

Cities and Street Art. A Sociological Research on 1UP, Mr. Paradox Paradise, Cranio, Blu and Mr. Woodland

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the phenomenon of street art and the relationship between street art, graffiti, cities and social actors, such as the audience of the artworks. The paper presents the state of the art related to phenomena of street art, graffiti, and the related subcultures. Then, the article considers original aspects and changes of the relationship between street art and graffiti. This analysis is possible thanks to reference to urban artworks of 1UP collective, Mr. Paradox Paradise, Cranio, Blu, and Mr. Woodland. These artists mark a turning point in the relationship between street art, graffiti, and social actors, and their works are considered as examples for the proposed arguments. In this sense, the global relevance of urban contexts such as Berlin, where some of these artists began their activities, emerges. The changing relationship between street art and graffiti is analyzed in the German capital from the perspective of visual sociology through photographic field research. Photographic research makes the artworks observable and analyzable ex-post. Street art emerges not as a homogeneous phenomenon, but shows different forms of expression, some closely related to traditional graffiti, others profoundly different. Emerging characters are analyzed through the concepts of audience, shock, collective innervation and aura, which refer to the sociological tradition of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, viewed as conceptual lenses for the study of contemporary street art.

Keywords: subculture, visual sociology, methodology, street art, graffiti.

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1. Street art and visual sociology. State of the art

Urban art forms have been studied by sociology. Many sociological studies are focused on street art and graffiti: these studies consider these two phenomena not as homogeneous but stress the differences between graffiti and street art (Harper, 2012; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Samutina & Zaporozhets, 2015). Graffiti has been the main form of urban art since the late 1970s. As an art form, graffiti has experienced changes and contaminations. While graffiti consists of representations on walls showing the name of the author (writer) represented in an original way and according to codified styles (wild style, bombing...), street art consists of the representation of artworks (landscapes, figures...), often of large dimensions, that evoke political and social meanings (i.e. Banksy). There are works dedicated to peace, environmental issues or others are just abstract graphic representations. At the same time, artists who practice street art are not part of a homogeneous phenomenon. Although they have aspects in common, they also show significant differences. Thus, in a general sense, street art derives from the traditional graffiti that has been widespread in metropolises since the 1970s: at the same time, street art diverges significantly from graffiti (Macdonald, 2003; Rahn, 2002; Samutina, Zaporozhets, 2015).

One area of research on this topic concerns urban subcultures: Hebdige (1979) studied groups such as mods, punks, rastafarians and other English urban subcultures. According to Hebdige's (1979) perspective, the belonging to groups characterized by styles (self-expression, languages...) can be explained by the socio-economically disadvantaged condition. Hebdige's pioneering perspective, which refers to a Gramscian approach, was, also, used for the groups of graffiti writers that emerged in New York in the 1970s and early 1980s. These groups were part of the hip-hop subculture. The hip-hop subculture is one of the most relevant references for cultural norms and urban youth identity expressions. It originated in the United States in the 1970s, in disadvantaged suburban areas, where young people originated ways of singing, dancing and painting, and in a more general sense of living. This subculture includes different areas of activity, including writing (graffiti) for artistic representation. In this sense, graffiti is one of the visual and expressive evidence of a subculture. Furthermore, other areas of activity are Rap for music, DJing for sound mixing, and break-dancing (Macdonald, 2003; Rahn, 2002).

A second area of study and research on street art and graffiti concerns the perception of safety in cities: in some areas, especially suburban areas, visible elements such as abandonment and dirtiness encourage further behaviors that contributes to degradation, triggering a vicious circle. In this sense, graffiti has been considered as an indicator of degradation. By now, however, graffiti are

recognized as an art form (Alpaslan, 2012; Ferrell, 1996; Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Graffiti have, also, been followed by other related forms of expression, such as stencils and installations. This perspective analyses the relationship between perceptions of safety and urban transformations, focusing on gentrification and the revaluation of formerly degraded city areas: livable and safe city areas are destinations for tourism, housing aspirations, nightlife and become attractive from a real estate perspective (Alpaslan, 2012; Ferrell, 1996; Kelling & Wilson, 1982; Perroncel, 2018).

A third and more general branch of analysis concerns urban visual emergencies and the perception of social actors. Already in the first decades of the 20th century, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer dealt with the image as an actor capable of modifying society: billboards, new urban landscapes, as well as cinema and photography, are the changes that impressed Kracauer and Benjamin and made the two German intellectuals reflect on the impact of industrial rationalization on art, aesthetics and culture at the beginning of the 20th century. This perspective can be used today for the study of street art and graffiti. The two German intellectuals, in fact, recognized the power of the image (in the broadest sense, from billboards, display windows and city galleries to advertising and variety shows) to change the culture and society of their time. For Kracauer (1963), the symmetry and calculability of twentieth-century industrial production are reflected in aesthetics and culture, which change and can be understood by a large part of the population: industrial rationalization is reflected in what can be seen in the new city shows, in photography, in cinema. Calculability, repetition, symmetry, regularity are the aesthetic elements of production of goods, as well as the culture of cabaret shows and advertisements.

Thus, the visual dimension of society constitutes a field for the analysis of social change. For example, the images of advertising, display windows, cinema and cities at the beginning of the 20th century are for everyone. A new social actor is established: the audience is not a cultural élite, on the 19th century model, but a broad, popular actor, uniting office workers and housewives, young and old (Kracauer, 1963).

In relation to this, the scientific debate on graffiti, street art and urban visual representations, also, evolves in relation to the works and creativity of artists. In this sense, one aspect that has emerged in recent decades, and which seems worthy of further investigation, is the global influence of the Berlin underground art scene and the global success of the German crew 1UP (which stands for One United Power) and street artists such as Mr. Paradox Paradise, Blu, Cranio and Mr. Woodland. All these artists chose to represent their creations in Berlin, so the German capital is an ideal context for analyzing the characteristics of graffiti and street art today. The works of the collective 1UP and the other street artists mentioned represent a paradigmatic moment of

transition, showing elements of continuity and, above all, discontinuity with previous urban art and subculture.

1.1 1UP, Mr. Paradox Paradise, Cranio, Blu and Mr. Woodland

The group of artists and writers 1UP was founded in the Kreuzberg district around 2003, and then spread all over the world, from Brazil to Italy, from France to Greece, Puerto Rico and Thailand. The innovative traits of the group concern its globality and the peculiar position of the artworks. Their large-scale works have become famous for their unique location: underwater (in Nusa Penida in Bali), in Scampia on *Le Vele* buildings, on the wreck of the Mediterranean Sky at sea in Greece.

The members of the group number many dozens, the exact number is unknown, but the global character of the collective and their actions filmed and webcast on YouTube, as well as their style and choice of places to paint, represent highly innovative aspects. The famous American photographer Martha Cooper followed them and documented their work in the visual documentary *ONE WEEK WITH 1UP* (2018, by Martha Cooper & Ninja K).

Street artists, such as Mr. Paradox Paradise, Blu, Cranio and Mr. Woodland, are also deserved to be analyzed, in order to understand the changes in contemporary urban art and subcultures. Mr. Paradox Paradise is an anonymous street artist. He is specialized in large-scale representations: he writes letters in a style he calls *spiritual* that evoke alien and mystical atmospheres. He paints on the highest floors of buildings and in subways, through the dangerous practice of train-surfing. He also creates sculptures and installations. A film about this was made in 2021, entitled *Spiritual Letters - The Art of Mr. Paradox Paradise*. Blu is an Italian street artist. His identity is unknown. He started to become famous in the late 1990s in Bologna. He is characterized by a comic style. Protagonists of his works are bizarre human figures, linked to themes of social denunciation. Cranio is a Brazilian street artist from São Paulo. His characteristic representation is a blue South American native, that evokes the native and indigenous peoples of Brazil. These are large-scale works that cover entire façades of palaces and buildings. He participated in the URBAN NATION 2018 exhibition, *UN-DERSTAND The Power of Art as a Social Architect*.

In order to analyze the works of these artists and their relationship to their social contexts, visual research in the German capital seems to be useful. In Berlin there are works by all the artists mentioned. The research focuses on street art and the similarities and differences between the 1UP collective and artists such as Mr. Paradox Paradise, Blu, Cranio and Mr. Woodland. To conduct this analysis, visual sociology is a useful heuristic tool. Visual sociology,

in fact, is the disciplinary and methodological field that allows an in-depth analysis of the visual emergencies of society: from advertising to social networks, from graffiti to photographs to political posters. All the visual contents circulating in societies can be the subject of sociological study. Such a study requires methodological rigor and particular care in the construction of the empirical basis, i.e. in finding the images to be analyzed and the theoretical concepts used for interpretation (Pauwels, 2010).

2. Methodology and visual research

The term ‘visual sociology’ is generally understood both strongly as a particular disciplinary branch of sociology and weakly as a particular research technique (Conti, 2016; Pauwels, 2010.). In sociology textbooks the term visual sociology is variously understood as a discipline, methodology, research technique, research system (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Pauwels, 2010). The scientific field of visual sociology and its area of application enrich social research with techniques using images. Visual sociology is a key approach that, within the unity of the sociological discipline, allows us to enter cognitive territories that are difficult to investigate using only established empirical investigation tools.

Here, ‘visual sociology’ is weakly understood to mean the set of social research techniques using images. The research, in fact, is based on the use of sociology with images (in particular photographic field research) and sociology on images, when reflecting on what artists represent.

Among the techniques of visual sociology, photographic field research has been used. Photographic field research has similarities with participant observation and utilizes tools such as the camera: researchers and scholars take images and analyze them by interpreting what they observe. The objectivist intellectual and cognitive posture can hardly be eliminated. At the same time, it is important to be aware that photography does not reproduce objectively, but that different factors intervene: the observer selects and chooses what to see (Harper, 2012; Pauwels, 2010).

Furthermore, the research, after the photographs have been taken, uses sociology on images to reflect on the artistic works considered and to understand the messages and social dynamics involved. Sociology on images is a technique that takes place ex-post, to analyze images such as graffiti, the works of street-artists, or other genres of visual content. From this perspective, the works of the artists mentioned are analyzed as visual content.

In a broader sense, in different scientific contexts, from anthropology to sociology, from urban planning to semiotics, attempts have been made to understand dynamics of what social actors see around themselves.

While, on the one hand, the term vision refers to what social actors perceive through the sense of sight, from a sensory perspective, the term visual refers to what social actors perceive on the basis of cultural and social characteristics and dimensions, both within the surrounding context (Conti, 2016).

Billboards, graffiti, social networks, photo archives, family photo albums, smartphones, youth fashions, act on interactions and relations and help to define the socio-cultural landscape surrounding social actors. The study of visual aspects of social living is common to several disciplinary areas and sociology has developed a special interest in it.

From a general point of view, in the history of sociological thought, visual sociology has been used to study aesthetics and urban phenomena, thanks to the images of changing cities (Simmel, 1903). The analysis of subcultures is based, for example, on visual elements: clothing, style, appearance are the evidence outlining the steps in Hebdige's (1979) research, analyzing the significance of such youthful visual elements. Studies on the perception of safety, also, derive from the data referring to what social actors see around them. Similarly, the analyses of Kracauer (1963) and Benjamin (1936) focus on what is perceptible by the senses, especially by sight, in cities and urban spaces.

In order to analyze the relationship between the works and the surrounding urban context, it was important to proceed through the detailed monitoring of the creations, which appear and disappear over time. In fact, some works disappear as they are erased and removed. In this way, it is possible to consider the role of street art in the city.

3. Berlin and street art. Mr. Paradox Paradise, Cranio, Blu, Mr. Woodland and 1UP

Mr. Paradox Paradise's artworks are mainly composed of letters that represent his name in a peculiar style. The letters are similar to futuristic hieroglyphics, evoking a form and style referable to extraterrestrials and aliens. Other works are drawings and they are shapes and graphic games, inspired by the same alien conceptual universe. They are symmetrical and labyrinth-like shapes (Figs 1 and 2). These representations lead one to reflect on the future, on a possible other universe (*paradise*, precisely), on everything that is not human in relation to the terrestrial world.

Cities and Street Art. A Sociological Research on 1UP, Mr. Paradox Paradise,
Cranio, Blu and Mr. Woodland
Uliano Conti

Figure 1 and 2. Two artworks by Mister Paradox Paradise in Berlin. Source: Conti (2023)¹

Figure 1



Figure 2



¹ All the photographs were taken by Uliano Conti.

Blu's artworks (Fig. 3) depict large human figures performing peculiar gestures: for instance, a giant face composed of human bodies seems to feed on another body. Firstly, Blu's visual representation (Fig. 3) denounces the cruelty of contemporary Western society, exaggerated competition, emotional isolation and abuse of human beings towards other human beings. In general, the works of this artist often represent the hegemony of the mainstream goals of wealth and economic well-being.

Cranio (Fig. 4) depicts human figures of Native Americans in blue or light blue, through cartoonish, playful features that, however, do not renounce representing environmental themes, related to animal protection and the threat of pollution. These representations are very colorful and vivid, symbolizing hope and the responsive and resilient capacity of nature and the environment.

Mr. Woodland (Fig. 5) focuses his works on the theme of migration and dramatic aspects of contemporary society such as poverty. These are large-scale realistic representations with uniform colors and essential lines. The meaning evoked refers to the harshness and drama of economic growth and progress, represented by figures alone or at most in pairs, with sad and lost looks.

Figure 3 and 4. A large artwork by Blu and a work by Cranio in Berlin Conti (2023)
Figure 3



Cities and Street Art. A Sociological Research on 1UP, Mr. Paradox Paradise,
Cranio, Blu and Mr. Woodland
Uliano Conti

Figure 4



Figure 5. A work made by Mr. Woodland in Rigaer Strasse



1UP (One United Power) (Figs 6 and 7) is a crew of writers with members all over the world. The works are the initials of the 1UP group usually placed in hard to reach and dangerous places: these large-scale representations symbolize the cohesion and strength of the artistic collective and, more generally, a form of dissent and rejection of conformism. Compared to the above-mentioned street artists, the 1UP collective maintains stronger links with the tradition of writing and hip-hop culture, as can also be seen by the use of fire extinguishers, as is the case in many writers' crews (Fig. 8).

Figure 6, 7 and 8. Artworks made by the crew 1UP

Figure 6



Cities and Street Art. A Sociological Research on 1UP, Mr. Paradox Paradise,
Cranio, Blu and Mr. Woodland
Uliano Conti

Figure 7



Figure 8



The cases cited all refer to works created by street artists on their own initiative. i.e. the works are not commissioned by local institutions or private companies, but are illegal, albeit relatively tolerated, actions, unlike, for example, the work *Make art not war* by the street artist Obey, created in 2014 for the city museum Urban Nation (Fig. 9).

Figure 9, and 10. A tag by Sam crew made with fire extinguisher and the artwork Make art not war by Obey

Figure 9



Figure 10



The use of media such as fire extinguishers runs the risk of scandalizing and affecting the public more negatively, when compared to works such as Obey's, which are more easily associated with the concept of 'beauty' in the

common sense (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2016, 2021). At the same time, however, it represents a further frontier in the stylistic evolution of urban writing. Street artists can potentially be commissioned by local institutions or private companies, but, in this way, they come closer to being themed as advertising, albeit with an artistic character.

The use of fire extinguishers, the recent frontier of urban writing, raises questions about the boundary between art and vandalism. The same questions, however, marked the rise of graffitiism in the 1970s in the United States.

3.1 Street art in Berlin. Analysis and results

In order to investigate the presence of street art and the works of 1UP, Mr. Paradox Paradise, Cranio, Blu and Mr. Woodland, it is necessary to identify a few examples in the city. As a first example, the district of Kreuzberg can be considered: some of the city's leading artist collectives were born here and many works can be found here. In Kreuzberg there are numerous works by the artist collective 1UP. These artworks date back to the early 2000s, when the group was founded. Secondly, the neighboring districts, such as Friedrichshain, can be explored.

The research identifies great visual representations such as the spiritual letters by the artist Mr. Paradox Paradise; the famous *Pink Man* by the street artist Blu (2007); the work by Cranio at Holzmarkt (2016); and the work *Hope* by Mr. Woodland in Rigaer Strasse (2018).

Mr. Paradox Paradise creates works with symbols and styles that recall tribal forms. These artworks evoke a form of contemporary tribalism, associating the style of visual works with the style of ethnic representations (Figs 1 and 2). In this sense, Maffesoli (1996) uses the term neo-tribalism as a metaphor for analyzing social bonds. The neo-tribal bond is a form of community and exists where traditional socialization agencies such as school and family are absent.

In Falckensteinstraße, Blu creates a large work composed of human figures characterized by essential features. The figures are close together and merge into one overall figure, in this case the bust of a man. His works often depict themes of social and political denunciation. Cranio near Holzmarkt depicts on the façade of a building a blue figure, with a drink in his hand, dressed in a suit and tie, representing a South American native (Figs 3 and 4). Mr. Woodland is a German street artist from Munich who has created works in Berlin. For the first edition of the *Berlin Mural Festival* in 2018, he realized *Hope*, in Rigaer Strasse, a street where there are numerous occupied buildings and where the

works represent dissent and opposition to the transformation imposed by gentrification (Fig. 5).

Considering the research described above and thanks to the two visual techniques mentioned (photographic field research and sociology on images), it is possible to suggest a third meaning of ‘visual sociology’: the theoretical reflection on art works, thanks to concepts inherent to sociological thought and theory. An analysis of the relationship between these works and the surrounding actors reveals four common elements: audience; shock; collective innervation; aura. The audience of the street artists’ works abovementioned constitutes a mobile, apparently distracted audience, that sees the works for a short time and enjoys them while wandering around the city. This placement in cities such as Berlin is associated with a worldwide dissemination of the works in topical locations such as, in the case of the 1UP collective (Figs 6, 7 and 8), underwater in Nusa Penida in Bali, in Scampia on *Le Vele* buildings, on the wreck of the Mediterranean Sky at sea in Greece. On the one hand, fruition of the works in cities is distracted, on the other hand the fruition of the works placed in paradigmatic places is attentive, dedicated to representations that remain in time, that are not erased. This dual configuration contributes to defining a complex dimension of audience: a mobile, distracted urban audience and an attentive global audience. Already in the first decades of the 20th century, urban advertising and billboards are visual emergencies that condition social actors. For Kracauer (1963), the audience of the media – cinema, photography, but also billboards and urban images – is an ornament, an extension of the mass as social actor, its concrete realization that gathers together at the moment of fruition. The audience, the social actor that constitutes the self-observation dimension of the masses, is attracted to and involved in the images of cinema and photography. At the beginning of the last century, the technical reproduction of the photographic and cinematographic image had favored the constitution of a mass audience: workers, office workers, young people, families became users of new media contents, of images.

The second element is the large size of the artworks, which cover the entire façades of palaces and buildings and impress observers.

In cities, the quick and mobile gazes turned to street art engage passers-by, even if only for a short time. Passers-by stop to observe and photograph artworks. The large size and bright colors tend to strike, shock and attract attention within an urban landscape where everyone is distracted. Attention is gained not only through large and colorful works, but also through stickers and other modes of communication (Fig. 7).

Decades before McLuhan, both Kracauer and Benjamin had intuited the relationship between visuality and social actors: the new media, such as advertising and propaganda media, had the capacity to engage perceptions,

numb consciences and shock, to act on mass audiences (Pinotti & Somaini, 2021). For Benjamin (1936), the new stimuli of cinema and photography, advertisements, billboards, city traffic constitute a set of new perceptions for social actors. They have the power to shock, to affect perceptions and to induce, due to sensory over-stimulation, as a reactive response a state of numbness, of sensory alienation. To react to the numbness, actors seek new stimuli, new shocks, other images that engage and awake them. City, radio, cinema, photography are *media* that constitute the new audience, which reacts to new stimulations capable of impressing, of shocking, in the Benjaminian sense of the term. Urban billboards, advertisements and photographs disrupted the experiences and perceptions of social actors and created space for new forms of sensory receptivity and knowledge, forms based on the gaze.

Thirdly, the perceptual connection promoted by the works is analyzed: walking around the city is a heterogeneous experience, but the viewing of street art works constitutes a perceptual *continuum*. In this sense, the continuum fostered by street art works constitutes a path within the city: unconnected, uneven spaces, differing in form, appearance and function are linked by the vision of the giant works on the façades of buildings and buildings. The vision of large works is the red thread that connects walking through the streets of the city. Collective innervation, in the words of Benjamin (1936), is a useful conceptual lens for understanding link between the works disseminated in cities and social actors such as the audience. Art fruition in city streets is distracted and mobile, but visual representations attract perceptions. This sensory involvement was analyzed by Benjamin (1936) who spoke of collective innervation: the German intellectual hoped that images could create a connection, a virtuous sensory link between actors, making them a collectivity conscious and mature. Benjamin hoped that image and film could favor a positive bond between actors. The image affects the senses and perception. If image does not create a virtuous collective innervation, it numbs the actors' awareness (Benjamin, 1936).

Finally, the difference between traditional graffiti referable to the hip-hop subculture and the works of the street artists emerges. Whereas graffiti consists of the artistic representation of the author's name, works of street artists are representations that are independent of letters and names: on the one hand, the works of Blu, Cranio and Mr. Woodland distance themselves from graffiti and lettering, from the representation of words. They are, in fact, representations of landscapes, things and characters. These visual artworks are different from traditional graffiti. On the other hand, the style of 1UP (Figs 5 and 6) is made up of simple characters, large letters and essential features. The representations are always "1UP" (or "One United Power") and places themselves in continuity with the tradition and subculture of hip-hop and graffitiism. In an intermediate

position is placed Mr. Paradox Paradise (Figs 1 and 2), who in continuity with graffiti represents letters and his own name. On the other hand, he creates an innovative and unprecedented style in the graffiti landscape.

The aura of graffiti is transformed: it becomes the art form of the past (from the 1980s to the early 2000s) and its characteristics are distant and outdated. Aura is the term used by Benjamin (1936) to characterize art prior to the 20th century: the aura, the elevated and distant character of art and, more generally, of culture, due to the visual potential of the image of film and photography is transformed. For Benjamin (1936), new urban spaces, together with the images of photography and film, induce a profound social transformation: aura and elite culture of the 19th century decline. Culture becomes accessible to new audiences, to social actors who, in the 20th century, conquer an emerging role. The same logic can be considered for the transition between graffiti and street art: urban visual representations do not remain confined to a subculture and are not connoted in a detrimental way as elements of degradation but are accessible to an ever-wider audience.

In conclusion, some forms of street art, as in the cases of Blu, Cranio and Mr. Woodland, therefore, deviate from traditional graffiti. Other globally well-known artists, such as members the 1UP collective, present original and innovative elements and aspects that are placed in continuity with graffiti art.

As mentioned above, one area of study and research on street art and graffiti concerns the perception of safety in cities: areas in which large street art works appear are often, as in the case of Berlin, areas involved by gentrification. In this sense, street artworks are “indicators” of a phase of commercial valorization of the areas where artworks appear. Street art is considered usable, an element that requalifies the city. Street art authors are considered by graffiti creators as actors who have preferred a socially accepted and non-antagonistic art form to express themselves. Often by graffiti creators street art is considered a commercial and impure form of urban art (Andron, 2018; Stampoulidis, 2021).

Furthermore, such forms of expression, investigated through visual sociology, allow a deeper understanding of dynamics surrounding the audience, intended as public social actor, the perception in the city and the perceptive elements that construct an urban continuum. Thanks to the evolution of street art, graffiti and forms of expression, the hip-hop subculture traditionally associated with graffiti art is changing. Another and general field of analysis concerns urban visual emergencies and the perception of social actors. In summary, four elements emerge: media audience; shock; collective innervation; aura. These elements allow us to reconsider Benjamin and Kracauer and their highly innovative position. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, in fact,

they understood the power of the image in acting on social actions, defining the heuristic keys to analyzing street art and its role in contemporary society.

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