Aesthetic Experience in the Public Space:  
THE CASE OF MEXICO CITY  
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The Aesthetic Experience

Although Mexico’s associations to the mural form are undeniable, in this case, we are not so much interested in who did the painting, but rather how they were painting. Not about how or why it is made, but how it changes one’s experience and interface of the city and the structures in which we move around.

“Octavio Paz’s observation about the oxymoronic status of Mexican mural painting presents the central paradox of the book: how a revolutionary art—at least one that intended to be revolutionary—became an official art that helped to legitimize an authoritarian state” (Goffman 1).

Street Art: Graffiti vs. Murals

The two terms can be encompassed under the umbrella term of “street art”, however, as much as they may be of a similar medium, they have inherent and important differences, stemming from their conception, creation, and location. The spaces that they occupy are also often times very different, usually stemming from their primary definitions between legality and illegality. Graffiti, which is defined as “writing or drawings scribbled, scrawled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in public place” (GOV), bears the connotations of not only illegality, but also is defined in terms announcing its artistic value. Murals, on the other hand, are defined as “A painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall (OLD), and are clearly thought to represent a more traditional art form. However, in a contemporary context, graffiti has become a largely respected art form, and although it is still in many circumstances considered to be an act of vandalism, in other circles, it has joined the likes of the commercial art market.

The Case of Mexico City

“This strong association between the mural form and ‘mexicanness’ is itself a cultural artifact, sedimented through a complicated, and politically charged history of public art and public institutions” (Campbell 1). In this case, graffiti is not being added to a blank space, but rather a city that has an undeniable association with murals. Therefore, does this provide a cultural precedent for revolutions and social commentary via streets? Or does graffiti function in a cultural tradition? A mural is made to be seen in a more traditional and analytical scene—where one steps and steps at the art working attempting to interpret its meaning. Graffiti, on the other hand, is made to be seen and understood in a split second, when driving or walking past.

Temporality—Are they permanent? Are they temporary? Graffiti is a medium that can continue to change and evolve within the societal and temporal walls of a city—shaping one’s constantly changing aesthetic experience.

The Aesthetic Experience

This particular aesthetic experience could be considered an act of vandalism, however, this use of graffiti makes a social commentary that the sculptures themselves do not make. These blue sculptures are located outside of the new national library, and although a sculpture certainly plays a role in shaping our experience of a city—seeing it, walking around it, attempting to understand its purpose and meaning and propagating the graffiti aspect public and social commentary. In this instance, people have grappled the sculpture as public art that forms a bridge with their government and media outlets, for not properly investigating the disappearance of 43 students in Mexico (Godin, “Still No Justice”)

Redefining Public Space and the Aesthetic Experience

Mexico’s Missing Students

Under the mural movement, the street art is not a product of the government, however, it continues to shape the public perception of the space to which it belongs. In Mexico City in particular, the writing on the walls tells a story and helps to define its own culture. From the Muralists who looked back in order to shape and redefine how people view the country’s cultural legacy and Revolution to today’s artists, decorating the city, recalling Mexico’s more traditional art forms, or making social commentary,

Conclusion

The Aesthetic Experience of Mexico City can be found anywhere within its walls. From buildings, to bike racks, to advertisements, or big blue sculptures—all of these reflect the way we interact with or view the city. However, in this instance, it is the art work on the walls that work to shape the city’s cultural identity. In Mexico City, there is a clear and well known connection to the mural form, which for many, has shaped their understanding of the country’s history. Street art continues to send a message, to carry out traditions, or simply to decorate the city— all of which shape our aesthetic experience.

Aside from their medium, the distinction for both graffiti and muralism as art forms is in their accessibility. There may be certain cities that are more centered around art, both commercially and institutionally, but graffiti and mural play a vital role in making art accessible, and making a city into a gallery in-aid of public. Murals have been a popular culture art form that become a part of the system, but graffiti remains a form of cultural energy, still very much alive today.

References


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