



Eduardo Kobra, Rio Brazil  
*Etnias*

## Urban Art: Your Voice

Imagine your life this way:

You are an artist. You wake up in the morning. Read the news. You notice more and more real-life encounters of social injustice and apparent regression in the model that the US claims to uphold. There's another act of violence by a white police officer against an African American, for no reason other than the color of their skin. Another United States official is sworn into office with opinions that counter the 'land of the free' ideology that defines your country. Another racist and misogynistic act by the leader of the country somehow becomes the new normal followed by another failure to denounce the acts of white supremacist groups in the media. Another instance of the leaders of the country and the media unreasonably connecting a worldwide pandemic to politics. What will you do about it? You grab your sketchbook. You express your thoughts with the tip of a pencil. You evolve your thoughts with a paintbrush. Then show them to the world with spray paint. Herein lies your voice. Herein lies the voice of your community. Herein lies the voice of the people.

A person becomes a product of the society they live in. Family, friends, schools, and churches infinitely shape a person through the morals these communities teach them. What a person sees every day when they walk out their door or on their way to work has the potential to influence them. Herein lies the power of street art: an image or phrase fixated into a given

community through colors. Despite the static nature of urban art, it nevertheless has the power to influence people locally and focally due to its tangible connection to the community and the visuality the painting takes on concerning social justice.

Public art has the potential to significantly impact people because it becomes a byproduct of a given local community. As an accomplished street artist, David Flores looks for inspiration all around him. Flores states “everything” has the power to inspire street artists, whether it is “everyday life, global events, or local events” (Flores). Not only does the art literally and physically become a part of a community, but it does metaphorically too. When artists look to “everything” for inspiration, especially “global” and “local events,” the idea a piece takes on represents specific circumstances and qualities of a particular group of people locally or focally. Street artists share this value throughout their discourse community. McCormick’s, a pop culture critic, piece on street art tells how public art often evolves amid chaotic events to express thoughts that can not take shape in any other form than art. McCormick describes it this way:

Public art is pulled along by the insecurities of society while it is simultaneously propelled by the aspirations of its culture...It’s the kind of crazy shit you get when a great storyteller gives up on being literal and jumps into the puddles of abstract thinking with an armful of loaded iconographies. A deconstruction we can only measure in its composite, everything fits together because it must, because these are the dangerous questions of a pathological problem solver answering to their own existential doubts. (McCormick)

As “storytellers,” street artists find inspiration through the “insecurities of society,” paralleled by the “aspirations of its culture.” These “insecurities” and “aspirations” drive the purpose of street art, allowing it to become an embodiment of “society” and “culture.” Street art

brings together the “literal” thoughts of a community, through “abstract” thoughts and symbols, “iconographies.” Street art manifests as a mandatory “composite” of a street artist’s “own existential doubts.” This pathway of creation by the individual artist aligns with the thoughts and concerns of a specific community. Here, the two discourse communities intersect, street artists and local or focal communities. Because public art personifies a local community, it has the power to communicate a meaningful message specific to that niche.

To have success in communicating with a target audience through street art, the location must embody the personality and voice the artist strives to communicate for the given community. The artist's interconnection and communication with the community they participate in embodies a significant component of urban art. Urban art directly correlates with situational literacy: the artist reaches and represents a specific audience, hence embodying a specific situation and location (Mirabelli 159). The location of a piece in urban art is crucial; everything surrounding urban art depends on context, perspective, and knowledge of a particular subject or situation. When asked “what goal/purpose do you strive to achieve through your work?” Flores responds with: “to compliment the landscape, any landscape it might find itself, a wall, a gallery...anywhere has to be complimentary” (Flores). As a street artist, Flores understands the significance of the interconnectedness and necessary mutual flattery of a piece and a specific landscape. The urban art must ‘compliment’ the landscape it takes shape in because it becomes physically and metaphorically attached to the community.

The way street artists communicate through their art enhances group goals through impacting local and focal communities. The audience understands “that literate acts are embedded in specific situations and that they also extend beyond the printed text involving other modes of communication including both nonverbal and verbal” (Mirabelli 146). The literacy of

the art visually represents specific situations, a given time or place. This literacy evolves “beyond the printed text” both nonverbally, colors, shape and symbols, and verbally, words and communication (Mirabelli 151). Flores states that he uses his voice through shapes and colors: “Lines and heavy black!” (Flores). The intensity and choice of color play a significant role in conveying a message to the artist’s audience. This coincides with the socio-rhetorical interpretation of discourse communities. When graffiti operates as a text, it opens the door to verbal communication; an artist can use lexis, or slang specific to the community the art takes place in. When graffiti operates more abstractly, it opens the door to nonverbal communication; an artist can use color contrast and other visual triggers to communicate to a given community. The choices street artists make surrounding the visual specifics facilitate the collective goal to impact local and focal communities.

Every choice street artists make regarding rhetoric transpires through careful calculation. Street artists recognize that to accomplish the goal of their piece they need to ensure it receives positive attention from the community. Grams, a scholar of cultural communities, brings to light the reality of the thought process behind any given mural or street art. He states, “networks of local art producers have been shown strategically using symbols of their local place, its people, and its history as tools to mobilize resources, including people, votes, money, space, respect, status, and power.” (Grams 221). The “networks of local art producers” gather information through reading “history” and “its people” of the target community to successfully combine multiple literacies and achieve the purpose of the chosen rhetoric. Artists also combine the elements of multiple literacies through “strategically” using “symbols” that represent a specific group of people, or discourse community, in order to gain positive attention surrounding the visual. In order to achieve the goal of the painting, “votes, money...respect, status, [or] power,”

the artist must “support innovation in order to mobilize the political and cultural capital necessary to carry out their projects large and small” (Grams 221). Though a mural technically remains physically stagnant, the power it conveys remains relentlessly stimulating. Street artists understand this concept, and continuously “support” necessary “innovation” within the target community in order to successfully and wisely carry out the desired “political and cultural capital.” The rhetoric the artist chooses must be analyzed throughout every aspect of multiple literacies to achieve the desired goal.

Through giving these silential voices a platform of expression, street art embodies an unparalleled realm of art as activism. As an activist for Black women, Megan Lewis’s piece titled, “Lady Liberty, Please Know Thyself,” empowers the voices and struggles of Black Women in the United States. This mural combines both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication directly to the discourse community of Black women in Baltimore.



Megan Lewis. Baltimore, MD  
*Lady Liberty Please Know Thyself*

Because of the nature of street art, the reach of this painting remains infinite. Whether the audience sees this mural first hand, or through a screen, the message Lewis sends remains intact. She uses intertextuality through universal symbols, such as the Statue of Liberty, the Black power fist, warm colors, and letters in the phrase “Know Thyself” in the statue’s hand. Lewis beautifully organizes the aspects of visual rhetoric and nonverbal communication required to successfully reach the target discourse community. Megan Lewis demands to have a voice and to empower Black women in America (Megan Lewis Illustrator). Lewis, like many other street artists, uses this platform to grab observers' attention through using her art as activism.

The mural painted by the Bushwick collective in the Wynwood district of Miami represents art as activism through showcasing the artists' fears before the 2016 election (Harris).

This text showcases the clear textual, verbal communication of “come on...what the hell do you



Bushwick Collective. Miami, FL  
Anti-Trump Mural

have to lose?” and intertextual,

nonverbal communication of

posing Donald Trump as the

joker from Batman holding a

knife to the Statue of Liberty’s

throat. Through both words,

colors, and symbols the artists showcase their fears of Trump as a threat to the ‘God-given’

liberties Americans possess. The choice of the colors red and black for the letters along with the

background of rioters gives off an intense, raging mood, nonverbally, to the audience. Through

intertextuality, the Bushwick collective successfully demonstrates the potential of color,

symbols, and words to communicate a powerful message. This piece brings to light the endless

possibilities of art as activism.

Urban art takes on a steady and constant nature within the chaos of a specific community.

Similar to most public objects, street art embodies the community it takes shape in. Although

street art remains still, its message does not; it has great power to influence the community on a

small scale but also presents infinite possibilities for spreading a message on a large scale.

Whether art takes shape on the street or in a museum, it embodies the direct thoughts of an

individual in relationship to or reflection of a larger society.

You’ve fulfilled your life in this way.

Mind, body and spirit became one through your art.

You forced the audience to pause and think.

You grabbed the attention of the people.

You used your voice.

You gave the people a voice.

This is how you make a change from the bottom up.

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