A Territoriology of Graffiti Writing

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In the 1970s, signature graffiti were mainly interpreted by scholars as 'territorial markers' (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974). Suggestive as the phrase sounds, it in fact gives, at best, a very partial understanding of such practices while, at worse, it may lead to some grave misunderstandings. Generally speaking, most scholars assumed that graffiti provided a venue of expression for inner city youth, often from ethnic minority background, which had little other chances for self-affirmation. In other words, graffiti provided those youth with a way of 'claiming space' by making a space for themselves. Space claiming was then easily associated with territorial phenomena, especially as they had been described in the 1950s and 1960s by classic ethology studies.

In my view, the problem with these arguments lies in a simplistic conception of territory drawn from ethology. Put it simply, what is unconvincing and misleading is placing 'appropriation' (and, inherently, a defense-aggression dynamic), instead of 'relationship', at the core of the territorial process (Brighenti 2007). True, Ley and Cybriwsky already made an important distinction between, on the one hand, teenage street gangs graffiti – where territorial marking was strictly functional and turf-oriented – and, on the other, graffiti loners, 'kings of the walls' or all-city writers. Rather than with appropriation, the latter were engaged in urban visibility games and they were doing it for 'fame and respect' – even though, paradoxically, such a fame could only be bestowed via the construction of a fictive persona or alter ego (Campos 2013).

But, after all, isn't a large number of human activities – such as for instance academic activities – motivated by the search for peer recognition, respect, and fame? In a sense, this is precisely the mark of all professional activities, which can only come to exist thanks to a community of peers who position themselves and their work in relation to people whom they regard as significant others. Not by chance, the notion of career makes perfect sense in cases as diverse as those of graffiti writers, fiction writers, as well as essay writers. It has been remarked early on that careers in graffiti entail a long-term perspective and the determination to bring one's name 'up' (Lachmann 1988). What most commentators have failed to recognize, though, is that the outer territoriality of graffiti – graffiti as marking scattered in the city for this or that purpose – is matched and doubled by its *inner territoriality*. From the internal point of view, graffiti contain a rich territorialization that unfolds between the graffer, his/her tools, his/her skills, his/her shaped pieces, tags or wall, and others' tools, pieces, tags and walls. Technologies, techniques and styles do act as territorializing and

territory-making devices. Graffiti are not simply *in* the territory, they *are* territories on their own account. For territories are not simply spatial extensions, rather, they entail an intensive dimension which joins elements material and affective into a single focal point.

Advancing and articulating such multiple forms of territorialization, graffers develop an intimate knowledge of the city through its visible and haptic affordances – its 'spots' (Ferrell and Weide 2010). By physically embracing, walking and climbing the city, these producers constantly create and multiply urban territories rather than merely occupying them. Therefore, rather than with territorialism as a primordial exclusive appropriation of a place, here we are dealing with interventions that take place in public space – and interventions in public space can only be intervention *on* public space. The public experience is, in fact, characterized by the creation of venues for 'public address' (Iveson 2007). There is no blank public space to which words and tags are then added, but it is precisely those words and tags as addresses that make space public. So, far from being a way in which city space is hijacked by writers, graffiti is in fact the way in which writers constantly give something to the city: it is a matter of an urban visual ecology which is simultaneously competitive and collaborative. There is no other way to make an ecology but through coexistence of diverse, heterogeneous parts. An ecology is fundamentally different from a monologue. So, the first meaning of 'aesthetics' is neither judgment nor morality, but *perception* – and perception unmistakably occurs through discontinuity and diversity.

Despite their differences, signature graffiti, graffiti art, and street art all relate to territories and produce territories. However, in the short or long run, diversities come to be arranged, ranked, hierarchized. Circuits of value creation are set up that are differential, in the double sense of differentiated and differentiating. Territories are imbricated with value production, and attempts at territorial stabilization breed new scenes and their values. So, how do a series of human practices – even a set of underground or straightforwardly illegal practices – can contribute to the value to certain places? According to which criteria and parameters? We know that both graffiti and street art share humble origins. While the first emerged as an essential expressive form of disadvantaged inner city youth in the late 1960s, the second originated from a heterogeneous cohort of underground artists who, however, for quite a lapse since the 1970s through the 1990s, remained marginalized in the official art system. Such humble origins were clearly mirrored in the fact that, seen from the outside, early street art entertained only a parasitic relationship to the official cityscape, while graffiti was mostly stigmatized as seen as negatively affecting places (a sign of 'urban decay').

Over the last decade or so, a major counter-trend has made its appearance. Street art has moved much closer to the core of the contemporary art system,

whereas graffiti has received unprecedented attention from mainstream cultural institutions. Albeit to different extents and not without contradictory or even paradoxical outcomes (with sometimes the same person being criminally prosecuted as vandal and simultaneously celebrated as a critically acclaimed and economically successful artist), both graffiti and street art have been increasingly associated with thrilling lifestyles, urban creativity, fashionable outfits, and hip neighborhoods. Here is where the notion of *milieu* becomes essential: value can never be created by a single act or person, rather, it emerges when a series of independent, free acts by independent and free persons converge towards a focal zone, a milieu, making reference to each other, eliciting, fostering and challenging each other's response. This is how *scenes* as new social territories are born.

The impact graffiti and street art have on the value that is attributed to certain places, districts and zones in the city has consequently changed dramatically: rather than value-neutral (invisible) or value-detracting (supravisible) as they were before, now graffiti, and even more pronouncedly so street art, seem to have become value-bestowing (just visible, as even a cursory look at the mainstream media attests). Visibility means that these items have turned into recognizable and much sought-for landmarks in the urban landscape. While signature graffiti has remained the most controversial and least accepted practice, and still a largely criminalized in many cities around the world, graffiti art and street art appear to have been very much recuperated and incorporated within the official value-creation circuit – not dissimilarly from what has happened with the commodification of hip hop and gang styles in the fashion and music industry.

From Istanbul to London, from Rome to Philadelphia, from Barcelona to Jakarta, fewer and fewer are the cities that do not yet have a major street art festival, a retrospective exhibition or yearly event. This fact, which has created no small identity crisis to a significant part of early practitioners, has transformed not only the social and cultural significance of graffiti and street art, but also the economic process of valorization of places at the urban scale. Street art can certainly be used to produce ironic or even sarcastic statements about the effect of neoliberalism on urban space, but it may as well be easily turned into an accomplice of that same late neoliberal circuit of capital valorization and accumulation, providing mere urban decoration, and a further funny tradable commodity.

Clearly, anything that creates new value has economic impact. But, is value only economic? Ultimately, *the political* is the dimension of human existence in which we ask: what makes value? What does it mean to make new values? Signature graffiti, graffiti art and street art nowadays play a significant yet varied role in urban governance. By exposing the complexities and tensions between the spheres of the public, the private and the common, these practices still retain an important potential for new territorial productions to come, which, however, will probably be known under other names.

References

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