

## Street Artist: Urban *Flanêurie*

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### Abstract

*It is the goal of this paper to aesthetically rethink Street Art's artistic process and question its narrative in urban and public space. We intend to highlight the anonymity, ephemeral, and transitory element as a key feature of its artistic creation. To this end, we will use as a starting point the relationship between the street artist and Baudelaire's flanêur, to reach Foucault's point of view, which somehow finds the key to the street artist's aesthetic features, synthesized in the understanding of Baudelaire's modernity, understood not as a mere historical period, but rather as an "attitude."*

**Keywords:** Street Art, Flanêurie, Modernity, Anonymity, Transitional, Ephemerality.

The purpose of this working paper is to characterize the Street Artist's creative process, from an interdisciplinary approach that establishes relationships between poetry, philosophy and the art world.

We intend to highlight the anonymity, the ephemeral, and transitory element as a key feature of his artistic creation, by using as a starting point the relationship between the street artist and Baudelaire's famous flanêur: For whom it is an immense joy to see the world and remain hidden, as a voyeur, "enjoying the fact of being incognito throughout the entire city" (Baudelaire, 1988: 43). The flanêur's visual message spreads throughout the urban space and proliferates insidiously. The street is actually, 'Just as good a place to publish,' as Banksy recently stated – an artist whose true identity remains veiled (Raychaudhur, 2010: 52).

The flanêur has a cosmopolitan personality – his home is the major city. To the French poet the crowd, or "the mass is so intrinsically present that vainly we seek for it in the poet" (Benjamin, 1999: 115). The crowd is a framework that orchestrates urban movements. For this man of the crowds

the street is his home, as it is the large city. Indeed, the individual that crosses the webs of the large urban centers, dipping into the "great desert of men" (Baudelaire, 1988: 173), is searching for something specific: Modernity. In Baudelaire's conception, "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" (174). It is in this transience that the modern artist recognizes the value of his own work. Unlike the traditional aesthetic conception, in which beauty would be identified with the universal and with the unchanging, Street Art has in the transient the true motive of its inspiration; in urban life it finds what it wants to represent.

It is within the city in motion that the artist will see their condition radically transformed. In the poem "The loss of halo" stated in Paris Spleen, Baudelaire describes metaphorically how the poet crosses a busy avenue, and sees his halo falling from his head, as an effect of shock. As a consequence of the loss of this emblem, the artist loses his quasi-divine and angelic status and acquires anonymity, and seeks to take advantage of this by remaining incognito in the crowd, as a fallen angel or an anti-hero. Benjamin focuses on this poem, including the theme of the loss of "aura," in his critical

analysis of the modernity in the book: Charles Baudelaire: a lyric in the rise of capitalism.

The crowd is omnipresent in the poet. The flâneur arises from the practice of observing the galleries that decorate Paris, of wandering through the crowds of those who pass. Now this is where the subversive activity and the unknown street artist meet Baudelaire's conception of modernity, which represents the transient, the fleeting and the contingent (1988). Unlike the traditional aesthetic conception, in which beauty would be identified with the universal and with the unchanging, Baudelaire finds in the transient the true reason for the artist's inspiration.

The street artist is aware of the ephemerality of his artwork; being one of the essential characteristics of this kind of art, to such an extent that video or photography (expertly diffused by modern media, like the internet and social networks) are often the only record of these works. Street art as a global movement has grown unconstrained through Web image sharing.

Like the flâneur, the street artist's subversive and unconventional activity seems to be a response to capitalist law. The street artist does not want to feed the market and his art is not suitable for consumption. The transience of the work also reveals such nonchalance. Street art is for everyone, but is nobody's. Baudelaire's aspirations seem to echo in the very essence of street art: an unconventional art that creates colorful and subversive scenery for the walls of the big city. The street is the canvas and the infrastructure of street art, but it is simultaneously also the space that surrounds mainstream art. Consequently street art should not be seen as a further category of conventional art, but as a category of its own. Baudelaire's poet has the audacity to make the affirmation of transience, of the moment that quickly turns into remembrance, of the intensity of the "here and now" and its near end.

Foucault's views on Baudelaire can shed light on the street artist's aesthetic features, synthesized in the understanding of modernity, not as a historical period but rather, as an "attitude". That is, the attitude of becoming eternal through the transitional, where nothing stays the same, implying: "recover something eternal not beyond the present instant, nor

behind it, but in it" (Foucault, 2008: 342). Therefore, the role of the artist is "to extract the eternal from the transitional" (Baudelaire, 1988: 173).

The modern poet would then be attained by "a willingness to turn here the present moment" (Foucault, 2008: 343). However, this "became here" has something "ironic" in itself, that is, the attitude of modernity does not aim to "sacralize" the moment, to then keep it in the absence of all change. The artist's attitude is a game of creation and freedom within which the artist shapes their own life as a creative process. What Foucault recognizes in Baudelaire's work, and what we identify with the attitude of the street artist, is the claim of an aesthetic life, an aesthetic way of existence that has its focus on the urban *flanêurie*.

The figure of Baudelaire's flâneur, which we here have taken the liberty to associate with the street artist, introduces an aesthetic form of existence. This aesthetic mission does not exist to embellish reality, but exists for individual self-realization. The street artist is not alone in his creative process, but within society: the big city. He operates his own transformation as he expects also to transform the walls of the streets.

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