

Murals as Memorials: The Artist's Responsibility

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Abstract

This paper, short though it is, represents my first thoughts on the overlap between street art as memoria and the concept of the artist as implicated subject. That is should we consider the artist who create memorial graffiti as documenters of societies memories or creators of them. In examining the extent to which the making of such art can be considered as an act of shaping rather than reflecting cultural memory I will seek to establish that the artist promotes interaction with both their art and the subject of that art.

Keywords

Graffiti; Memoria; Cultural Memory; Implicated Subject; Murals.

1. Introduction

The concept of the implicated subject was first developed by Rothberg, when discussing the interlocking levels of culpability associated with the artistic representation of trauma. (Rothberg, 2000) His distinction between the impartial observer, who could perhaps be seen as a mere spectator of events, and the witness, who seeks to interpret or redefine the events for others is key if we are to use this term in our analysis of street art as memoria. It seems appropriate to ask if it is the image, or the accompanying text that reflects the message and does either, or both, represent the intention of the artist or have the meanings changed when interpreted by the local community. By addressing this question I will endeavor to provide a platform from which to start a discussion about the relationship between the artist and the community in memorial murals.

2. Start with the Political

George Orwell is frequently misquoted as saying that 'all art is political'(Orwell, 2018) – he was, in truth, discussing the impact of politics on writing rather than art – but, if we are to misquote Orwell once we may as well do so again

and say that, if 'All art works are political, ... [but] some are more political than others.'(Orwell, 2003). There are murals painted to commemorate the heroes of war, the heroes of civil unrest and heroes of revolution. These paintings, such as that of Bobby Sands in Belfast, (D, 1998) or the 2020 *Heroes of the Great Patriotic War* depicted in Moscow, (Various, 2020) are usually state, or quasi-state sanctioned, and, although clearly political in nature, are outside the scope of this essay. This is because the sponsorship of this art means that the risks of engaging with these artworks means that there is very little public interaction with them. This can be contrasted with community artworks such as the *Say Their Names* mural in Springfield, USA (Wane One et al., 2020), *Through Art We Rise* in Hampstead, UK (Xhafa-Mripa et al., 2020), Akse P19's mural of George Floyd in Manchester, UK. (Akse P19, 2020), or even the Safer Streets murals which filled the Leake Street Tunnel in Waterloo, UK.(WOM Collective, 2021) These artworks, and others like them, are produced in response to live issues. They represent a local interpretation of larger political issues such as police violence, homelessness and violence against women. This being the case it is appropriate to ask why these artworks are so often defaced or destroyed.

3. Claiming the Issue; Claiming the Space

It may be that the problem with political murals in community spaces is the fact that the spaces are communal; any public space is likely to be contested. Take, for example *Through Art we Rise*, an artwork commissioned by Justice Through Arts which was founded by the conceptual artist Alketa Xhafa-Mripa. This consisted of two murals painted on each side of the ThamesLink Bridge in West Hampstead. One side of the bridge, painted by the artist Zabou, was painted with portraits of three people who he described as 'The Forgotten Ones'. The intention of this mural was to humanize the homeless by making passes by look at them. The inspiration for the mural was the death of a local man, who sat by the bridge every day. However, complaints were made that the mural was inaccurate as the man who inspired the work, John Henderson, was not homeless. In addition the artist who painted the mural on the opposite side of the bridge, Ben Eine, was a controversial figure. The mural was defaced, said to be in breach of planning regulations and finally partially removed by the artists. The question then is, did the artists have the moral right to place the artwork on this site? Legally they had the right, the owners of the bridge had agreed and planning permission had been sought, but they clearly did not have the unanimous support of the community. But is unanimous support a realistic goal, or even one to which we should aspire? Take, for example, the cases of the memorials to George Floyd, several of these have been vandalized by overpainting, whitening-out or by the addition of racist messages. Clearly some members of the community did not support the painting of these murals, but there appears to be little indication that the majority of the communities in which they are situated feel the same way. Would we want the artist to alter their work to represent the messages sent by the vandals anyway, surely not? Therefore, we must return to my original question, do the artists expect to shape the opinions of the community or to reflect them, and how does that alter the art itself.

4. My Views or Yours

If we assume that the painters of memorial art think that their views align with those of the community that host their art perhaps we should ask why they have chosen to

paint the work, particularly if, like Alketa Xhafa-Mripa, they describe themselves as Activist Artists. However, as the definition of community is so nebulous at what point do we say that the art is supported by the community? Is it community art if some members of the local community take part in the production, or is it sufficient if they help to fund it, or perhaps support can be assumed if there are less than ten, twenty or a hundred complaints? Moreover, is there a risk that such public murals may memorialize the subjects in ways that their families do not support? Such depictions, even if well meaning, may cause more distress to the families than would have been the case if the artwork had not been painted. Take for example the George Floyd memorial artworks. The artists are undoubtedly showing their support by reproducing George's image as a larger than life mural. Something that his family have said that they support. However, is it not possible that when the murals are defaced by racist slogans this could cause the family additional hurt; equally the presence of the murals on the streets may also function as a magnet, providing a focus for racist groups or individuals. The artwork becomes more political by being defaced, and more political again when it is repainted to cover the original destruction. In essence the painting and repainting of these memorial artworks becomes a public debate about the subject being memorialized. The act of producing a disputed memorial is sufficient for the artist to become an implicated subject, as they are not merely recording facts, but are initiating a discussion, however distasteful, about the merits of the memorial.

5. Conclusion

The production of public memorial murals is not a neutral activity. It is a political act, even if the subject is not innately political. In addition I believe that the painting of such murals, and their disfigurement represents a political discussion between different sections of the community and because the artist has initiated this discussion they cannot be considered to be an impartial observer, but rather an implicated subject in that they are driving the direction of this discussion.

Conflict of Interests

The author declare no conflict of interests.

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