

The Formation of Identity in the Arts and Media

Street Art in Berlin: The Role of the Artist

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Berlin and Jena, Germany – Summer A Term 2015

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“An empty wall is an empty population” – Anonymous

Abstract

Street art emphasizes communal engagement, public activism, and awareness all while being an integrated part of a city. Social media is one of the most important tools to connect people in our lives, especially in today's youth culture. Our group is interested in investigating the relationship between identity and media. We are approaching this question in three main ways: street art, gentrification, and social media posts. One of the main points of both social media and street art is broadcasting a message to a larger audience. We want to analyze these messages, the artists, and the audience to see what they reveal about overall identity in Berlin. I am specifically focusing on the role of the identity of the artist and what that brings to the understanding of art. YiShi is comparing and contrasting minority communities and gentrification to see what that reveals about the overall Berlin identity. Finally, Emerson is analyzing cultural identity, which he defined as part of the “self-conception and self-perception nationality to ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality and any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture” (Deshmukh 600) and applying it as a comparative look between America and Germany. All three of our specific topics are prominently cemented by the concept of identity through the lens of art and expression. Although all of us changed our research questions more or less, our group is still all focusing on the identity formation but from different perspectives. We are different from other groups who are researching German identities by focusing on more social, economic and immigration perspectives rather than the arts and media. After one month of interviewing, questionnaires, listening to professors' lectures, and going to art and memorial galleries, we thought we would be much clearer about

our original research topics; however, we found every one of us became even more confused and realized the questions we are researching turned out to be much more complex than appeared to be at first glance. We have never experienced first hand resources and doing such a huge individual and broad research and after this month, it gave us a very good idea of what real first hand research is about and what needed to be give up or emphasize on in order to perfect our final research presentation.

Question

My individual research focuses on the relationship between the identity of the artist and the meaning of the art. The program, “Re-enacting German and American identities” centers heavily on the concept of identity, through education, art, immigration, etc. My question is, what is the role of the identity of the artist? In this paper, I’m going to investigate identity labels through art as a form of resistance, activism and communication. I will dive into the theme of identity and appropriation as it relates to the meaning of a piece of work. My overall group is trying to answer the broad question of “what is German identity” and I will be focusing on a small part of this overarching theme by looking at street art.

Background

Street art is urban visual art created in public locations, usually created by unsanctioned artists outside the traditional, mainstream art community. The term “street art” is interchangeable with “guerrilla art”, “graffiti” and “urban art” and it encompasses several distinct styles of conveying societal messages. From elaborate stencils, prints and murals, to interactive street installations, street art has been integrated into the core of contemporary

art. Over the last decade, street art is used as an unconventional form of expression and activism. Street art allows artists to “express their subjective conceptions of beauty, emotion or some other aesthetic ideal” and simultaneously “formulate beliefs about the nature of reality and values regarding desirable states of reality” (Visconti 5).

Street art has been a significant presence in Western civilization throughout history. First found in prehistoric caves, like Lascaux, to marking gang territory in the 30s, to the current political statements found in the streets of any major city. It’s obvious that “people have always felt the need to share and express themselves in a public way, sometimes by telling a story or posing a question” (Smith 11). In the early 1900s, graffiti picked up popularity. Some of the earliest well recorded expressions of street art were the graffiti with tags, which started showing up on the sides of train cars and walls. These were the works of local gangs marking their territory. In the 1940s, there was a “Kilroy” movement in Europe during World War II. The phrase “Kilroy was here,” usually accompanied by a drawing of a bald figure with a big nose, began appearing wherever US servicemen were stationed. The Kilroy movement signified a milestone in the history of street art. By the 1970s and 80s, the impact of the subversive culture shifted into high gear. There was a significant turning point in the history of street art – it was then a time where the younger generation started creating a movement, taking the “battle” of their current sociopolitical environment into their own hands. However, today, street art has moved towards a larger scale. It is now considered a marvelous art form filled with diversity and social activism of the 21st century. The evolution of street art is extremely dynamic and is evident as iconic artists such as Banksy, whose stencil art became revolutionary throughout the world, take over the streets. The emergence of artists such as Vhils, a famous etcher who carves his art into buildings, or JR, who specializes in wheat

pasting, shows that street art became a ground for experimenting with different kinds of methodology, but constantly pushing societal boundaries and sending provocative messages.

Street art encompasses several different types of artistic styles and mediums: (i) *tagging* represents an early and common expression of street art meant to spread an individual's name or group. Its main purpose was to contest the conformity of daily life through "the repetition of names or words of rebellion on public walls" (Visconti). Tags can often contain subtle and cryptic messages, and may incorporate the artist's crew symbol; (ii) *sticking*, or slaps, is the practice of pasting simple drawings and symbols on stickers in public spaces so as to spread short messages to a broader audience; (iii) *stenciling* uses complex, premade stencils to effectively place pieces that "mimics the marketing practices of advertising and branding by replicating the same form or symbol in multiple places" (Visconti) ; (iv) *poetic assault* is one of the recently emerging practices of street art, and it consists of writing of poetry on bare public spaces to spread sentimental and elegant content; and (v) *urban design* mostly relates to a practice applied for the purpose of beautification of public architecture and urbanization (Visconti). Over time these different styles emerged to form specific milestones within the street art industry. While these are some of the popular techniques, each specific artist has their own methodology, which can help with identifying and categorizing street artists and their identities.

The popularity of street art as an art form has grown immensely, as the practice has become an idolized counter culture. Traditional graffiti and street art motifs have increasingly been incorporated into mainstream advertising, with many instances of artists hired to work as graphic designers for organizations. This commercial success has allowed street art to gain an impressive presence in pop culture and the contemporary art world. Art allows a connection to

form between artist and viewer while it transcends language barriers to convey a specific message. There is a strong presence of activism and rebellion within this powerful type of urban art. Street art is most often used as a platform for reaching the public and an influential form of political expression for the oppressed. There is currently a great controversy between art and vandalism. Some see street art as benefitting their city both aesthetically and bringing a flood of tourism, while others strongly view street art as illegal vandalism. Many people struggle to accept the fact street art has a “transitive nature and has already successfully occupied and progressed to the white gallery walls as well as open-air urban surfaces” (Kotseva 2).

In recent years, Berlin has gained a reputation of being the “graffiti capital of the world” (Twark 119). Graffiti writings have been present in West Berlin since at least the 1970s, when countless tags, slogans, and colorful images covered the Berlin Wall and turned the barrier between East and West into a famous icon of the divided city and the Cold War. The western side, with its “colorful expressions of free speech, stood in stark contrast to the bare, sterile eastern side, with its corresponding oppressive atmosphere” (Twark 119). Several West Berlin neighborhoods, especially Kreuzberg, were home to alternative subcultures and a strong multiethnic population, wrapped in numerous graffiti writings scratched and painted on house facades quite some time before Communism took its last breathe in Germany in 1989. Kreuzberg was the “creative, anarchic center of a city” (Twark 119) and during the 1980s, Kreuzberg served as a center for free speech, alternative lifestyles, social unrest, and protest against norms and conventions, in short, the “epicenter of counterculture” (Mandel 141). The city, dramatically transformed in the postwall era, has undoubtedly assigned new meanings to graffiti, which spread widely and today can be found all over what are now centrally located

neighborhoods, especially Kreuzberg, Mitte, Friedrichshain, Prenzlauer Berg, and Neukölln. Graffiti has become a formative component of Berlin's postwall "urban landscape and a critical voice in a highly contested location at the height of a process of urban renewal and social unrest" (Twark 119).

Berlin is also one of the most open and welcoming cities in the world today. This has to do with registered life partnership for same sex couples being allowed in Germany. Berlin has a strong gay community that makes homosexual themed art a big topic for street art in Berlin. The Berlin Wall is widely recognized as the "biggest canvas on earth" for street art, the east side of Berlin wall stayed untouched and white until the 90s, more artists added on there. The west side of the Berlin wall is full of graffiti where people express their love, hopes, dreams, and hates. One of the big art performances was from the 1982 West-German artist Elsner who created about 500 artworks along the former border strip around West-Berlin as part of his work series "Border Injuries".

When discussing "identity", people always think of the ethical or superficial aspects but rarely other deeper dimensions of identity. According to Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, a person's identity includes: race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ability, age and nationality. Identity is a fluid, malleable idea that changes throughout ones life and influences daily life decisions and perceptions.

But street art is not the only form of youthful, and varied expression as a medium for the formation of identity. Since the dawn of Twitter, there have been 163 billion tweets (Velocity). 89% of people in the age bracket of 18-29 use social media (Pew). Social media is the primary method of communication and connection between people these days. Often, you cannot go without receiving an "Friend Request" on Facebook from someone you met the other

day, or getting a “follow” on Instagram after sparking up a conversation around some funny picture you found on Instagram on the bus. You almost never meet someone who is not involved in at least some form of social media. With this huge audience available on social media, it becomes a primary outlet for many people. From simple act of sharing pictures at events you may have attended, to full blown arguments over a particular topic of interest, social media hosts a wide array of expressions at varying levels. A very recent example can be the immediate focus on utilizing social media for political campaigning. Right after Hillary Clinton announced her campaign, social media surrounding her, blew up. Facebook pages were made, Twitter accounts were used to give Live updates of Hillary’s planned events, and even Instagram accounts were made to capture important moments that would represent her campaign. In a Twitter feed, there is a call for interaction by Hillary to get supporters to share their feelings about student loan debt. Importantly, she even asks for their opinions to be shared through Emojis, a keyboard set available on the iPhone and other mobile devices. This is a key factor in this particular interaction, because she attempts to bring her status as a public figure to a more personal, grounded “regular person” who also uses Emojis to express her feelings.

By carefully crafting her identity on social media, Hillary attempts to create a personable campaign that attempts to touch the Lives of those who may be potential supporters. It seems like a lot of work to do this in comparison to simply crafting a TV campaign and just letting it run. This requires daily upkeep and creative minds to keep this identity formed, because identity is a social construct (Willig). Although she can put as many things on the Twitter feed that she thinks may create a certain perception, social media can often be unpredictable. An example of this can be the ALS ice bucket challenge. Thinking about it superficially, who would really want to dump a bucket of ice on their head as a way to support

awareness of a disease? But, the trend went viral and ultimately raised \$100 million and counting (Forbes). As one can see, there is a ton of work and critical thinking put into attempting to create a presence on social media. But after considering the amount of reach that one can achieve, exemplified through the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, this “need” for social media gives strong evidence of the power of social media to inspire people to share parts of their lives.

The overpowering need for expression and activism throughout history is clear. Street art and social media are insightful tools for looking deeper into communities and cultures. We are going to look closely at the relationship between the expression and identity.

Research Methods

In our spring seminar, the first chapter of the first book we read was about the Berlin Wall Street art. I instantly fell in love with Berlin art and knew I was going to tie my research into this concept. But I had a few issues with narrowing it down to a specific and obtainable topic. At first, I tried to look at the mobility of the street artists themselves, moving from city to city leaving their mark, and what this said about border identities and transnationalism. But to me, this topic fell flat. I found it hard to find differences between transnational and domestic art. I concluded this to be because of globalization and the ease of mobility.

I then had had an inspiring discussion with Manuela Mangold about art and the individual and about overall representation in society. I then wanted to focus on the differences between representation in society vs. representation in street art and to what extent language and education played a role. My theory was if you were able to communicate, you could be represented in society. But then I came across an interesting picture. It was of Alias, an

extremely well known graffiti artist who often portrays migrant workers and faceless minorities, and he was a white male. I thought, how and why was this white male putting up minority expression street art? Isn't this appropriation? Does this change my view of the art? At initial thought, I would have imagined a minority figure painting a minority piece. But then this can also go the other way; just because someone is a minority doesn't mean they have to be tagging about minority issues. These questions brought up even more questions for me. I've noticed a ton of commissioned street art. Does it change the meaning if the artist was paid to paint it? And who paid them? What are the differences between commissioned and non-commissioned work? Is one more valid, or true to the original intentions of street art? Is this aspect of mainstream disrupting the messages? Manuela stated something profound, "there's no such thing as a blank canvas". This got me thinking about how identity influences one's perception. Everyone has an identity, a filter, which they perceive and produce art through. History, experience, race, gender, environment, age etc, will always be subconsciously present in the formation of opinions. So does the artist matter? Does the artist's intentions matter? Once an artist puts his or her work out into society it no longer belongs to them; it's now in the eye of the beholder. Does an "informed" viewer have a more valid interpretation than an "uninformed" viewer?

After all these questions, I started forming my definition of identity. In this paper, I'll be using an "individual's identity consists of multiple, intersecting factors, including gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality" (MoMA Learning 1). The concept of identity is fluid and it changes throughout one's life. I then narrowed my question to a single line; what is the role of the identity of the artist? I thought this question really captured the program goals and the main ideas of my questions that sparked my interest in the topic.

I gathered data mainly from three independent sources: interviews, guest lectures, and close analysis of literature and art. My interviews were with a variety of people, ranging in age, education, occupation and backgrounds. I performed these interviews both on the street and in a classroom setting. I tried to hold no personal bias when choosing people to interview to get a wide range of answers. Guest speakers, like Manuela Mangold and Cathérine Kuebel, were vital to my research, giving me an insight into the contemporary German art world. I had informal discussions with them that helped me reach both a topic and a conclusion. And finally, I used close reading of literature that provided me with the critical theory that helped shaped they way I filtered my data to draw conclusions. Art analysis also gave me data to learn more about the artist's true identity without speculation.

A strength of my methodology was the interviews. I felt the interviews gave me grounding in the concept and to the opinions of residents. While I didn't use all of the interviews while making a conclusion, I did use them in building a foundation for my research. I also felt that my literary research was extensive. My biggest weakness was that I changed topics so late in my study abroad. My first topic was really falling flat for me and I knew I wanted to change, but I didn't change fast enough. This made it so my interview questions weren't as formulated and direct as they would have been if I had my topic for a few weeks prior. I also wish I could have spent more time with Catherine and Manuela because most of our discussions were formulating the topic rather than discussing the topic in more depth.

Findings

This section presents my research data and explores new concepts that were introduced to me in the process of research. My talks with Manuela jump-started the research when she stated, “there’s no such thing as a blank canvas”. We talked about the “quality” of the informant and where this information was coming from; was it first hand from the artist or second hand through an external source? She pointed out several dichotomies and we discussed “individual versus collective action, self - affirmative versus altruistic aims, self/peer versus public audience, critical versus celebratory purpose, protesting versus aesthetic language” (Visconti) and more. This really opened my eyes to the different types of conflicts present in street art. My interview questions and answers were the next preliminary steps that allowed me to lead into more complex ideas. My open-ended and informal questions allowed for each conversation to take it’s own path, which gave me a wide variety of answers and thoughts. My first question, what is identity to you, which led directly into stimulating discussions about the role of the identity of an artist. One student at Humboldt stated, “It doesn’t matter who the artist is, unless it’s propaganda. Then I want more information so I’m not blindly persuaded”. On the other hand, another student expressed his views by stating “I think the artist’s identity allows the artist to express a certain style of language into the public space” (cite). This comment stuck with me, which led me to exploring language and space in relations to identity, which I talk about in a later section. A person I interviewed on the street of Kreuzberg stated “most of the time the artist is unknown and invisible to the viewer, at least to me. However when thinking about a symbol, like a painting of an eagle by a German artist that you know is German and an American artist painting an eagle mean very different things to me”. The interviewee used the idea of an eagle to simplify his thought, but made sure to state that this could be in relation to anything. This brought up the idea of cultural connotations and

background in relation to an artists' identity. From these interviews, I moved onto scholarly texts that dove into these specific topics.

Appropriation

I started with the idea of cultural appropriation and how that pertains to identity. I am using the definition of cultural appropriation as a concept, which “treats with the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of a different culture as a largely negative phenomenon” (Young). I found that generally, an assumption that the culture being borrowed from is also being oppressed by the culture doing the borrowing, which is a prerequisite to the concept. I took what we learned about historical appropriation in the Karl May exhibits and shifted them to fit street art. According to proponents of the concept of cultural appropriation, such cultural borrowings are problematic for a variety of reasons: ranging from group identity, and questions of cultural oppression, to claims of intellectual property rights. As minority cultures are imitated by the dominant culture, observers may begin to falsely associate certain cultural practices with the imitating culture, and not with the people who originated them. This is often seen in cultural outsiders' use of an oppressed culture's symbols or other cultural elements, such as art, music, dance, spiritual ceremonies, and modes of dress, speech and social behavior, among other cultural expressions. I found that this cultural appropriation was important to the viewers of an art piece. They wanted to know more about the artist's purpose and how that related to their personal identity.

Language

I then explored the nature of language because artists express their identity through written and pictorial language. Visconti described the streets of Berlin as a “linguistic landscape” with various forms of street art making up crucial components of all language in it.

Street artists and graffiti writers “contribute significantly to the diverse voices expressed and heard in this linguistic landscape”. Some forms of language and graffiti in Berlin are graffiti against the police, against tourists, or against new Berliners from other parts of Germany; graffiti created as pure forms of artistic expression or displayed in art galleries; gang tags; political banners at demonstrations; stickers transforming street names; and innovative and mixed language use in shop windows. Language surrounds us in everyday life in multiple ways, but language inserted into any public space should never be considered an arbitrary addition. Berlin is a place of intense and constant spoken, written and “visual” language contact.

In *Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre describes the urban street as a “place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become ‘savage’ and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls” (Lefebvre 19). Written language in an urban space can also provide specific information about current sociopolitical circumstances in the city. Graffiti writings in the streets are key components in a text-filled landscape, because language is uttered and perceived as sounds, but also written, displayed, and perceived nonverbally, like street art. Graffiti consists both of the “unofficial” responses by individuals inhabiting a specific area in the city and the “official” language and signs of the government and private businesses. Language serves several important functions in public spaces by denominating and structuring a given territory; it establishes rules, opinions, and provides orientation in space.

As Florian Coulmas states in his assessment of the role of all language in the public sphere, “graffiti speaks to us about subculture, resistance, sacrilege, profanity, contributing its share to establishing a public sphere” (Coulmas 29). City streets serve as an open-air gallery for public opinion, often in direct response to the language already present in them or in any other

given space. Graffiti and efforts to decode and read them as significant contributions to a public discourse are, furthermore, no recent phenomena.

Space

The idea of language in public spaces led me deeper into the idea of public and cultural space. Shepard Fairey, one of the world's best known and most influential street artists, notable for his creation of the iconic 2008 Barack Obama "Hope" poster, said in an interview: "There is something powerful about seeing art in public spaces that has a function other than just advertising that's selling a product" (PurpleList 1). This describes the different relationship artists have with the city, creating work on its surfaces to beautify it. Graffiti in urban space is "commentary, intervention, formation, and transformation" (Visconti). Accordingly, space is never neutral or static, but in fact shaped, invented and constantly reinvented. Michel de Certeau described space as a "practiced place," as it is "created by human interactions and interventions, by language, and especially by forms of active communication".

Cultural space denotes those areas in which young people and others construct meaning, perception, and identity. Within relationships of power, inequality, and marginalization, the control of cultural space is contested: while "powerful adults attempt to define and impose cultural space, less powerful young people attempt to unravel this imposition" (Ferrell), to carve out their own spaces for shaping identity and taking some control over everyday life.

The notion of space traditionally refers to something anonymous, whereas place distinctively accounts for the meaningful experience of a given site; that is, it is "consumed space" (Ferrell). Places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world. Impermanence not only defines urban spaces; it is also one of graffiti's most important characteristics. Therefore, street art is the perfect match to

Berlin's dynamic urban space. Embracing this inherently transitory nature of urban spaces, graffiti artists in Berlin do not intend their texts to remain visible for a long period of time, especially in areas that are most affected by gentrification processes, which YiShi expands more in her research project.

Conclusion

Identity is a difficult concept to truly understand, and after four weeks in Berlin, I am closer to building my own personal definition but it is a lesson I will be able to carry throughout my education and career. Within street art, the role of the identity of the artist is multilayered. The artist's personal identity allows for the conveying of a certain message through language. Through this language, the artist's identity floods public and cultural space broadcasting their selves to an audience. I have concluded that is important to understand how a city can be shaped by language. In the case of street art texts, we need to ask: who produces graffiti, what is the motivation behind his or her actions and message, and who is the targeted audience? Some of the most important factors to consider when examining the use of language in space: Who lives here? What do they do? How do they communicate and interact with each other and their environment? What are the current pressing social issues in this place? The identity of the artist is a crucial aspect of the art, message, and language within street art. Fully informed viewers are able to get a well rounded view of the meaning of the piece.

While investigating this question, I came across many more questions that, if I had more time, I would have liked to also research. I would dive into cultural connotation and how that information could completely change the meaning of a work for a viewer. I would have also

liked to research representation in society by looking at schools vs. representation in street art. I also wanted to look into commissioned vs, non-commissioned work.

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Cultural Sensitivity

There was several times during the process of my research project that I felt like I didn't know what I was doing. I took the phrase "fake it until you make it" to heart and ended up feeling very comfortable with being uncomfortable. Analyzing street art and big concepts like identity and space are extremely outside my comfort zone, but it was a learning experience for me to put myself out there and dive into a world where I was previously an outsider. Walking through Seattle and some of the other European countries I visited, I noticed that I was very aware of the street art that I normally might not have looked twice at before this project. I discovered that I had a very narrow cultural knowledge of the migration groups in Berlin. Growing up in a white, middle class, non-religious household, I felt like the least cultured person in Europe so it was amazing getting to interact with so many different people from different backgrounds. One surprise was the quality of conversations that came from my interviews. I expected people to blow me off or say "oh I don't know", but people really thought about my questions and provided great answers. The number of people who spoke English in Germany also surprised me. I had heard "Oh don't worry, everyone speaks English", but I was really impressed with the public, and especially the students we interacted with.

My topic is important to me because going out and looking at art in the streets of Berlin was something that I truly loved doing. I feel that art can connect cultures and people in a way that words cannot. Art is a universal language of expression and emotions and it was so valuable for me to take a month off from studying the sciences and just focus on this cultural study. I think globally, this topic is also prevalent in the fact we come across art daily. It is important to dig deep and think about why that art is there, who is the audience, and what the

meaning reveals about the identity of the artist. I'm disappointed that I formed my topic so late in the game because I think with more time and more discussion; I could have pulled bigger topics out of the question.

I also decided not to focus on a specific street art piece and take a more literary approach to my research. I found that there was a lack of concrete information about specific street artists and their history, which I felt uncomfortable working with. Overall, I'm very happy where my topic ended up and I am positive that I will be able to use ideas that I formed here in future experiences.