Street Art Dialogue

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Abstract

This paper reviews street art dialogism as understood through parallel architecture, remediation, recursion, and combinatoriality of signs through art’s social setting. It exposes the contrast and comparison of the nodes in visual culture, digital media networks, and most importantly the dialogue throughout contemporary art networks such as Abstract Expressionism, Dada, Pop Art, Postmodernism, and Post-Postmodernism. This remix culture forces an engagement from the art world to comment, reply, use, reject, admire, and debate the new semantics of an ephemeral art form that spans across public visual spaces. The ability for street art to be seen is very important and enabled by the structure and dimensions of the wall, but today, it is also facilitated through the digital world as more art is being transformed for an internet viewership that has opened up a new interface outside museums, galleries, and even the streets; it helps enable art become global.

In the whole of contemporary art there is a conversation of thought, messages, meanings, and emotions that resonate with a larger public through various forms. Within these forms there are different-isms that maintain a dialogue over multiple mediums with new and modern views of this conversation. The theme of the conversation could range and cover a multitude of fields and ideas including the human condition, socialization, politics, culture, race, and can be exposed through various nodes of messages or codes within the medium of the art including texture, size, color, contour, material, space, and platform. The conversation after WWII ranges from abstract expressionism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism, and street art (contemporary art) while in today’s world, they are embedded into the digital interface outside of the street and the institution. This paper will cover the exploration of dialogism and remediation of street art through the use of its different interfaces.

Contemporary art is a form of visual culture that resonates with the viewer through previous understandings and appropriations throughout time. While observing contemporary art we can define it as, “the objects and network of social and discursive institutions and practices which in conjunction are productive of present artworks and art culture, constituent of the art world” (Marriner, 2012). Street art pulls from previous art structures to acknowledge their existence and react or engage in the overall meaning of different messages with a type of cognitive discourse on specific interfaces to maintain itself within the boundaries of the art world. “Street art works by being confrontationally material and location-specific while also participating in the global, networked, Web distributable cultural encyclopaedia” (Irvine, 2012); here the message through the art’s cognitive expressions regarding the urban location, material, and confrontation form more in-depth message nodes than emotions, and is accredited through its use of interface and remediation of legitimized art modes. Embedded in visual culture–either theories of cul-
tural or social phenomena including art, or "mass"/pop culture and the relationship between the two (Marriner, 2012)—are contemporary and street art with a generated expression of meaning through messages over different interfaces.

The generated expressions of meaning within street art begin with two agents, the artist and visual culture. They work as a catalyst for the interaction between these two agents that brings about the perception, creative process, intersubjectivity of collective cognition, and combinatoriality. Within these nodes, "Street art synthesizes and circulates a visual vocabulary and set of stylistic registers that have become instantly recognizable throughout mass culture" (Irvine, 2012). The interaction is based on the cognitive dialogue between the agents, also referred to the encoder and the decoder (Jackobson, 1985) by understanding the meaning of a symbol through its visual, phonological, syntax, and conceptual nodes. In regards to cognitive linguistic communication, there are inherent recognizable rules within the culture of language that are a means for understanding and developing semiosis—the process of making meaning within a symbol(s) —"the semiotic identity of a given spoken or written instance of language is governed by a rule for recognizing each occurrence as a replica of a linguistic type . . . this rule of recognition gives users of a sign system the ability to evaluate various occurring phenomena to determine which are to be classified as proper signs" (Parmentier, 1994). The semiotic process is greatly interconnected in the structure of the street art dialogic network in that it 1) maintains the Peircean triadic model and 2) adopts Ray Jackendoff’s parallel architecture with regards to specificities of the nature of high/low art.

The Peircean triadic model is composed of a representamen, the sign or symbol being represented; an interpretant, the understanding of said sign; and the object, the meaning/message of the understood sign (Peirce, 1998). In street art, the representamen includes the art along the city walls maintaining the history and culture in regards to its form. The interpretant of street art is the conceptualization or recognition of the specific art and its message, and the object is the meaning of the message that is incorporated within the street art as it refers to the overarching location, confrontation, culture, or political message. The triadic model based on street art assumes that the viewer is well versed in the historical, conceptual and cultural context of high and low art, as well as familiar with the environment, political context, and cultural construct of the location where the art is visible. "A visually aware Street art cohort in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Paris and London began to see the city as the real teacher, providing a daily instruction manual for the visual codes and semiotic systems in which we live and move and have our being" (Irvine, 2012). In understanding the cultural and historical implications of the location of the wall, or sections of the interface, as part of the message, its appropriation is able to resonate with viewers within the surrounding art network, as well as the local community. With these outside determiners generating meaning within the message, Jackendoff’s parallel architecture adopts most of the outside nodes to better understand the artists’ messages and overall meanings.

Jackendoff’s parallel architecture of a generative system deals with one’s ability to identify and perceive the meaning of a sign and understand the message from already established structures through an existing lexicon, or "the store of words in long-term memory from which the grammar constructs phrases and sentences" (Jackendoff, 2003), simultaneously. Within these structures it is understood that "language has multiple parallel sources of combinatoriality, each of which creates its own characteristic type of structure" (Jackendoff, 2003). The generative system contributes to Jackendoff’s own tripartite theory within parallel architecture and is based off of phonological, syntactic, and conceptual rules, structures and interconnecting interfaces that process the overall effect of meaning and message acquisition (Figure 1). In the realm of street art compared
to parallel architecture, there is no phonological structure, "linguistic encoding of sounds" (Jackendoff, 2003), but instead a visual structure that incorporates the syntax of artistry for the decoder: "To be visible is to be known, to be recognized, to exist" (Irvine). The syntactic structure of street art parallel architecture is a cognitive capacity that holds the previously understood or assumed "grammar" within art history and street art culture that enables the connection of the other structures to maintain the dialogue. The conceptual structure of street art is the "encoding of the meanings" (Jackendoff, 2003) that helps the decoder process the message through their existing lexicon. In this sense, understanding the meaning of the art through an existing vocabulary of high/low art, or the culture of the location. In that case, Street art also includes a very important structure that is the basis of the art, its environment; but more specifically the wall, the street, the city, and even the digital experience. The environment structure is a platform or interface where the art is held, but is also part of the art concerning its cultural, social, and political implications through the web, mass media, or urban city. Here, each structure also works together to create collaborated interfaces that enable a parallel decoding or perspective of the art piece as shown in Figure 2.

Parallel architecture related to street art can be observed under specific semiotics as related to Umberto Eco’s theory of semiotics, and states, “a specific semiotics is, or aims at being, the grammar of a particular sign system and proves to be successful insofar as it describes a given field of communicative phenomena as ruled by a system of signification.” In street art, without being seen and understood can be detrimental to the awareness and spread of the information. In this instance the interface is extremely important, and the understood semiosis of the information i.e. conceptual structure of what the information brings to the table, is most critical in gaining a part in the high and low brow art dialogue. While building on our collected knowledge of how we encode and perceive art messages with signs, symbols, and location from Peirce and Jackendoff, we can look deeper into the message of the art and analyze its surrounding historical, social, and political perspectives within the specific genre. Within this observation of semiotic structures there is an inherent dialogism between communication through “referencing, assuming, quoting, embedding, and responding to the expressions of others” discovered by M.M. Bakhtin where “everything expressed in social situations and in larger cultural contexts is fundamentally grounded in otherness—others’ words and other as receivers of and responders to, anything expressed” (Irvine, 2014). Similarly, while Peirce contemplated signs, symbols and the spread of their meaning, he describes the instantiation and development of the sign and symbol through the likeness to other signs, and
maintains their concept to produce a consistency of growth within the meaning through "use and experience." (Peirce, 1998)

Bakhtin goes further in researching the idea of repeated and developed signs and symbols. The theory of dialogism and "remixed" expression came to pass while researching aesthetics through the theory of Architectonics: "Architectonics is the general study of how entities relate to each other, whereas aesthetics concerns itself with the problem of consummation, or how parts are shaped into wholes” (Bakhtin, 1990). Visual culture can be compared to Bakhtin’s Architectonics and aesthetics as most street artists use the aesthetics of popular culture, consumerism, and other socio-political themes to converse with each other and their viewers. While comparing dialogism throughout Art history from WWII to present, you can see the adoption and reaction to “networks of expressions, prototypical works, encyclopedic cross-references, and genre types that presuppose and entail each other and provide the links for meanings in new combinatorial nodes” (Irvine, 2014), specifically in street art, while it also criticizes and comments on other disciplines.

The sub-genres that comprise street art allow multiple dialogues throughout different disciplines at once; but still mainly contemplating its history. Specifically within the street art conversation, comments, publicity, new form, and dialogue “assume a foundational dialogism in which each new act of making a work and inserting it into a street context is a response, a reply, an engagement with prior works and the ongoing debate about the public visual surface of a city” (Irvine, 2012). The expression of street art can be compared to Bakhtin’s “addressability” and “answerability” where “all cultural expressions are simultaneously a response to, and an anticipation of, ongoing dialogic meaning” (Irvine, 2014). Some artists of contemporary and street art forms observed throughout the dialogic expression of history such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Basquiat, Gerhard Richter, Takashi Murakami and Sol LeWitt of Modern and Contemporary art, are compared to Jose Parla, El Mac, Banksy, Barry McGee, Alexandros Vasmoulakis, Swoon, Os Gemeos and Jazz of street art. These artists play and connect with the dialogue that explores many ideas throughout popular culture, social and individual cognition, the everyday object, mass media, the human condition, politics, society, the specific mediums being used, and their own self-reflections of their life impressions. While contemplating the generative process of recursion through its embedded cultural and historical codes, the “conceptual frames depend on a cultural (and subcultural) encyclopedia of collective knowledge, values, and codes that provide the collective ground for interpretable meanings” (Irvine, 2014). Specifically, the contemporary artists explore abstract, formal, and optical ideas and problems; politically charged and iconological visual ideas; text and the emotional and spiritual implications of a work; different materials for transference; collaboration; generative and combinatorial symbols/structures; the overlapping, interconnected, special and splattered hues; and the impact of violence and war.


I. Contemporary Art


Through the use of these cognitive, visual, and artistic explorations they also assume techniques and theories from previous and fellow
artists creating a generated concept structure of combinatorial and recursive forms. Street artists engage in a practiced dialogism, use and explore the basic grammar of art through art history, specifically obtaining forms of Pop, Postmodern, Post-Postmodern, and all of contemporary art, appropriating the techniques, forms, and nodes into their work, and applying and creating new codes to be entered into the conversation. This remix culture forces an engagement from the art world to comment, reply, use, reject, admire, and debate the new semantics of an ephemeral art form that spans across public visual spaces.

While observing the connection between contemporary art and street art through the network of recursive combinatoriality, Robert Rauschenberg and Jose Parla both encompass the codes and concepts of the dialogism throughout art history, with the use of different interfaces. In this sense, “a combinatorial unit in a structure can also be a material object or thing—not representations of things but found objects from the city that function as synecdoches of the dense, accumulated meanings of urban experience” (Irvine, Presentation). Rauschenberg’s use of different forms of visual and artistic combinations (assemblage, photography, silk screens, text, and drawings) allowed him to use different platforms to comment and discuss the mass media, political, and popular culture by providing multi-dimensional meaning structures through familiar objects. In regards to the signs and interfaces of the dialogic message, “Graphic and painterly marks or gestures can be quotational (from other sources) or directly imposed on a canvas or other material substrate” (Irvine, Presentation). The very production and reproduction of the art absorbs the surfacing of codes within the artistic discourse until those codes become natural for the viewer.

This form of coding through regenerated, remixed and combined symbols helped introduce street art as a legitimate art form through its adaptation and production of discourse with a different visual landscape/interface. While observing these forms along with a collaboration aspect to specific works, Jose Parla can be looked at for remixing codes used by Rauschenberg and other artists (Cy Twombly, Richter, Basquiat, and Pollock), eliciting a comparison on the basis of their form to enact similar and different commentary. Parla’s appreciation for contemporary and Abstract art is viewed through his graffiti and murals by using the quintessential ripped signs and posters, but adding his own form of stylized text and spots of seeming erasure and decay. Parla’s use of space and graffiti stylization is self-reflective as the visual culture is encompassed by his recursion and conceptualization of political and cultural events. Within Parla’s arts is the incorporation of the network and the use of specific space to epitomize its locational meaning, “the social meaning of Street art is a function of material locations with all their already structured symbolic values” (Irvine, presentation). Parla’s collaboration with other artists, such as JR, around the world, allows a closer look into how the artists express their message. The use of locations such as Cuba, Spain, and Shanghai to become a part of his art makes the location an indispensable aspect of his work. Bochner notes on location-specific interfaces: “by collapsing the space between the art work and the viewer, a wall painting negates the gap between lived time and pictorial time, permitting the work to engage larger philosophical, social and political issues (Bochner 2009)” (Irvine, 2012). The street poses as a museum or interface as it maintains visual real estate.

“Street art synthesizes and circulates a visual vocabulary and set of stylistic registers that have become instantly recognizable throughout mass culture” (Irvine, 2014). The vocabulary could not have been collected without the help of the wall, or the interface. This interface is a medium where the cognitive distribution of discourse, intellect, and creation form to create an artefact that holds significance in the dialogism of the art network. The performance capacity of an artist is able to latch on to the distributed perception to combine their creativity and cognitive abilities and use the visibility aspect of the wall on the street.
to spread their message through meaningful signs (Dror-Harnad, 2008). The wall interface provides an externalism for artistic cognitive abilities while using and incorporating their environment into the work. The extended cognition, in this sense onto the interface, is "an active externalism, based on the active role of the environment in driving cognitive processes" (Clark and Chalmers, 1998). But street artists, spawning from contemporary artists, also use different forms and materials to connect and motivate their creative process as cognitive artefacts.

The feedback designated by the urban location and visibility create a more easily processed work. In this sense, the interface understood as part of the art also becomes part of the cognitive artefact, "we live in a world in which we have made, it is a world of artefacts, to the extent that it is almost true to say that the world in which most of us live today is an artefact" (Renfrew, 1999). Street art takes hold of the artistic notion that landscaping, civilization, and architecture are forms of art, and interconnects this reality to further deepen the message to its audience while staying within the boundaries of the dialogic code. Although the production and abstraction of old and new forms of code (recursion, remix, combinatoriality) are used in the artwork, if there were unidentified forms of artistic expression, or an expression not being argued as art, a particular name or symbol on the wall is rendered irrelevant. In this sense, the generative grammar of street art is important for the creation process regarding the artist’s cognitive distribution into the work.

The conversion of the artefact into the art network dialogue is important, and much like other art work is saved, collected and documented. But because the work on the street is mostly temporary, "The work is fundamentally nomadic and ephemeral, destabilizing in its instability" (Irvine, 2012). This is why different forms of documentation and recording have emerged, specifically in the digital realm. Within the interface of digital media i.e. software, programs, the Web, and social media multiple individuals now have access to the art network proving that "the computer is encyclopedic, spatial, procedural, and participatory" (Murray, 2011). While working with digital media, and maintaining the web and webpages as an interface for new media, new dialogue, more cognition, faster and more efficient production and reproduction, it is easy for artists to exhibit their work on a broader and more general interface, creating a gateway pedagogy into the code and grammar of the institutional art network or dialogue. "A large part of digital design is selecting the appropriate convention to communicate what actions are possible in ways that the human interactor can understand" (Murray, 2011), here the conversion of street art to the digital Web, was beneficial in relocating the conversation to the mass public, while accessing popular and mass mediated information to contribute and mix into the art. In regards to the mass mediated embodiment of the internet, the “pan-digital media platforms create the illusion of a disembodied, abstract, transmedia, and dematerialized visual environment and coexist in the field of the flat-panel frame” (Irvine, Street art Presentation). The accessibility the internet afforded to the artists, helped to grow and maintain the symbolic function of the messages through new media forums such as video, text, and web pages.

Within the dialogue, there is a hidden contest for visibility that maintains the boundaries of symbolic function of the network (Irvine, Street art Presentation). The street with its high walls and buildings creates the perfect real estate under its urban landscape to conduct the created cognition, only distributed over a temporal period. The internet allows the artist’s visibility to become permanent and documented as it globally connects multiple nodes throughout the dialogic network. With this in mind, the reproducibility of street art through its digital interface has a greater ability for circulation on other forms outside of the dense populations of urban location (Irvine). The affordances of digital art also document and expose the creation process to build ap-
preciation for the artist and to understand the meaning of the sign to ascertain the message.

One message within the dialogue that street art began to impose was its comment on the hierarchical system of high and institutionalized art compared to lowbrow and mass–produced advertising. But because the dialogism of art is a generative semantics of specific codes, while working within the digital realm, artists and aficionados still maintain a deeper understanding and inclusion within the dialogue: “Designers must therefore take care to limit access to information and to give interactors control over their own information and knowledge of how it is being collected and used” (Murray, 2011). The cognitive dialogue within the street art interface online (and on the street) was aware and remediative of the institutionalized nodes within the art world and able to help the conversation break away from within the museum walls through a loosening of the commentary of messages from Pop, Postmodern, Post-postmodern, and Dada art. But, also with the help of the Internet, and the aforementioned contemporary art works, street art was able to hold a significant part in the overall discourse of art history.

The ability to be seen is enabled by the structure and dimensions of the wall, but today, it is also facilitated through the digital interface as more art is being transformed for an internet viewership that has opened up a new interface outside museums, galleries, and even the streets; it helps enable art become global. Currently, the internet is providing a new interface of remediated art through search engines, and projects such as the Google Art Project to pose as a form of interaction with the art. Much like politicians who change their speeches to become worthy of sound bytes and modern media, street art is morphing its way into fitting the molds, or bits, of the internet to more effectively reach the global audience, and continue the conversation worldwide (Irvine, 2012). Within the potential of networking and communication through globalization, street art is able to continue art’s dialogue through remediation, recursion, combinatoriality, location, space, interfaces, material, and medium to increase the cross–dialogic interloping of high culture and mass popular culture in art, and understand the meanings of critical and abstract messages that have been spoken with the art form.

References


