as street art the mere “street” location is not enough, the word still generates a different range of ideas. When dealing with a term of this kind usually the context plays a decisive role in determining which understanding might be the most appropriate. Within the academic world scholars work on frameworks set up by their own theoretical backgrounds, academic interests and operative methodologies. As a result, their understanding of street art is in fact dependent on their working contexts. For example, Nicholas Alden Riggle’s personal and academic training as a philosopher led him to a need for “*thinking*” about street art and its analytic meaning (Riggle, 2010a)¹.

In contrast, art historian and sociologist Peter Bengtson (2014) discusses the impossibility of defining street art once

and for all², by tackling the issue from the anti-structuralist perspective of considering art in general as a social construction.

Individual ideas on street art may also depend on particular cultural and geographical contexts. Anna Waclawek’s understanding of street art in her 2008 doctoral thesis is interchangeable with the term post-graffiti (Waclawek, 2008). Her position in considering street art as the next stage of graffiti comes out of her US-oriented art historical perspective on the phenomenon, leading her to overlook the contribution of several non-American cultural and artistic ambits other than graffiti.

Lastly, the understanding about street art has steadily changed in the course of time. I agree with Ulrich Blanché (2015, p.33) that “street art was not always called street art [...] the meaning of street art has changed over time”. The term has been employed for an array of heterogeneous subjects, from community mural projects to political propaganda.

This short working paper aims to offer an overview of the understandings that have been proposed of the term “street

art” in books until the turn of the millennium, when the street art phenomenon started becoming global. The purpose is to historically survey street art as a continuously changing concept that shifts in time and space. This is done to provide an historical grounding to better frame and argue about the idea of street art today. The analysis is conducted based on a literature search with WorldCat³. The empirical material consists of printed books from 1950 to 2000 mentioning the term “street art” in their titles. Since the paper addresses the ways in which the aforementioned term has changed its significance over time, translations and texts that use similar terms in languages other than English are excluded from the study. The same applies to books on topics which can be included in the field of street art but that are not explicitly being referred to as street art.

2. Street art as community art projects/mural art

The earliest reference to the term seems to date from 1968, in *Street art/NY*, a photo essay published by the New York City Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration (*Street art/NY*, 1968). This short publication documents through black-and-white, full-page photos the local government arts workshop program, which took place in the streets of New York during the summer of 1968 in the interest of community social integration. That initial understanding of street art was meant to cover every form of sanctioned art – from visual arts to poetry, from dance to theatre – acting in the urban public space, as just another way to say community art or public art.

In a similar vein, during the following decade (1980 included), the term recurs in titles of a handful of publications⁴ concerning a spectrum of various sanctioned art projects in the US, mostly involving wall paintings. As one could imagine, this group of books is all from the US. The only exception is Horst Schmidt-Brümmer’s *Street art* (1974), a German-language catalogue of an exhibition held at the Amerika-Haus of Berlin, in which the term is first mentioned in a non-American publication, although referring to American mural art.

The longstanding tradition of mural art experienced an intense new wave in the US in the 1970s. In this context, the term “street art” was particularly suitable to emphasize the phenomenon and remind us of the spatial location of the

artworks. Besides overviews on street art/mural art such as Robert Sommer’s *Street art* (1975), that is the best known and widespread book among this group, others are more specifically addressed towards art initiatives of minorities, as in the case of John Bright’s L.A. *Chicano street art* (1974), focused on Mexican American artists’ decorations in Los Angeles, or Samella S. Lewis’ *The street art of Black America* (1973), on African American “street art” exhibited in Houston 1973 (Blanché, 2016, p. 45).

If the idea of street art at that point has matched with that of community arts and mural painting, new understandings came up in the 1980s.

3. Street art as unsanctioned art

Marian Kester’s, Peter Belsito’s and Bob Davis’ *Street Art: The Punk Poster in San Francisco 1977-1981* (1981) first introduced an alternative comprehension of the term to indicate punk rock posters, mostly advertising local music events, pasted all over the streets of San Francisco. This is an early understanding of street art involving the unsanctioned nature of the artwork, probably the core significance nuanced in the majority of definitions provided nowadays by scholars⁵. In this regard, the book points out that street art as unsanctioned art finds its roots in several cultural phenomena apart from graffiti.

However, the term “street art” was still far from being a uniform idea. Two publications from 1982 clearly show this lack of definition. One is from the renowned French art critic Pierre Restany (1982), about the “street art” by Dutch artist Karel Appel. Here the term relates to the artist’s long urban walks in search of waste objects and other material to assemble in original artworks⁶. A definitely generic reading is instead advanced by Donald J. Davenport’s *Street art* (1982), a how-to manual for various kinds of open-air decoration techniques and methods, from automotive custom painting to airbrushing, from sign painting to gold leafing.

3.1 Street art as unsanctioned art socially committed

Despite not being the only scene of non-authorized art in the streets, New York City during the 1980s was documented

early on in Allan Schwartzman's *Street art* (1985). With that seminal publication, most likely the first "modern" understanding of street art was born. From the pages of the book the term now calls for a specific identity and points to – apart from graffiti⁷ – street artworks that most would call street art today. Schwartzman's innovative understanding of the word can be summarized by a statement from Jenny Holzer, quoted at the bottom of the book back cover: "This is art done in secret for the public. It's art where it's not supposed to be. It's art on serious subjects put where anyone can see it. It's art that's extremely beautiful to show how good things could be". The unsanctioned nature of these practices along with their strong public and social engagement are the focal points around which Schwartzman builds the new idea of street art.

Schwartzman's legacy can be found across the ocean in a couple of European publications of the 1990s – firstly the catalogue of Jenny Holzer's Street art exhibition held in Warsaw in 1993⁸. Yet, most significant in the framework of this survey is Paolo Buggiani's and Gianluca Marziani's *Keith Haring: le lavagne metropolitane e la street art 1980/86* [*Keith Haring: subway blackboards and street art 1980-86*] (1996), by which the term was introduced in Italy. Along with presenting Haring's subway drawings from the collection of the Italian artist Paolo Buggiani⁹, the book gives an account on 1980s NYC street art in a similar extent to the work that Schwartzman had done before. Unlike the latter, however, Buggiani explicitly claims for street art a separate role from graffiti¹⁰, thus setting apart from graffiti writing what we now call street art. In other words, Buggiani's understanding of street art is that of Schwartzman less graffiti, making it quite close to today's common comprehension of the term¹¹.

4. Other understandings

Notwithstanding this early attempt of specification, in the street art "guidebooks"¹² authored by German psychiatrist Bernhard van Treeck over the course of the 1990s, the meaning of the word proves, once again, to not follow a process of gradual refinement. If van Treeck's understanding of street art is roughly that of an all-inclusive term encasing heterogeneous forms of visual art in the street, whether sanctioned or unsanctioned, Bob Edelson's *New American street art* (1999) returns again primarily to legal murals, even though, this time, they are also realized by graffiti writers.

To complete the analysis, the political perspective employed by Vladimir Tolstoy's, Irina Bibikova's and Catherine Cooke's *Street art of the Revolution: festivals and celebrations in Russia 1918-33* (1990) has to be added. In this English translation of a Russian book from 1984 street art means propaganda through art in public space (Blanché, 2015). The latter is almost an isolated episode, since following references to the term linked to the political sphere seems to deal more with protests against the regime rather than propaganda. Both aspects are anyhow in any case included comprised in Lyman G. Chaffee's *Political protest and street art: popular tools for democratization in Hispanic countries* (1993), in which street art is described as a "communicative device for informing and persuading" (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4)¹³, adopted by governments and protesters as well.

Conclusions

The term "street art" was first and mainly used in the United States until the 1990s, when it began to spread in European publications. The mentioning of the term gradually rises in the time span considered (1950-2000) – one in the 1960s; five in the 1970s; eight in the 1980s; eleven in the 1990s up to 2000. However, the most relevant element emerging from this analysis is that the idea of street art before the turn of the millennium remains uncertain and spans a diversified spectrum of interpretations. The term is apt for referring to one or all forms of art in the street. Nevertheless, the negotiation process of its understanding took essentially four avenues:

- 1 - street art as *community art projects/mural art* – during the seventies;
- 2 - street art as *unsanctioned art socially committed* – in the view of Schwartzman (1985), followed also by Buggiani (1996; 1999);
- 3 - street art as *generic visual art in the street environment* – foremost in the books by Bernhard van Treeck (1993; 1996; 1999);
- 4 - street art as *political communication* – as presented by Tolstoy, Bibikova & Cooke (1990) and Chaffee (1993).

No route seems more predominant than the others.

After 2000 the search results for "street art" increase in number. The term has been experiencing an overwhelming blooming in book titles since 2004/2005 – references go from twenty-five in the first thirty-three years (1968-2000)

up to around three hundred in the next eighteen years (2001-2018). This shift reflects the fact that street art – as unsanctioned and ephemeral art in the urban public space different from graffiti¹⁴ – became a global phenomenon at the turn of the millennium attracting big media interest. In this respect, the works of Schwartzman and Buggiani compared to the common understanding of the term after 2000 are not to be disregarded.

Yet, mural art or wall painting has had a huge renaissance in the popular comprehension of street art fostered by media, especially over the last ten years. When considering that, we need to be aware of the multifaceted body the idea of street art had in recent history, or we run the risk of ruling out other opinions without any evident reason for them to be excluded.

Endnotes

1. The need for *thinking* about street art is meant also as a reaction to the lack in criticism among street art enthusiasts: “There is a general disdain, it seems, for *thinking* about street art – street art enthusiasts tend to resist thinking about artistic value, artistic influence, artistic context, or pretty much anything related to art history and criticism” (Riggle, 2010a). Riggle tackled the issue of defining street art also in the article from the same year “Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces” (2010b).

2. “the term street art has no inherent meaning” (Bengtson, 2014, p. 13).

3. WorldCat gathers the collections of thousands of libraries around the world. Available at: <https://www.worldcat.org/default.jsp> [Accessed March 2018].

4. Lewis (1973), Bright (1974), Schmidt-Brümmer (1974), Sommer (1975), Wagner (1979) and Weihsmann (1980).

5. See in particular Bengtson (2014, pp. 138-141; 2017, p. 104).

6. “celui qui assemble des objets trouvés”(Restany, 1982, p. 49).

7. Despite the book includes both graffiti and art we now

call properly street art, the latter is being given the bigger attention, whereas the first represents more a necessary background to contextualize the work of “traditionally trained street artists” (Schwartzman, 1985, p. 107).

8. Works on display included Holzer’s renowned poster series – *Truism, Survival Series and Inflammatory Essays* – she pasted up on walls in Manhattan. Artworks were also placed in various spots of the Polish Capital, however they were authorized or in direct relation with the gallery show.

9. Paolo Buggiani lived the 1980s NYC art scene from the inside, as an artist performing and making interventions with fire in the streets of Manhattan. He was part of the Rivington School movement in the East Village as well as involved in the artistic scene of Pier 34 on the Hudson River at Canal Street. Moreover, he was one of the first to photograph and preserve a considerable number of *Subway Drawings* by Keith Haring between 1980 and 1982.

10. The text written by Buggiani (1996, p. 48) is from 1994. Buggiani also dealt with this issue in a text published a few years after, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Pittura Dura. Dal graffitismo alla street art*, held in Turin between 1999 and 2000 (Buggiani, 1999, p. 29).

11. It should be stated that Buggiani’s understanding of street art, as that of Schwartzman, was more oriented to the social value of street artworks than it is today. In this respect, from personal talks with him, I know he today appreciates artists such as Banksy or Blu for their criticism to society, as opposed to “decorative” interventions he can hardly refer to as street art.

12. van Treeck (1993; 1996; 1999).

13. The author specifies that “it is not given an all-inclusive definition” of the term, thus his understanding of street art is aimed to the purposes of the study (Chaffee, 1993, p. 4).

14. Although overlaps between graffiti and street art seem to resist.