



**California Institute
of Integral Studies**

Journal of Conscious Evolution

Volume 10

Issue 10 *Issue 10/ 2013*


Article 3

June 2018

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Recommended Citation

Suzuki, Christopher M. (2018) "Street Art as an Expression of Post-Modern Consciousness," *Journal of Conscious Evolution*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 10 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/cejournal/vol10/iss10/3>

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Journal of Conscious Evolution
Issue 10, 2013

Street Art as an Expression of Post-Modern Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the development and expression of street art from the end of the twentieth century to the present day. I examine the street art's use and definition of public space and how it challenges the prevailing paradigm on property and ownership. I explore the way that street art uses the language of advertising to reach the largest amount of people, while speaking out against all that consumerism stands for. I discuss how in breaking down the boundaries between high art and low, and using images from every source imaginable, street speaks to the post-modern projects desire to see beyond disciplines and deny all hierarchies.

I delve into the work of famous street artist Swoon and her art collective Toyshop and see how street art is seeking to facilitate a change in consciousness from a fixed and static way of seeing reality, to an organic and flowing mode of being.

Introduction

Of all the art movements that have arisen in the post-modern era none fully encapsulate post-modernisms hybrid multiplicity more than street art. Growing from the graffiti artists of the nineteen-seventies, street art came of age in the mid-two-thousands with the gallery show *Spank the Monkey* in Gateshead, England. From there it has enjoyed a meteoric rise across all media from fashion to music and even appearing as the symbol for Obamas election in 2008 (HOPE by Stephan Fairy). Yet this is a movement that

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sneers at labeling and the approval of the art establishment, seeking to break down all barriers and distinctions between high culture and low. Drawing from the history of each individual city as well as from the newly arising global culture, street art seeks to embody all aspects of the human experience at once. In this respect it is truly an expression of post-modern consciousness, drawing from all eras and all worlds without regard to traditional boundaries of discipline or taste. It breaks with the modernist belief that art should be mysterious and seeks to speak to the public in language it can understand, while still revealing deep truths about society and the individual. Street art by its very nature is ephemeral and subject to decay. While in the beliefs of modernity this would be seen as a weakness, post-modern street art sees its fleeting nature as strength. The art only becomes complete with the passage of time and is expected to be covered over by the work of others. The street artist accepts time as part of the art and thus seeks not immortality but immediacy, not product but process.

Shifting the Discourse and Bypassing Hierarchies

Street art grew out of several contradictory traditions, graffiti, advertising, and protest art. Each of these traditions seeks to speak directly to the public by occupying public space in an unavoidable way. Early adopters of these forms, “often created by disenfranchised urban youth; art that responded to advertising and mass media, by artists such as Jenny Holzer and Barbra Kruger; and work that manifested outrage about such issues as the AIDS epidemic, feminist concerns, and gay rights, created by collectives such as Gran Fury, group Material, ACT UP, and the Guerilla Girls.”¹ These artists were responding to the great Post-Modern awakening that took place in the second half of the twentieth century, largely amongst baby boomers. They felt that the grand narratives of modernism were empty, due to the fact that they had usually been left out of them, and decided to make a change. They were sidelined from the institutions of discourse by their gender, race, or class and thus took to the streets and began a discourse with the cities in which they lived. In forming collectives they rejected the ideal of the lone artistic genius that had been championed since the enlightenment and reinvigorated the tribal model of interaction.

As time moved on artists began to see the streets as both the platform and the medium for their art, allowing them to leave behind the rarefied gallery world. Artists such as, “[Jean-Michel] Basquiat and [Keith] Haring both chose to use public space as a platform for exhibiting and disseminating

their art, and by doing so they laid the ground work for street art: placing work on city walks and subway stations, they produced a body of work that was intentionally accessible to the general public. Their images were both visually arresting and easily comprehended by the masses of people inhabiting the city.”² This movement away from the gallery and into the street is part of the breakdown of hierarchical structures and cultural boundaries that is endemic of the post-modern era. No longer is the artistic underclass seeking the approval or support of the elites, instead the artist seeks direct communication with the public. They want their art to transform the culture, not just influence it.

Organic, Individual and In-the-Moment

This breakthrough, both in presentation and in intent, would become central to street art as a movement over the next few decades. By making their artistic messages accessible to the general public they were rejecting the modern ethos that art must be indecipherable to those outside the discourses of the art world. Drawing from propaganda posters many street artists create images that speak directly to the viewer on issues that affect their day-to-day lives. Other street artists seek to bring up aspects of society or culture that are ignored by the mainstream discourse by placing them front and center on the city streets. Today famed Portuguese street artist, “Vhils believes that by maintaining the status quo, institutions resist change, growth, and adaptation. Working in an ephemeral space helps Vhils draw attention to the state of these institutions and encourages transformation and revival.”³ Thus by being outside the major institutions of art and culture, street artists have the ability to authentically comment on them and challenge their hegemony, a major goal of the post-modern project. Street artists are also challenging the mechanistic viewpoint of modernity with its desire to build perfect, unchanging institutions. By displaying their work in the streets, on walls that will be covered over or demolished, they seek to be in the eternal present. They want their work to grow and change with their audience and with the issues they champion in an organic, evolving way. In this respect street artists are connecting with the integral philosophies’ desire to return to the rhythms of the earth, to be a constant process instead of a static product. They seek to constantly refresh the way we see our world so that we experience it in the moment, and not as our Meta narratives say it is.

Part of what defines Post-Modern thinking and art is the belief that all boundaries are constructions and not absolute realities. In reaction to this

truth much of post-modern art is a mismatch of different styles, mediums, and disciplines. Street art shows this type of variation more than almost any other art form, with one artist looking almost nothing like another. Process and personal history tend to play a bigger role than formal training (which is often nonexistent) and the medium tends to become the message. Artist such as,

[Dr.] Lakra draws from what is commonly considered ‘lowbrow’ culture and the marginal: there sources range from various tattoo traditions, gang symbols, nineteenth-century anatomical drawings, Mexican pulp fiction, and Day of the Dead imagery. These images are combined with references to ancient cultures and ethnic traditions, including Aztec, Mayan, Pacific Northwest, Maori, and African. His in-depth knowledge of this disparate visual styles, cultures, and elements drawn from popular culture allows the artist to combine them to create stunning monochromatic murals.⁴

Lakra displays the Post-Modern love and celebration of the “outsider” narrative, the stories and traditions that the Western canon left out. He shows how they are just as worthy of study and veneration as any of the traditional “fine” arts, perhaps more so for they are the traditions of the people. Thus by speaking to the public with imagery that they connect with and understand he is taking his message to them rather than expecting them to come to him. This breaks down the barriers between discourses, and creates a truly culture wide conversation. Lakra’s approach to art creation shows the change that has come about due to the rise of the Internet and globalization. Cultures and art styles that once would have been separated by geography and access are now easily accessible for the first time. Thus all of the arts are experiencing a blending and expanding of their visual repertoire to include all the new information. This has lead to the end of the obsession with the new that defined most art in the twentieth-century. In its place is a collage mentality were the artistry lies in the blending rather than the rendering. This impulse can be seen everywhere from the art blogs on Tumblr to the street art of Sao Paulo. Thus street art lends itself to being a movement defined not by class but by ethos and talent. With this blending has come an expansion of a consciousness that sees the underlying connection between all peoples, while still valuing and celebrating their artistic differences.

Advertising, Ownership, and Public Space

The influence of advertising on the desires and values of modern culture cannot be overstated. It has driven the aesthetics of world culture and consumer capitalism and has had a multivalent influence on contemporary street art. For some such as, “artist, Geoff Hargadon’s campaign ‘Cash for Your Warhol’ utilizes the same medium (plastic signs) and platform (the sides of buildings or light posts) as the companies advertising that they are buying homes or gold. Hargadon’s campaign is a simultaneous critique of the use of public space and the deflating art market. In most cases, civic authorities do not penalize those who place advertisements in public space – and by extension, art disguised as an advertisement goes unpunished.”⁵ Thus street art makes us question what belongs in public space by asking who truly owns it, the people or companies. The humor inherent in this type of artistic expression is central to the ethos of street art, which never takes itself too seriously. It calls into question why the government supports the expressions and needs of companies and not of individual people or communities and makes us ask ourselves who is in charge here. This desire to question all inherited notions of space and belonging are also central to post-modern thinking, as is the desire to question the centrality of consumerism in our lives.

This critique of the ownership that consumerism has over our public space is central to most forms of street art today. The fact that this ownership comes at the expense of art and the people is central to street arts critique of contemporary society. Money and the way it decides our laws concerning public space is at the forefront of the battle between street artist and the authorities, as well as what the public considers art versus vandalism. As the above mentioned artist shows,

While art and ads share similar materials and space, the rules favoring revenue-generating advertising while prosecuting street art are intentional.... Formal access to public space is limited to those wielding economic or political power. For the rest of society, a series of barriers, economic and bureaucratic, have been erected to ensure limited access, creating situations where the political views and social agendas of those in power are reflected in the official use of public space.... The current assault on public space by street art... presents a direct challenge to those who control the urban landscape. By effectively addressing the general public, street art also challenges the elitist traditions associated with contemporary art.⁶

The control of the public sphere by international corporations is in a sense the *raison d'être* for modern street art, giving it vitality and verve and driving its creativity. It is the force within post-modernism that is at the cutting edge, attacking corporate hegemony and the ideology that money controls everything. In the shift from communal living to private ownership that has happened in the West over the last few centuries, less and less space is open to public use and more and more is regulated by corporate needs. Street art is a direct reaction and course correction to this and sees itself as not only the voice of the people, but also the voice of an enlightened humanism. It seeks to speak to the real needs of communities and individuals, rather than the manufactured desires promoted by corporate advertising. When money and its generation are the scale by which a society measures everything, things that are free are immediately suspect. When everything is privately owned any public art is considered vandalism and defamation of public property, yet in reality street art is seeking to return power to the people. It seeks to break the control that political parties and corporations have over our cultural discourse and create a truly citizen driven society. Street art and the culture that creates it are by definition grassroots movements that seek to expose the fact that many of our social rules and laws are there to legitimate the power of the few. It seeks to expand the consciousness of the average citizen to the realities of our time, over entertaining the art world and playing to its market. In this way it hopes to break the barriers between high culture and low and show our common humanity.

Yet while street art is leading the attack on a world gone corporate, it also uses the tools of the media age to advance its influence. Many street art campaigns,

Make good use of the basic tenants of accessibility utilized in marketing campaigns: visually arresting images that the public can relate to, a repetition of work placed in key locations to guarantee maximum exposure and visibility, as well as merchandising of images.... The emphasis on accessibility is diametrically opposed to the elitist and exclusionary principles adhered to in the traditional art world... In doing so they help to foster a following for art among youth (a group that has traditionally been shut out) and circumvent...art galleries and dealers- by embracing... the Internet for distribution and promotion of their work. This more populist approach has lead to a thriving market for limited-edition prints.⁷

The contemporary street artist has used the tools of corporate branding against corporations, while still enjoying the fruits of becoming a brand. Street artists such as Stephan Fairy are famous around the world through the distribution and marketing of their art, which can be seen on everything from T-shirts to computer cases. Some artist such as Swoon or Banksy are known only for their art and not as individuals, giving their art the aura of mystery and truly making them a brand instead of an individual. On one hand this makes the art central because the artist as a person doesn't figure into the equation, but on the other hand it can make their work seem to come from a machine and not an individual. Though these artists have avoided the tag of elitism by selling their work at a price the public can afford, they have become part of the consumer culture they started out criticizing. Now to be fair they do this as a way to fund their art or political performances, but still this makes them a part of the culture that they claim to hate. The only out for them is the fact that even though they sell prints of their work, the originals still exist on the streets for all to see for free. In doing so they gain the financial support that comes from monetizing their work, while still being effective as a cultural and political force. In adapting to new technologies and reaching out to the youth they are building an art market for the future, shaping the discourse for the next generation, and continuing the post-modern project of bringing in formally excluded groups. Thus the street artists are the perfect example of the post-modern creative, using the best of every previous system (galleries for instillations, street work for political messaging, and the internet for distribution) while leaving behind their limiting or destructive aspects.

Swoon and the Creation of a New World

Like almost every artistic movement that has come before it, street art does not arise out of a vacuum, but as the culminating expression of a dedicated community. Growing out of the anti-Iraq war movement, Brooklyn based artist Swoon has built her collective, known as Toyshop, around creating a new type of consciousness and societal awareness. Swoon formed her collective with friends from school and people who lived in her community deciding to fight the modern paradigm through carnivalesque disturbances were, "They dressed up like pirates and stormed the Staten Island ferry. And they participated in dozens of community projects: art parties, free dinners, street events.... [They] were creating culture.... [Through] intense collaboration, meeting people on the street, a polite fuck-

you to advertising, the assumption of public space, [and] dialogues with the city.”⁸ The cultural movement of which Swoon is a part grew out of the counter-culture of the late sixties, with its ethos of communal living, play, and art. She seeks to change society by making us aware of our shared humanity through street theatre and orchestrated absurdity. While she works towards these changes she creates around her the type of society she wishes to see in the world. These same impulses would later spark the Occupy movement and would continue to this day with the Freegan movement, two groups that Swoon draws from for her collective. Swoon is truly a post-modern creative is her desire to bring forth art forms of the past, such as street theatre and the culture of carnival, and blend them into the best of contemporary society.

From these early endeavors Swoon began to expand her work, seeking to reach larger communities and build bigger projects. In 2007 Swoon moved her desire to show the world a new way to exist out of New York and out of the urban environment into the center of America. Along with her collective she built a series of interlocking art barges that sailed down the Mississippi, performing music, theatre and offering free meals at every town where they docked. Speaking about the project Swoon said,

I decided.. I should make something that traveled through the heart of the country. That addressed some of the reasons I felt we were going to war by being an example of another way to live... It would be a floating laboratory. Compost toilets and rainwater collection, bicycle power, wind power, French fry grease power... we would try to free ourselves from the cycle of need that gives our country the market for and the license to steal resources out from under the ground that other people live on.... We just had to go and trust something would appear... We made a performance that changed at every show in every town... We made our own world.⁹

Here Swoon shows the utopian idealism of the sixties counter-culture, along with the Dadaist sense of play. That being said she doesn't just gesture at the notion of a better world, but gives concrete things she believes should happen, such as renewable energy. This shows the development that has occurred within these types of collectives since the late sixties. Street art generally and Swoon in particular seeks to break the public out of their day-to-day consciousness by showing them the unexpected and challenging them to see the world as it could be. These small disturbances leave cracks in the prevailing paradigm that artists like Swoon hope will eventually lead to a

shattering of the old consumer based world and opening up a new, sustainable, and holistic reality. Swoon brought this project to the middle of the country because she feels that the culture needs to be changed from the ground up and the best way to do that is to bring the new world to the people. Having grown up in Daytona, Florida Swoon recognized the need for these types of events in rural communities and the impact they can have on the youth who live there. Swoon speaks often about trusting in the process and many synchronistic events occurred that allowed this project to move forward. From finding an artist who had previously worked on boats to finding a farmer who was willing to let them build on his land for free. Swoon mixes Western and Eastern influences in all of her art and this shows in her performances. She allowed the culture of the city to change the performance each night in accordance with Hindu and Buddhist belief that the best way to live is to react to each moment in the moment. Post-modern and integral consciousness both seek truth in commonalities between cultures and disciplines and this synthesis can clearly be seen in Swoon's art and performances.

Conclusion

Street Art is one of the defining movements in the art world today, it appears in our cities, on our clothing, and on the Internet. It is as multifaceted and diverse as our modern society and can be seen in every major city in the world. It draws from our deep well of collective culture and sees no difference between high culture and low. In this sense Street Art seeks to form a synthesis between all these competing forces and show us a new way forward. Contemporary Street Art seeks to challenge our collective view of what constitutes public space, what is legal and why. In every sense it is the embodiment of the post-modern project, seeking to bring together all that has come before it and value them equally. Street art denies all master narratives as incomplete and exclusive and seeks to bring the forgotten narratives at the heart of our modern age to public discourse. It works to be by and of the people, speaking their true desires and championing their causes; while asking everyone to expand their ideas of what is possible. It asks us to not just be a consumer of culture, but a participant and creator as well.

Notes:

Shifting the Discourse and Bypassing Hierarchies

1. *Viva La Revolucion: A Dialogue with the Urban Landscape*. The Museum of Contemporary Art. Gingko Press, La Jolla, CA. 2010, 8.
2. Ibid. 8.

Organic, Individual and In-the-Moment

3. *Vhils*. Gestalten, Berlin, Germany. 2011, 1.
4. *Viva La Revolucion: A Dialogue with the Urban Landscape*. The Museum of Contemporary Art. Gingko Press, La Jolla, CA. 2010, 11.

Advertising, Ownership, and Public Space

5. Ibid, 8.
6. Ibid, 9.
7. Ibid, 14.

Swoon and the Creation of a New World

8. *Swoon*. Abrams, New York, New York. 2010, 82.
9. Ibid, 124-26.

References:

1. *Viva La Revolucion: A Dialogue with the Urban Landscape*. The Museum of Contemporary Art. Gingko Press, La Jolla, CA. 2010
2. *Swoon*. Abrams, New York, New York. 2010
3. *Vhils*. Gestalten, Berlin, Germany. 2011