

Urban Art and Tactical Aesthetics: Street Art, Policing, and Civic Identity

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ABSTRACT

Urban art, particularly street art, operates as a powerful medium through which civic identity, collective memory, and spatial politics are negotiated in contemporary cities. This study explores the intersection of tactical aesthetics, policing, and civic identity, positioning urban art as both a form of public intervention and a site of contestation within urban governance frameworks. Drawing on a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation, the paper conceptualizes tactical aesthetics as a dynamic, situational practice that engages the temporal, material, and semiotic dimensions of urban space. It examines how policing regimes, surveillance technologies, and regulatory structures shape the production, dissemination, and reception of street art, while also generating adaptive and resistant artistic strategies. Through analysis of murals, tagging practices, and global case studies, the research highlights how urban art contributes to the construction of collective memory, territorial belonging, and public discourse. Methodologically, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating ethnographic observation, spatial mapping, and discourse analysis to capture the complex interplay between artistic practice and civic structures. The findings reveal that urban art simultaneously reinforces and challenges dominant narratives, acting as a conduit for both institutional co-option and grassroots resistance. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for balanced policy frameworks that protect freedom of expression while addressing issues of property rights, public order, and community wellbeing, thereby recognizing urban art as a vital component of democratic urban life.

Keywords: Tactical Aesthetics, Street Art and Graffiti, Policing and Surveillance, Civic Identity and Urban Public Space

INTRODUCTION

Urban art shapes civic experience through tactical aesthetics; spatial practices, policing discourse, and evidence-based arguments warrant study. Urban space encompasses physical, socio-spatial, and semiotic aspects; artworks can be material or ephemeral, sanctioned or unsanctioned, and visible or distributed [1]. Tactical aesthetics foreground temporal and situative qualities of artworks; street art or public interventions engage with urban governance, surveillance, and public policing [2]. The perceived legitimacy of authorities and policing influences urban collective identity and memory. Through scholarship connecting tactical aesthetics, policing, and civic identity, urban art's potential to enhance urban-dweller experience becomes evident [1]. Tactical aesthetics refers to work that approaches public art through urban space, temporal experience, distribution, and audience reception. Urban space encompasses physical, socio-spatial, and semiotic dimensions; art production, dissemination, and reception coalesce temporally into site- and situation-specific public art [2]. Public art enacts politics of space through materials and genres such as murals, sculptures, and installations. Tactical aesthetics, resistant spatial politics, and urban art shape collective memory, identity, and articulation of the commons. Tactical thinking informs exploration of ambiguity and location of meaning, targeting street art [3]. Street art embodies civic identity and collective memory through form, medium, and reception; transmission channels influence public art, collective narrative, and the commons. Artistic distribution intertwines with materiality, visibility, temporality, and audience, impacting collective memory architecture, urbanism, and public space, residence for the commons and inscription of collective memory, shape transmission [3]. The wider availability of documentary registers alters static collective memory and engagement at risk, motivated by spatial politics linked to equipment,

relationship with power, and degree of freedom enjoyed [4]. Order of analysis recommends public opportunities upstream of street-art production; cumulative participatory research informs the importance attributed to street art as public art. Street art generates dialogue on urban interface and everyday experience, with government capital and intervention accompanying coproduction or prevalent alongside restriction and enforcement. Street art and public discourse connect within choreography of civic participation that guides formal street-art situating across different urban governance, leading to actions and practices aligned strategically with route of artistic production [1]. Case studies illustrate how diligence, financing, public guidance, and collective commons nurture civic identity and memory through art embedded in residence and territory. Explore spatial transformation that remains addressable through each genre of urban engagement. Investigate additional notation and diverse channels of dissemination extend the overall exploration beyond a street artistic focus and surface ground for civic engagement and tactics design, addressing policy and practice along axes of language, point of view, and style [2].

Theoretical Framework: Tactical Aesthetics and Urban Space

Tactical aesthetics propose a plastic and reflexive attitude towards the multiple layers of urban space. Urban space is simultaneously the container of life and contestation [1]. The right to the city cannot be restricted to access to amenities and goods; it is a right to the very production and (re)distribution of space. It encompasses the right to the temporary appropriation, metropolitanical subversion, remaking and sharing of space [2]. Civic identity pivots on the construction of collective memory when images encounter, transduce, and intensify memories of experiences affecting the lives of many, speakers and addressees may be linked not only by sharing the same image, but also, and more importantly, by residing in the same image, experiencing the same intensities. The co-habitability of urban images graffiti, as one of its modalities, is uncontainable is crucial in the establishment of urban common-pool resources [3]. Urban art as artistic practice that positions itself on public space as its principal locus of action constitutes an aesthetic strategy meant to provoke, stimulate, and nourish civic identity [2]. Vis-a-vis promotional decoration, informational sign-making and artistic beautification, urban art enunciates ideas about space, the city, citizenship, identity, and suchlike, participating in framing the politics of urban space. Urban art furthers the politicization of space, a highly mediated debate permeated with instrumental notions of political salesmanship where images of chance and attribution might function as counter-historical pursuits within a conceptual regime of hindering processes, far beyond the local expressions and stylistic determinations associated with the rise of the digital city on a planetary scale [1].

Street Art as Public Intervention: Methods, Ethics, and Reception

Urban art shapes civic experience through tactical aesthetics; spatial practices that influence the way urban governance and policing are perceived [1]. Surveillance technologies, policing regimes, and the geographic distribution of artistic communities structure how urban art is produced, disseminated, and received. Yet, they also provoke inventive resistance strategies, adaptations that avoid formal censorship, and co-optation that transforms policing regimes into motivators for public art [2]. City soundscapes, digital technologies, and participatory platforms problematize analysis of spatial, temporal, and non-visual dimensions of urban artistic practices. Historical legacies and territorial stigmas linking certain artistic styles to illegitimacy, vandalism, and deviance influence practice by several actors [2]. Narrative trajectories, collective memory, and spatial appropriation intersect through distinct street-art styles, but city materiality and public discourse also play formative roles. Different spatial regimes, artistic communities, and monitoring technologies contingent upon a broad range of factors shape expression and reception [3]. Media frameworks serve as filters but also as platforms for counter-narratives that contest dominant governance discourses. In the context of pervasive surveillance and police intensification, urban muralism remains a prominent practice, often coupled with other visual or performative methods that facilitate dissemination inside, outside, or beyond gentrified neighborhoods [3]. Art tied to urban governance, surveillance, policing, and space operates across multiple dimensions. The imposition of Order Maintenance Policing (OMP) strategies routinely acts to limit and define the conditions for public artistic expression, transforming the production and dissemination of street-art practices. The spatial implications of OMP entail vital trade-offs corresponding to communities, organisations, artistic networks, and modes of dissemination [4]. Within many urban spaces, artistic production, distribution, and circulation measure social, economic, and symbolic risk against any potential but seldom-received sanction from authorities, shaping a calculus that remains multiply determined. Media representation, augmented by specific institutional arrangements or cultural practices, contributes further to establishing both the positioning of artistic agents and the normative significance of any work [4].

Policing, Surveillance, and Artistic Practice in the City

Influences of policing regimes and surveillance technologies in contemporary cities shape art communities and their spatial practices [3]. Platforms of artistic expression, therefore, become constricted to selected genres or fade altogether, reflecting the visible traces of disciplinary societies. The expectation of permanent visibility erodes the potential for freedom in exchange for 'affordances' limiting desired means [4]. Authorities impose regulation onto terrain, site, and content—regulating practice, risks, and territorial legitimacy. States channel imagination towards

the conventional, the ‘acceptable—establishing dominant erasures or officially sanctioned narratives. Co-option of a source of resistance into deployment for governance becomes commonplace [5]. Institutionalization and curatorial frameworks rigidify pre-condition genres. Yet, ‘creative synapses’ remain open; local active participation continues; wide scatter of ‘post-its’, frescoes, and temporary murals persists. Creative activity still exhibits a ‘caring’ and ‘agapic’ aspiration shaping generous acts towards receptive publics [6]. Active attempts emerge to undercut suppression, avoid risk, and explore adjacent terrains. The emergence of ‘pop-up’, ‘temporary’, ‘one-off’, ‘guerrilla’, ‘soumission’, and ‘semi-public’ reflect strategic adaptation to the restriction; categorical dislocation provides further freedom yet the sentiment opens creative collaboration through local constellations [6]. Local authorities can not only determine practical frames but also ‘play’ within those frames, exploring alternate creative registers where policy still inhibits content. Similar levels of adaptive agency extend through global art-making [7]. Drawing from diverse prior work, Child examines public artistic agency and socio-political atmospherics globally; collective practice, tactical aesthetics, public deliberation on art, and pre-condition works remain constant across varying chronicles [7].

Civic Identity and Collective Memory in Murals and Tags

Murals and tagging occupy distinct but related positions in urban art. Tagging commonly conveys personal and collective identity, yet its status varies by city. In some locations, tags articulate collective identity through choice of name or crew, while in others they merely record the name of the artist [1]. Tagging consists of actions that represent the person, crew, or organization by means of a name, a symbol, or a combination of both. Most tags aim to promote the identity of the artist or group, albeit from a different angle than tagging on canvases often found in private or commercial spaces. Street art’s topics, points-of-view, and modalities of expression governed by joining a gallery, museum, or exhibition differ from those of tagging [2]. Tagging typically asserts a public identity that neither requires a gallery or curator’s sanction nor presumes a preexisting intimacy with the person or group whose identity remains underscored [3]. When tagged names or symbols matter to an audience wider than intimates, the art most likely resounds with recognition reinforced by the artist’s identity at work in other media. Tags become artifacts that extend reception beyond the act, much like gallery or institution work [3]. [4]. Tagging and mural production exert manifold influences on collective identity and communal memories connected to traffic hubs, gathering spots, and neighborhoods. First, these pieces engender a platform to celebrate local figures and events by depicting their likeness and associated text. Second, they either nod to cultural references significant to the communities who acknowledge these creations or highlight lamentable episodes of violence, loss, and grief [5]. Portions of a community constructing or claiming a corresponding signature establish an additional layer that aids others in knowing where tagging occurs and intensifies feelings of belonging [5]. Possible connections between collective memories and territorial claims depend on the typology of mural or tagging. Flagging on an exacerbated, external scale simultaneously conveys agitation with spatial dominance and reminds of a commitment to a shared locale [4].

Case Studies: Global Perspectives on Urban Art and Policing

Urban art encompasses a broad range of forms, often associated with illicit expression and the neglect of public space. Many elaborate forms of so-called “street art”, including paste-ups, stencils, and stickers share this status. These artistic practices have adapted to estimates of the policing risk associated with various neighborhoods, which in turn reflects a political risk assessment [2]. They also remain responsive to the spatial positioning and material interventions of both public authorities and commercial interests. A wide range of governance instruments impinge on urban art. Permissions are typically required to paint on many surfaces, steps must be taken to avoid interventions in zones controlled by urban art, and commercial sponsorship and deployment of official logos frequently attach to works [3]. Each of these elements informs the local scene while remaining subject to geographical variations in policing, governmental engagement, sponsorship, and commercial consideration [2]. The examples surveyed encompass a range of political structures and aesthetics and deploy various artistic materials. Each scenario derives from disparate institutional conditions. These instances illustrate how concepts of governance, policing, and public representation shape the engagement of urban art with practices of dissent, memory-making, and territorial attachment [3]. They also reveal the degree to which a metropolitan infrastructure accommodates this engagement and the intensification of risk associated with its non-acquisition. They propose a matrix of encouragement and obstruction that a given regime may confer upon urban art. In some instances, avoidance of risk is judged more advantageous to artists than outright engagement with public-policing and commercial-commercial representation [4].

Policy and Governance: Regulating Public Art without Stifling Expression

Public art raises the question: should it be promoted, restricted, or tolerated? The case for promoting public art is widely communicated, and this has been adopted as one of the pillars of “urban revitalization” worldwide [3]. Public art has been claimed to have numerous benefits such as stimulating economic performance of the immediate area, triggering higher property values, fighting crime, enabling community cohesion, and it has been even argued

that public art is needed in times of creeping impoverishment and shrinkage [3]. The best-known position that seeks to restrict rather than promote public art is the one of the property owner. When an art work is ostensibly infringing on the property owner's right, it is legitimate to discuss whether to remove the art. More generally, property owners, occupying one's own abode, may have the legitimate right to decide whether or not to allow public art in front of their buildings if they own the property [4]. However, it may not be illegitimate to promote public art on the condition that it does not infringe on legally protected rights of property owners [3]. An intermediate position holds that public art should be publicly tolerated even when it is not sanctioned so long as it meets certain conditions. In the case of New York City, it has been claimed that public art provides a politically safe avenue for the practice of democracy [5]. Apart from the avenue for practicing politically motivated democracy, public art generates collective symbolism that reinforces a person's feeling of belonging and sense of community. The safety-to-say or freedom-to-say constitution that guarantees the liberty of expression has become progressively more unquestioned over the last years, leading some voluntary aspects of urban public art practice to gradually take the form of a de facto freedom. Hence ruling public art as illegal simply becomes an inconsistency that invites discussion on articulating alternatives that are socially well accepted [6].

Industrial and Media Narratives: Power, Resistance, and Representation

The narratives disseminated through industrial and media channels, the terms of representation within the culture and advertising sectors are crucial to understanding urban art as cultural and civic expression [5]. The extent to which the identity and intent of the producer, the art, and its position on public and private space cohere, or are forced into contradiction, provides insight into the dynamics of power and resistance, expression and censorship that characterize city life [2]. Because much of the visibility gained through advertising or corporate sponsorship occurs at the point of commodification, a parallel economy, as well as a critique of that economy, emerges; these aspects of the art interrogate the very means of their own representation [6]. Urban spatiality once shaped and organized the exertion of power, now the semiosphere is saturated with the inscription of power and authority through the articulation of brand identities. The existence of dominant and counter-narratives, of hegemonic positions and grassroots means of dissemination, is a feature of the space of representation and of public life in a city like Toronto [5].

Methodologies for Analyzing Urban Art in Civic Contexts

Urban art shapes civic experience through tactical aesthetics [7]. To elucidate the relationship between urban art and civic identity, a mixed-methods approach combines ethnographic observation, discourse analysis, spatial mapping, and visual methodologies to generate diverse data across four metropolitan contexts. These techniques foster dialogue with affected communities while addressing analytical blind spots [7]. Coding schemes focused on materials, styles, and production methods address street art's shared characteristics with public interventions. Spatial analyses of artistic locations reveal distribution patterns contingent on social, cultural, political, and material factors [5]. Mapping sociopolitical discourses illuminates the interplay between governing and artistic practices. Triangulation of these modes guides empirical iterations, uncovers system interdependencies, and enriches theorization. A reflexive stance remains essential to mitigate researcher bias, recognize situatedness, and articulate the reciprocal influence of individual positioning and systemic formation [6]. Various methodologies can illuminate the role of urban art in shaping civic experience [6]. Three foundational elements guide research: a comprehensive framework of tactical aesthetics, recognition of the profound intersection between policing and artistic practice, and attentiveness to political authority's pervasive entanglement with civic identity. Tactical aesthetics investigates the spatiotemporal character of interventions that target public institutions [2]. Particular attention focuses on their execution within the constraints stipulated by urban governance. Policing broadly encompasses the multiple strategies employed by public agencies to maintain or promote a given social order. The very legitimacy of authority constitutes a core plinth of this order [7]. Civic identity refers to the diverse modes through which individuals and collectives experience, construe, and narrate belonging within a given territory [7].

Implications for Urban Planning and Community Well-being

Urban planning plays a significant role in shaping communities and influencing individual and collective well-being [1]. Distinct from social policies and operations, planning concerns the layout of connections, amenities, and outdoor spaces that determine the quality of social interaction. Safe, pleasant, interconnected, legible, and appealing environments foster engagement with local culture and with each other [2]. Civic identity, collective engagement, self-conceptualization, shared belongings, communal legacy, and societal interactions themes that once comprised urban art and its societal benefits, are crucial to human experience and psychological well-being. A sense of civic belonging promotes positive individual and community outcomes, yet social cohesion has been declining in many regions [7]. In a world where rapid advancement, globalization, and disparity fuel mistaken conceptions of character and belonging, the urgency of nurturing civic knowledge and solidifying a coherent identity has increased. Urban-art research concentrates on local storytelling and belonging, fundamental

constituents of civic identity, providing insights into community-building possibilities that could fortify both civic identity and the broader cultural and economic system [7].

CONCLUSION

Urban art, situated at the intersection of creativity, governance, and public life, plays a pivotal role in shaping civic identity and collective memory. Viewed through the lens of tactical aesthetics, street art emerges as more than a decorative or subversive practice; it is an active and evolving dialogue with urban space, authority, and community. Murals, tags, and other public interventions encode narratives of belonging, resistance, and remembrance, transforming the city into a living archive of shared experiences. The influence of policing and surveillance on artistic practice introduces both constraints and opportunities. While regulatory frameworks and order-maintenance strategies often limit artistic freedom, they also provoke adaptive tactics and innovative forms of expression. This dynamic underscores the resilience of urban art communities and their capacity to navigate, resist, and sometimes appropriate systems of control. At the same time, the increasing institutionalization and commercialization of street art reveal tensions between authenticity, co-option, and the politics of representation. From a policy perspective, the challenge lies in balancing regulation with creative freedom. Overly restrictive approaches risk suppressing valuable forms of civic expression, while unregulated environments may generate conflicts related to property rights and public order. Context-sensitive governance models that incorporate community participation recognize diverse artistic practices, and support inclusive public spaces are therefore essential. Ultimately, urban art contributes significantly to community wellbeing by fostering social cohesion, encouraging dialogue, and strengthening a sense of place. As cities continue to evolve under pressures of globalization, inequality, and technological change, the role of urban art as a mediator of civic identity and democratic engagement will remain increasingly important. Future research and practice should continue to explore interdisciplinary approaches that integrate artistic, social, and policy perspectives, ensuring that urban art remains a vibrant and transformative force within the public realm.

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