

# Ulična umjetnost kao oblik vizualne komunikacije

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Ivanović, Sara

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University of Zagreb  
Croatian Studies  
Division of Communication Sciences

Sara Ivanović

# **Street Art as Visual Communication**

BACHELOR THESIS

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## **1. Introduction**

In the world of media, sight has become the most important sense for receiving an information. Thanks to one's sense of vision, a message can consciously or even unconsciously make a stimulant which accesses one's brain in a very short period of time. Thus, perception is made. This perception of one's surrounding has an influence on forming an opinion and makes an individual deliberate.

Due to technological progress visual communication plays the main role in sending and sharing information. As the market is expanding, the importance of high speed information transfer demands clear, transparent and effective tool which will reach the audience and make an impact. However, not everybody has the ability to participate in creating media content. That is why instead of being just a passive spectator, some people found an alternative way to make their voices heard. The main aim of this thesis is using public space as a free and accessible platform for spreading one's voice and sharing a message.

In the first part of the thesis the origins of street art will be displayed, so as to show that street art is not a modern way of expressing and communicating, as is commonly thought, yet its first usage began centuries ago. In the second part I will explain what comes under the syntagm visual communication and how it became the most used way of communicating in the world of today's media. Furthermore, in the third part I will examine a connection between art and the city, the way public space may represent a blank canvas to a citizen, whereas in the fourth part I will mention those particular citizens who use public space and I will present their significant work which influenced audience. In the fifth part I will show how street art from vandalism became widely used as an advertising tool, while in the final part of the thesis I will examine a connection between street art presented on the street and street art shared on the internet.

## 2. The origins of street art

Street art is not a modern day way of expressing and communicating, as is commonly thought, but its first usage began centuries ago. Decorating one's surroundings by scratching, writing and painting on the wall is one of the oldest ways of human communication and expression. The oldest scratches on the wall were found in the caves of France and Spain and are dating from the Stone Age. In Lascaux, for instance, it has been discovered more than 1500 drawings and 60 pictures in colour painted on the wall (Lalić, Leburić, Bulat, 1991: 18). Not only Europeans, but also Native Americans and later the Egyptians used wall scratching and painting to express themselves. All those nations left a significant symbolic legacy in a form of the drawings many years before street art was recognized as a form of communication.

A turning point that led to the communication we use today, as well as visual/street art communication, was the development of the script and emerging of literacy which has made a drastic change in the world of communication – drawings were replaced by writings, provided that drawings were and are still used as a form of expression. At that time, the capital of this expressionistic form was Athens which was filled with all kinds of writings, mainly romantic in content. Apart from literacy, the emergency of Christianity has extensively increased graffiti writing – graffiti of religious content were written in churches and monasteries, namely, places that were considered as cultural and educational centres.

Even though street art that we know nowadays has developed during the World War II era, its history began way before in a form similar to graffiti. Some examples presented further in the text date back to Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the Roman Empire. To start with, graffiti are part of a street art which refers to writings or drawings that have been scribbled, scratched, or painted on the wall and are exposed to the public. An author can be either an individual or a group of people who are not necessarily professionals and are usually unknown to the audience.

The origin of the term *graffiti* comes from the Greek word *grapheins* which means “to write”, while in Italian language word *graffiare* means “to scratch “. The term itself was used for the first time in 1851 as a name for the writings found in the ruins of Pompeii. Despite the fact that the writings were widely used among all ancient cities, the Romans have always been in the forefront of the others in the amount of their usage. To give an illustration of this, the

Domus Aurea built by Emperor Nero in Rome or Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli have proven that graffiti have been a component of Italian architecture, even though graffiti may be falsely considered as the 20<sup>th</sup> century art movement.

However, writings discovered on the ruins of Pompeii were of great importance for graffiti art history, as well as for the experts and artists in the field of street art. Art historian Walter Grasskamp pointed out that a preservation of particular area's subculture has enabled graffiti "not only as the oldest, but also as the most persistent manifestation of human culture" (1988: 197).

Although drawings on the wall may nowadays be considered as vandalism, when literacy occurred and Christianity emerged, the authors of the early form of "street art" were merely the members of the upper class. Not until 18<sup>th</sup> century other classes got involved and brought in a brand-new layout into the world of street art. This change was most pronounced in England. All of a sudden, public space became covered with writings of diverse topics. Most writings were witticisms or various life deliberations, while the topics have been illustrating everyday life such as consumption of alcohol and tobacco. Accessibility to all social classes, involvement of an individual and boundless freedom of expression have changed course of communication. Therefore, art historian Robert Reisner labelled that time as "the golden age of England graffiti art" (Lalić, Leburčić, Bulat, 1991). Soon graffiti took over the whole Europe. From Vienna to Berlin, all the way to Copenhagen graffiti had been written throughout the city. Still, majority of them were found in public toilets and have imposed on politics, sex and social issues.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writings and drawings had spread out to the East and afterwards came to America. Allen Walker Read, American etymologist had in 1935 published the first survey ever about graffiti around the world. His research was actually based on his travels through Canada and western parts of the USA. In conclusion he realized that the majority of the writings were based on sex, while the survey noted some forms of animosity such as racial, religious, national, etc. (Lalić, Leburčić i Bulat, 1991).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century street art started to reflect political events of particular area and was focused on social circumstances. In other words, street art has taken over a form of expressing opinions of citizens and became closely related to politics and communication in a society. On the one hand, street art was used to transmit intolerance and hatred. To give an illustration, during the Nazi Germany a lot of offending writings were found on Jewish houses.

On the other hand, rising of the Berlin Wall has offered the individuals a perfect place to express their opinion about political situation and throughout creativity to fight for their freedom. Another example of using street art as a medium for fighting for one's rights is May 1968 in France when students started protesting against consumerism and capitalism. The protest ended up as a massive general strike which left behind many significant artworks around the city. Those artworks were the voices of young people who were unsatisfied with the political system, who were fighting for their personal identity and human rights. It was a cultural, social and moral turning point in the history of France and the slogans, writings, drawings and illustrations used at that time have, as well, become a valuable historical record (Lalić, Leburić, Bulat, 1991:22).

Soon after the power of visual communication on the walls had been recognized, street art became popular alternative medium for the members of subculture. The greatest popularity overtook in the 1970s when street art occupied the interior of New York metro stations and moreover, covered the streets of the city. Those places were not positioned around mainstream locations. Nonetheless, those were the hidden treasures of cultural diversity. Visual communication was crawling from the walls, decorating abandoned places and dark alleys, attracting mixed personas who were approving and supporting this "new" medium and wanted to take a part in its formation. Before long, global recognition of street art had been proclaimed and it became a constituent part of urbanism, architecture and art.

Nowadays, street art includes symbols, illustrations and images that are meant to send a message. It is purposely positioned in open space so as to reach diverse individuals with different ethnic or social background. Therefore, street art is made to be understandable and accessible to everyone. Street art is often identified with guerrilla art because the main purpose is for the work of art to have some kind of meaning and intention. Yet, the difference lies in that guerrilla art, as the name implies, is seeking to present uncompliant act so as to challenge the audience. In any case, street art includes forms as spray paint graffiti, stencil graffiti, wheatpasted poster art, sticker art, street installations and some other visual arts, such as sculpture.

### **3. Visual communication**

In its traditional meaning, the term visual communication includes painting, sculpting, design and architecture. Yet, over the years, visual communication extended throughout other forms of expression. Those forms are illustrations, graphic design, posters, web design, typography, as well as street art and all the other forms that have been transmitting visual message to the recipient as their main purpose.

Over the centuries, even before the emergence of literacy, graphical symbols were used to express one's emotions. Today, individuals are doing the same thing - they are expressing their emotions by sending the message. Street artists use public space so as to reach the public observers. They are using visuals to speak up or even to provoke some kind of a reaction. In other words, visual communication is an integral part of the human existence from the very start.

As I already mentioned, eyesight is the most powerful tool for receiving a message. The acts of visibility, for a street artist, became part of the social symbolic world. According to that, Martin Irvine, professor at Georgetown University, explained that urban public space is always a competition for power by managing the power of visibility and concluded that "to be visible is to be known, to be recognized, to exist" (2012: 255). Another author who states the importance of visual communication in the media world we know today is Michel de Certeau. This is how he describes behavior of the society we live in:

"From TV to newspapers, from advertising to all sorts of mercantile epiphanies, our society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey." (1984: 21)

That explains the fact that we daily consume more visual messages than products. Messages that do not require devotion, time and focus are the ones our consumer society is seeking for. Hence, street art is the ideal medium for spreading messages of a common man.

Street artists put their ideas, arguments, interventions and performances in the open space aiming at a dialogue. They take the street as a medium and each new work of art on the street is an information. That information can be transformed into something else by someone else apart from its author. Piece of art placed in public space anticipates a reply and finally an



ongoing debate. What is more important, street art is all about showing signs of life, that people are alive and that someone was there at that time (McGee, 1995: 69).

#### **4. Art and the city**

Each existing medium is using some kind of a channel to communicate with the audience. Communicator sends an information throughout a particular channel which enables a receiver to successfully get that message. In the case of street art that channel is the city. Street artists are directly engaged with the city, using their environment for mastering semiotics of everyday life. They are adapting their work according to the surrounding and use it as an inspiration. As Irvine noted:

“Most street artists seriously working in the genre begin with a deep identification and empathy with the city: they are compelled to state something in and with the city, whether as forms of protest, critique, irony, humor, beauty, subversion, clever prank or all of the above.” (2012: 237)

This connection between the communicator and the channel is highly expressed in street art. According to that correlation, street art indicates important media characteristics. Besides, those kinds of art works, located in the street, are desperately calling for a dialogue. They are left to the citizens to comment, react, change the message or respond to it. The main goal is to make an effect and provoke feedback. Moreover, works of art positioned in open space have no expiration date – not only that art work can appear overnight, but it can also disappear in the same amount of time, as well as become something totally different. That is exactly what makes street art different from other mediums – its charming sense of boundlessness. Thanks to that channel, street art is accessible for everyone anytime and anywhere. It stands as a blank space for the ones who feel like sharing their thoughts with the public by creating a visual work of art. A street work can be commentary critique, desire for a democratic expression, individual or collective call for a social rebellion, simple manifestation of one’s worldview or humorous statement – in short, city streets provide limitless space platform that is free of charge and is accessible to all.

Collaboration of street art and the city is often referred to as urban art. More precisely, urban art relies on the special connection between visual art works and urban areas because those kind of works arise as a result of inspiration tempted by urban architecture and lifestyle:

“Looking at graffiti, we gain a reality insight into the life of the city and into the lives of its citizens, because this medium is not moderated by any esthetic or cultural norms at all. In this sense, it is an unmediated representative of social reality and it touches everything: banality of everyday life, political protest, individual and collective identities... It is probably true that graffiti mostly reflect the aspirations of social groups that are not able or have no interest for more conventional aspects of expression, because they are drawn to protest, excitement and adventurism.” (Mrduljaš, 2004: 66)

Quotation of architectural critic Fedor Kritovac points out an important component of urban art – it has no esthetic or cultural norms. It is a medium that can not be controlled nor can art works displayed on the street be directly censored.

Nevertheless, that very same form of expression can be misunderstood and proclaimed to be vandalism and as such, it can be covered or destroyed. The reason why some works of art are exposed to destruction is because the authorities find them inappropriate to be dispatched among the society, namely because many street art works symbolically and subliminally implicate dissatisfaction with the current system or governmental regime. On the one hand, among street art prevails lawlessness because it is not a formally organized medium controlled by some kind of an owner, but on the other hand, if an unsuitable piece of work appears in public space, it will be declared as vandalism. That explains the fact that throughout the history, street art was a controversial subject of many social, political and legal conflicts:

“In the past fifteen years, many street artists have gone from underground, usually anonymous, hit and run, provocateurs pushing the boundaries of vandalism and toleration of private property trespass to highly recognized art stars invited to create legal, commissioned wall murals and museum installations.” (Irvine, 2012: 241)

Serving as a voice of city’s subculture scene, urban art was criticized and the individuals who were involved in creating noncommercial content on the streets of their city suffered constant disapproval of the authorities. As postmodernism appeared, it has loosen up approaches to art and usage of space. While critical thinking became more valuable, open-mindedness encouraged individuals to use public space which resulted in forming postmodern cities. As a result, city streets became a channel for spreading messages in a form of art works. Instead of being covered or removed, art work and the street found a way to successfully work together due to social changes. Finally, they created a synergy which became a trademark of a particular city and represents a society of a particular area.

## 5. Notable artists

Different artists use different styles and techniques to express their ideas. As street art came out of underground and firmly occupied visible places of the city, its creativity increased. Each new artist on the street art scene brings something new to this branch and expands its innovative diversity. Additionally, in only a decade, street art had spread across the globe. Messages and visuals can be found in every inhabited place on the Earth, from multicultural postmodern cities where modern street art originates, to the rural areas and even occupied war areas. It appeared as an intervention for social, political or individual issues. Among many individuals who are battling for media space on the street, I have chosen some of them who, in my opinion, spread important visual messages of tolerance, liberty and are fighting for better society.

One of the first graffiti artists in Paris, also known as “the father of stencil graffiti” is Blek le Rat. His style includes using stencil made out of paper or cardboard on which he applies spray paint or roll-on paint. His art is often referred to as guerilla art because of the strong political and social messages. For instance, le Rat devoted many of his works to homeless people in order to raise awareness of this global problem. However, he came to the conclusion that people will walk directly over actual homeless people, but will stop to discuss a painting of a homeless person on a wall (Neu, 2017.).



*Figure 1.* A photo of Blek le Rat’s graffiti project on homelessness. Taken from: [Google](#) (2018).



Figure 2. A photo of Blek le Rat's stencil work Computerhead in London. Taken from: [Flickr](#) (2018).

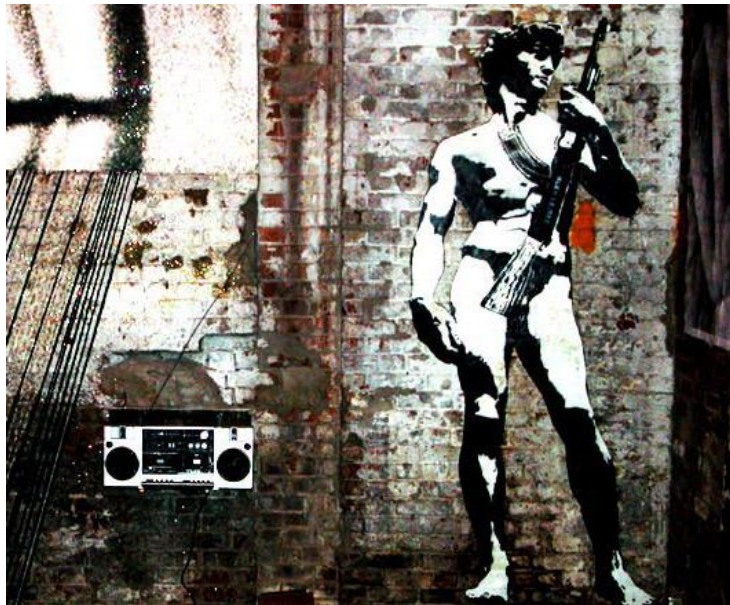


Figure 3. A photo of Blek le Rat's stencil work. Taken from: [Fecal Face](#) (2011).

Another individual who made a significant impact according to his unique style is José Parlá. His work is described as a mix of abstraction and calligraphy and is known for inserting

large images in public places. Parlá's most notable work "Wrinkles of the city: Havana" was made in collaboration with the French artist JR.



*Figure 4.* A photo of Parlá's project with JR "Wrinkles of the city". Taken from: [Bryce Wolkowitz](#) (2013).



*Figure 5.* "Wrinkles of the city". Taken from: [Jose Parlá](#) (2012).



Figure 6. "Wrinkles of the city". Taken from: [Brooklyn Street Art](#) (2013).

Variety of styles can be recognized in works of street artist Blu who started doing his art works with spray paint but ended up using house paint. In street art scene his works are known as "epic scale murals" due to their size and are mostly themed with sarcastic huge human figures (*Blu Biography*, 2018).



Figure 7. A photo of Blu's street art in Vienna. Taken from: [Unurth street art](#) (2010).



Figure 8. A photo of Blu's street art in Berlin. Taken from: [Pinterest](#) (2018).



Figure 9. A photo of Blu's work showing brainless soldiers. Taken from: [Google](#) (2018).

Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra stands out the most owing to his distinctive usage of colors and patterns. The subject of his work are mostly notable people from history, painted as large murals in multiple colors. Kobra's significant technique is repeating squares and triangles throughout the whole surface of his murals and filling it with differently shaded lines. Thus, his work is widely appreciated and often awakes nostalgic feelings due to its subject (Figuerola, 2018).



Figure 10. A photo of Kobra's David Bowie mural in New Jersey. Taken from: [Flickr](#) (2018).



Figure 11. A photo of Kobra's Anne Frank mural in Amsterdam. Taken from: [Pinterest](#) (2018).





Figure 12. A photo of Kobra's work on the facade of MAAM Museum in Rome. Taken from: [Wanted in Rome](#) (2014).

The artist who covered streets of Valencia in a very significant way is Escif. He conveys a message that makes people stop and think about it, makes them focus on his work instead of just concentrating on pure aesthetic. His work is not only beautiful and elegant but also has an important point to make (Ficpatrik, 2014).



Figure 13. A photo of Escif's work in Valencia. Taken from: [Street Against](#) (2018).



*Figure 14.* A photo of Escif's work "Nun's metamorphosis on illegal immigrant". Taken from: [Pinterest](#) (2018).

The last street artist I will mention is the most controversial and the most popular one. His identity is still unknown but he is widely known under the name Banksy. Due to his unpredictability, he is a very interesting individual for the media. His works have been appearing on different continents depending on the intervention he wants to make according to happenings in the particular area. Therefore, speculations about his identity are unstoppable. Banksy became appreciated the most owing to the ironic messages he sends through his works. Except for his originality and supreme technique, he knows how to impress the audience. The reason Banksy achieved such fame is because the characteristics of medium are the most expressed in his works. Each of his works provoked a strong reaction and encouraged dialogue. The fact that the Time magazine selected Banksy for the world's 100 most influential people in 2010 alongside Barack Obama and Steve Jobs demonstrates his popularity and achievements (Ellsworth-Jones, 2013).



Figure 15. A photo of Banksy’s controversial work “Kissing Coppers”. Taken from: [The Art Story](#) (2004).



Figure 16. A photo of Banksy’s work criticizing social networks. Taken from: [Strategy Lab](#) (2018).



*Figure 17.* A photo of Banksy’s protester whose Molotov cocktail morphs into a bouquet. Taken from: [Smithsonian Magazine](#) (2013).

Street art serves as a voice of a common man. Aside from notable artists, street art took part in many important events in history. Street works that appeared during a two-week strike in Paris became valuable works of political design. For example, “It’s forbidden to forbid”, “Elections, a trap for idiots”, “Be realistic, ask the impossible” or “Read less, live more” are just some of the writings that marked that period. Another example is Berlin wall which is, after being painted for 30 years by artists from all over the world, one of the greatest monuments of visual art in history.

In addition, street art was used to highlight cultural events, mostly connected to music. Massive popularity in New York had had a graffiti which said “Bird Lives”. That writing referred to “Yardbird” which was a nickname for an American jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker who tragically died at the age of 34 in 1955 (Ouellette, 2016.). Moreover, during the 70s, in London started to appear graffiti which said “Clapton is God” referring to the English rock and blues guitarist and singer Eric Clapton.

Finally, known or unknown, artist is a communicator and his work is an information. With its media characteristics, location specific positioning and creative symbolism, street art competes for a media space to reach individuals and improve communication among unheard voices.

## 6. Street art advertising

The advertising industry functions by understanding the trends of social and cultural discourses (Maric, 2014). The main goal is to catch attention and reach consumers. In order to keep up with innovations and originality, advertisers use different methods and channels to do so. Usually those methods include visual arts of different kind.

In a consumer society we live today, advertising space reached high price. Thus, advertisers are looking for alternative ways of distributing their content for wide audience. Lately, instead of paying huge amounts of money for space on billboards and other advertising structures, advertising industry started to use empty walls on the city streets. Hence, advertisers had gotten into the area of street artists, using their channel for transmitting information. Even though street art was often used as a reaction to the domination of urban visual space by advertising in a closed property regime, nowadays they are sharing city walls.

Luckily for both, collaboration among advertising industry and street art worked out pretty well. While advertisers are saving money and reaching diverse individuals, street artists are included in making money out of their, usually unknown and unpaid works of art. What is more, not only that street artists are paid for their art works, but their name also gets recognized and acknowledged. Putting their hands on advertising material, street artists brought up valuable changes into the industry – creativity of advertisements and a variety of visual techniques attract audience and show originality. Using walls as the background has not only financial advantage, but it brings advertisements closer to the consumer and stands out among other identical advertising structures.

In the interview *Graffiti - a precious urban phenomenon* for magazine Life of Art, Croatian architect and critic Fedor Kritovac stated:

“In contrast to technically and formally sophisticated advertising material that devours the visual surroundings, graffiti relate more organically, more directly to the background on which they are painted. While advertising is distinctly autonomous and works in a space matrix that is programmed and implanted into the urban structure, following a deliberate plan and using a complex infrastructure (billboards, city lights...), graffiti are spontaneous and work within a more traditional harmony with the material quality of the urban.” (Mrduljaš, 2004: 64)

Finally, customers are the ones who are setting up the requirements and consequently impose on sellers in which direction their marketing campaign should go. Using city streets in a creative and artistic way to promote products has been widely accepted among the audience owing to its different approach, visual originality and easily accessible content. That's why this interaction between advertising industry and street art is profitable and beneficial for both.

## 7. From streets to web

Inclusion of street art in society, intervention into politics and strong messages can be seen not only on the streets, but on the internet as well. Since the technology has the widest reach, the easiest access to the content and the information is spread in a very short amount of time, street artists have recognized the advantage of sharing their work online. As visual communication professor Žarko Paić noted “ all modern artists are inherently media artists” (2008: 24).

On the one hand, art works from all over the world can be “googled” and found no matter how distant their location is and if a larger number of people will see that work, comment, analyze and share it. Aside from the work itself, the internet provides more information about the author and makes it easier to access his other works which may not be easy accessible in the real world. Thus, the author can be recognized and can get more credit for his work. Also, street art work, after some time, can be removed, covered or changed in the real world, while on the internet that work stays documented. As the psychologist Susan Hansen in the article *Longitudinal photo-documentation: recording living walls* explained:

“Without photographic records, graffiti and street art are unlikely to have achieved such an international scale and influence. Graffiti writers, street artists, and the many followers and fans of independent public art also engage in prolific online photo-documentation, sharing and cataloguing images through Instagram, Twitter and other forms of social media. Indeed, many works of street art may now only be viewed as photographs uploaded to social media and online forums, as they are commonly subject to removal by authorities or being written over by others and thus may have only a very brief tangible existence in the material world.” (2015: 26)

On the other hand, street art uploaded on the internet loses its sufficiency. Art work put on the street is closely connected to its surrounding and its location is precisely chosen with a particular reason. The surrounding is a part of the art work and it brings message as

well. Another downside of online street art is that technical quality of art work can not be appreciated, nor recognized when the individual sees it on the computer monitor. In addition, street art seen on the street has stronger effect on the audience then when the same work is seen online.

To sum up, street art on the internet may not have the best quality and the greatest impact, but the biggest advantage of online street art is undoubtedly its reach. The possibility to share art works from the street has brought the whole street art culture closer to the audience and has made anonymous voices to be heard. One of the examples is the mural believed to be made by the Australian graffiti artist Lushsux which was painted on Israel's West Bank wall. The mural was made after the president of the USA, Donald Trump, has made a visit to Jerusalem (The New Daily).



*Figure 18.* A photo of mural on Israel's West Bank. Taken from: [The New Daily](#) (Nasser Nasser, 2017).

Because of the strong message this mural sends, it has been shared among many news portals. This was just one out of many examples where visual art from the city streets became media topic on the internet and was widely spread. That is why street artists who are doing their work in multiple cities started to document their work in real time on the web. Street art is not

stuffed to a particular location anymore, but it became global informative platform. Martin Irvine noted that “nomadic street artists are now imagining the global city as a distributed surface on which to mark and inscribe visual interventions that function both locally and globally”. In the digital age with popular media coverage, street artists actively contribute to the “global Web museum without walls” having distribution as a main goal.

## **8. Conclusion**

As one of the oldest forms of human expression, street art has gone throughout many phases since its first usage began. From different locations to different techniques, styles and content. Still, the purpose stayed the same. From the ancient drawings to this very day, street art has been used as an independent and autonomous medium for spreading one’s opinion and commenting on one’s surrounding.

Even though street art does not fit in today’s media world in the context of typical news gathering and fast information sharing, it is widely appreciated for documenting life in a particular space and time and for providing critical statements about the society of that space and time. Aside from that, the most untypical characteristics are that street art is not oriented towards financial profit as other mediums are and it does not have an owner who dictates what kind of messages can or can not be spread. Above all, each information dispatched among city streets does not only bring a statement, but it also creates a unique piece of art and visually shapes a specific area.

Thus, not following the standards or laws of today’s media system, has shown to be a successful tool for reaching the audience and encourage a social dialogue. But the question is how long can a non-profitable medium without formal organization in this online consumerist era last? While modern technologies have reached the highest point and the financial profit is the most important component, is there any chance for street art to keep documenting reality, ironically analyze everyday politics and spread critical thinking or will street art lose its power to present the voice of a common man and simply conform with the system by promoting commercial products? It depends on the society.



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