

Review of *Urban Art: Creating the Urban with Art*.
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Creating the Urban with Art

Vittorio Parisi
 Panthéon-Sorbonne
 University

From its very title, this book seems to suggest a different, almost counterintuitive understanding of what we commonly call ‘urban art’, among other main designations which Ulrich Blanché, who edited the book together with Ilaria Hoppe, enumerates in his introduction – namely ‘street art’, ‘graffiti’ and ‘public art’. Thus, urban art is not simply about making use of the urban space, be it in a material or conceptual manner, in order to create art. The book – a collection of 16 papers delivered on July 15–16, 2016, during the namesake international conference held at Berlin’s Humboldt University – aims to see things the other way around: art as an active, bottom-up process by which communities shape and reshape the urban environment they inhabit, through a multitude of actions ranging from different domains and standpoints.

The choice of speaking about ‘the urban’ as a concept and in an abstract fashion, and not simply in relation to cities or urban environments, is to be found in the authors’ focus on ‘the urban’ as a process, rather than a physical place. As a matter of fact, any reader will immediately notice that thinking about the urban in terms of one specific physical place would not be an accurate option, and that at least four different kinds of place, linked to the idea of the urban, seem to emerge after a complete reading of the book. We could categorise such places as follows:

1

Of course, the city, understood as the physical place inhabited by individuals and, above all, communities, as stressed by Minna Valjakka (37–47), Johanna Elizabeth Sluiter (129–143), Pamela C. Scorzin (144–154), and Renée Tribble (155–163) in their papers;

2

The urban understood as a place sculpted by political conflict. Meltem Şentürk Asıldeveci, Elisabeth Friedman/Alia Rayyan and Jovanka Popova’s articles offer the reader three crucial case studies: respectively the role of social media during the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul, the participatory urban art interventions in occupied East Jerusalem in 2015–16, and the so-called ‘Colourful Revolution’ in Skopje that was brought about by rebellious movements in 2016;

3

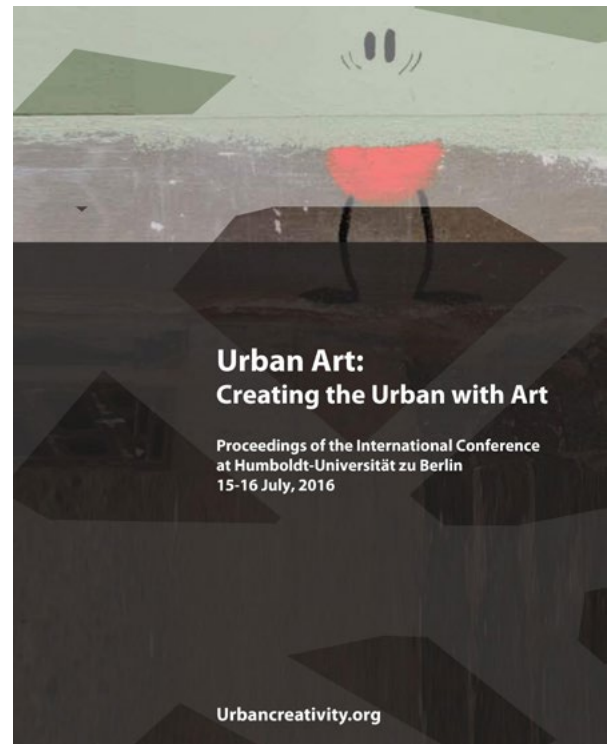
A third kind of place, represented by the virtual or digital city, which has come about thanks to the possibilities opened up over the last decade by the internet and ICT. For instance, QR codes or augmented reality, which street and public artists have recently experimented with: in this regard, Frank Eckardt and Katja Glaser’s contributions investigate respectively the practice of ‘urban hacking’ (13–17) and ‘digital archiving’ (56–62), and find a common concern: how power shapes, at its own benefit, both public and digital space;

4

The last kind of place regards the presence of nature in the urban environment, and how we relate to it. Zones of spontaneous vegetation resisting the dictatorship of concrete are, for instance, at the centre of Isaac Cordal’s artistic interventions, which Peter Bengtsen analyses in his paper *Street Art and the Nature of the City* (102–110).

The diversity of interpretations that we can derive from such a conception of the urban makes it easier for us to understand cities as ongoing metamorphoses in themselves, rather than stationary places: the same thing can be said, in most cases, for the art that has been observed by authors in their contributions to this volume. In the first place, the concept itself of urban art (or street art, or public art, or graffiti) is constantly used according to each author's epistemological standpoint and to their own understanding and experience of it. An interesting account of how terminology works and changes during time and according to different cultural contexts is proposed by Pedro Soares Neves, in an article focused on the case of Lisbon's urban art events between 2008 and 2014 (29–36). More generally, as pointed out by Blanché (6–7) and further developed by Johannes Stahl (19–28), we can speak of urban art in terms that include vandalism and illegality, but also institutional acceptance and recuperation. We can speak in terms of visual styles or periods, and we can of course categorise art by the media used by artists: from painting to installation, from stickers to photography, from virtual interventions to wall-painted animation and so on. The use that some artists make of video is, for instance, at the centre of Susan Hansen's contribution, articulated in four case studies (MOMO's Manhattan Tag, 2005; BLU's Muto, 2008; NUG's Territorial Pissings, 2009 and MOBSTR's Progressions, 2016): here video is considered as something that allows to document, show, and hence restore the performative character of graffiti and street art pieces in a non-urban scenario, like the white cube, where usually only the decontextualised surface of the artwork can be shown.

Eventually, the idea of art that we can derive from this book meets that of a 'contemporary urban, understood as a process', as Hoppe states in her introduction. This encounter finds its perfect conclusion in the last of five sections in which the book is divided: 1) Public or Urban Art? On Terminology, 2) Digital Media & the Urban (Art); 3) Affect & Performance; 4) Territories and 5) Urban Imaginary & The City. The latter (129–163) has the particular merit of putting this book into dialogue with theorists such as the American architect and urbanist Shadrach Woods (a pivotal figure in Sluiter's paper, that we have already cited) and the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (quoted in Tribble's article), who are respectively at the origin of a 'pedestrian' conception of urbanism (Woods, 1964) and of the idea of the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968). Both Woods' and Lefebvre's theories find new life throughout the entire book, and particularly in the idea that the production of space should ignite from the fight of communities against urban normativity and the monopoly of capital and neoliberalism: a sought paradigm shift in which art, of course, still plays a crucial role.



Vittorio Parisi (IT) is a lecturer in Aesthetics at Panthéon-Sorbonne University (ACTE Institute), Paris, where he also obtained his PhD. His research interests focus on the relationship between uncommissioned art, urban non-places, and the cultural industry.

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