

Aesthetic Experience in the Public Space:

THE CASE OF MEXICO CITY

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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, spanning from their conception, creation, and location. The spaces that they occupy are also oftentimes very different, usually stemming from their primary distinctions between legality and illegality. Graffiti, which is defined as “Writing or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place” (OED), bears the connotations of not only illegality, but also is defined in terms denouncing its artistic value. Murals, on the other hand, are defined as “A painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall (OED), 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.

Although an “aesthetic experience” of a city can be found within the walls of a city—painted or unpainted—we see street art as a way for a city to define its own experience, one that might not be represented in its sanctioned historical and artistic institutions. In a sense, cities are not just “the hard structure through which human beings flow. People’s use of these structures and systems defines cities more than objects themselves” (Biron 15). Therefore, this investigation will examine the “aesthetic experience” of Mexico City, and how its street art, both murals and graffiti, work to tell its own story.

The Case of Mexico City

“This strong association between the mural form and ‘mexicaness’ is itself a cultural artifact, sedimented through a complicated, and politically charged, history of public art and public institutions” (Campbell 11).

In this case, graffiti is not being added to a blank space, but rather a city that has an undeniable association with muralism. Therefore, does this provide a cultural precedent for revolutions and social commentary via street art? Or does graffiti tarnish a cultural tradition? A mural is made to be seen in a more traditional and analytical sense—where one stops and stares at the art work 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.



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

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 what they were painting. Not about how or why it is made, but how it changes one’s experience and interface of a city and the structures in which one moves around.

“García Canclini struggles to account for the dialectic between, on the one hand, the metaphor of the urban leviathan as an insatiable monster that devours individuals and cultural distinctions, and, on the other hand, popular cultural practices that carve out paths along which individuals and small groups can navigate the immense urban landscape in order to create a sense of belonging and enjoyment” (Biron 21).

I would argue that a city is constructed in a way that forces its inhabitants or “users” to interact with it in the way it was designed. People are sequestered into the areas that are meant for them, or that reflect their social or economic standing. Therefore, even when people revolt, they are occupying a space filled with the ads, art, and culture of the thing or people that they are protesting. Therefore, does muralism address a historical past while graffiti depicts a cultural present?



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



Redefining Public Space and the Aesthetic Experience

Mexico’s Missing Students

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 message and purpose—the graffiti depicts public and social commentary. In this instance, people have graffitied the sculpture to publicly convey their dismay with their government and media outlets, for not properly investigating the disappearance of 43 students in Ayotzinapa (Goldman, “Still No Justice”).



Unlike the mural movement, this 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 have viewed the country’s colonial history 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 affect the way in which we interact with or view the city. However, in this instance, it is the art work on the walls that works 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 to simply 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 murals play a vital role in making art accessible, and making a city into a gallery in and of itself. Murals may have been a subversive art form that became a part of the system, but graffiti remains a form of cultural energy, still very much alive today.



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