

Outer Space, Inner Time. Political Graffiti and Street Art's Audience Research

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Abstract

According to Velikonja (2020), there are three starting points of Graffiti and Street Art Research (GSAR): the contextualisation, the intentionality of the producer, and the reception, which is related to the audience/viewer/observant, where the audience is one of the starting points less approached in the literature. Consequently, I pretend to explore the potential level of analysis from time and space and its relationship with Graffiti and street art audiences. Time and space will not be considered in linear or geographic terms but in relational terms. Therefore, literature on the social construction of space, the historicity of phenomena from oral history, and audience studies will be considered. In this exploration, I intend to argue that to find the meaning and role of both Graffiti and its audience, it is necessary to consider literature that points to their relationship and how this develops. In this article, I delve into the ways scholars study Graffiti and Street Art audiences, highlighting their methodologies, techniques, and results. Then, I provide a fresh approach to Context in Graffiti and Street Art Research that integrates renewed emotional, temporal, and spatial elements. Lastly, drawing from both scholar's experiences and my own, I propose embodiment as an innovative tool that has yet to be fully explored in this field. By utilising this means, we may be able to bridge some of the gaps that currently exist.

Keywords

Audience; Embodiment; Graffiti; Social Space; Time

1. Introduction. Graffiti and Street Art, Social Movements, and Audiences

From October 2019 to March 2020, Chile witnessed massive social protests with over 3.7 million people participating in the marches (Cooperativa.cl, 2019). The Human Rights Institute report revealed that as of 19 February 2020, there were 3,765 wounded, 445 eye injuries, and 951 complaints of torture (CNN, 2020). The demonstrations led to explosions in metro stations, looting, damage to public and private property, barricades, and fires. However, amidst the chaos, there was also an extensive display of aesthetic and artistic expressions. Graffiti, murals, and stencils adorned every wall, bus, metro station, and building during this period (Le Bert & Soto, 2021; Ribeiro Cavalcanti & Barbosa de Oliveira, 2021).

These events grabbed national and international public attention. Local and international electronic media indicated several causes for the outbreak, such as dissatisfaction with the neoliberal socioeconomic model, the increase in the price of public transportation in Santiago (Rehbein Caerols, 2019), social and economic inequality and the high cost of living (Zúñiga, 2019), abuses of power and cases of corruption, cases of collusion in basic goods and medicines, increase in unemployment and business closures, and few guaranteed social rights (Paúl, 2019). Additionally, they reported on the marches, the encounters between protesters and police forces, the reasons for the outbreak, and the artistic expressions. For instance, a Euronews article/video featured an interview with a passer-by woman who commented on

the impressive display of expressions by the people. Similarly, a young man remarked that the walls scream history (Castro, 2019).

These events are not unique, as social movements, strikes, riots, and other collective actions happen frequently. In fact, since 2017, over 400 significant anti-government protests have erupted worldwide (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023). They are usually accompanied by artistic expressions that resonate with their audience and hold great significance.

Consequently, one may ask whether politics (and contentious politics) could exist without a form of aesthetics or art. From Rousseau and Schiller to more contemporary scholars (Kompridis, 2014; Rancière, 2004, 2013; Ryan, 2017, 2020; Waldner & Dobratz, 2013), there has been an ever-growing exploration of political life from an aesthetic perspective (Kompridis, 2014). Recent books and articles linked to non-routine politics and social movement studies address aesthetics from different approaches, such as cultural studies and democracy (Dabène, 2020), visual culture and communication (McGarry et al., 2020), or urban space and visual protest (Campos et al., 2021), to mention some. Despite this progress, there is more to explore, particularly regarding the role of the audience and their impact on the (re)constitution of time and space.

In this article, I delve into the ways scholars study Graffiti and Street Art's (GSA) audiences, highlighting their methodologies, techniques, and results. Then, I provide a fresh approach to context in Graffiti and Street Art Research (GSAR) that integrates renewed emotional, temporal, and spatial elements. Lastly, drawing from both scholar's experiences and my own, I propose embodiment as an innovative tool that has yet to be fully explored in this field. By utilising this means, we may be able to bridge some of the gaps that currently exist.

2. Audience's Approach

The field of GSAR has traditionally focused on the context, the artist and their work, neglecting the audience's reception and how audiences shape production (Velikonja,

2020; Waldner & Dobratz, 2013). While some scholars have emphasised the importance of social dynamics in GSA, research in this area remains limited (Ryan, 2020; Velikonja, 2020; Waldner & Dobratz, 2013).

Despite the lack of research on audiences' interpretation of Graffiti, Joswig-Mehnert and Yule (1996) provide a starting point for examining viewers' perspectives. In their study, participants responded to a simple written questionnaire attached to each Graffiti image. The survey results show that, on average, 53 % of the responses offered an interpretation of Graffiti, while 47 % offered no interpretations because participants did not respond to the question or expressed individual opinions. The authors did not consider these responses as having definitive meaning. Overall, the study highlights that viewers have a variety of interpretations, and analysts' interpretations may not coincide with those of other viewers. This finding challenges the previous assumption that viewers have a homogeneous understanding of Graffiti. Velikonja (2020) agrees with this conclusion, stating that there is no straightforward interpretative consensus in society, and every text is a battlefield of different interpretations.

Similarly, Lynn (1999) concluded that audience interpretation of Graffiti meaning reveals more about the reader than it does about the writer. To clarify, there is a strong connection between the interpretations and the audience's experience and knowledge. Unlike Joswig-Mehnert and Yule's survey (1996), Lynn employed interviews with Graffiti Writers and created multiple interpretations of selected works. Additionally, Lynn considers the expression of opinions, emotions, and the idea of social space, but they do not play an important role in her results. Joswig-Mehnert & Yule (1996), as well as Lynn (1999), researched uncategorised Graffiti. In other words, they made no distinction between political Graffiti, subcultural Graffiti, or aesthetic Graffiti.

In contrast, Olberg's research (2013, pp. 17–19) focused on political Graffiti from the viewers' perspective. He argues that political Graffiti can motivate an audience to change, unite a population toward a common goal, shape popular consciousness, inform people of important events, persuade

the audience toward action, and/or document a source of popular history and remembrance (Chaffee, 1990, 1993; Salole, 2004). Olberg conducted interviews where the participants observed Graffiti photographs while answering the questions. Three interesting observations emerged from the results: participants tend to overlook Graffiti details, interpret Graffiti ambiguously, and tell personal stories (Olberg, 2013, pp. 111–118). Additionally, Olberg recognises that material space and linear time are important

factors in political Graffiti production and meaning. Like Lynn, emotions were observed but were not considered a significant factor in building meaning.

In my Master's thesis (Fernández Merino, 2023), I focused on the audience's perception of Graffiti during the Social Explosion in Chile (2019–2020). Following Olberg's steps, I conducted interviews while showing a selected number of GSA pictures (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). Some of the responses were similar as well, including the participants' tendency



Figure 1. Researcher collection. *Justicia para el Anthony* (Eng. Justice for Anthony).

to story-telling, but others differed. To clarify, around 70 % of the respondents described in detail what they saw in the photograph and what each of these details meant to them. Additionally, I observed varying levels of ambiguity in the responses, both individually and collectively. While some Graffiti had a clear and agreed-upon meaning, others remained entirely open to interpretation. My analysis revealed that, regardless of the interpretation, some participants found the meaning either obvious or ambiguous.

Unlike previous research, I considered emotions a substantial factor in my interviews. After asking about the meaning of

Graffiti, I asked how participants felt while looking at the picture. Their responses were sometimes expressed through words and other times through silence, hesitation, or body language. Additionally, it was apparent that Graffiti perception was not only highly emotional but also transformed the audience's understanding of space and drove them back to memories of the past. These three factors play an important role in meaning-building and potentially could affect people's conduct, self- and other's perceptions, and their political position in contentious scenarios. Furthermore, in a social movement context, these factors have the potential to affect the outcome of the movement; and therefore, play



Figure 2. Researcher collection. *No los perdones, saben perfecto lo que hacen* (Eng. Do not forgive them, for they know perfectly well what they are doing).

a role in (un)successful overturns of the status quo. Chaffee describes this as the “psychopolitical explanation of Graffiti” (Chaffee, 1993, p. 17).

My research produced results that aligned with previous findings on interpretation and the role of prior knowledge in shaping meaning. However, I identified a more complex interaction between Graffiti and its audience, with the process of building meaning being attached to more components than just knowledge. I identified five stages of interaction and meaning building: observation and description, identification of core or symbolic meaning, construction of profound meaning, identification of self and others, and reaction to reidentification. Participants’ behaviour and understanding of public space changed because of this process.

- First, participants observed, recognised, and described the image; meanwhile, they expressed an aesthetic or political opinion. They also used to interact with the image itself. In other words, these opinions were given to the image and not to me.
- Second, participants identified the core or symbolic meaning of the image. The participants usually

shared this meaning, so there was a reduced range of interpretations.

- Third, participants constructed, developed and described a profound meaning. At this stage, the meaning was attached to personal memories, emotions, and previous knowledge; therefore, the range of interpretation was larger than in the previous stage.
- Fourth, participants (re)identified themselves and their political position and the “other’s” identity and political position. Hence, they were not only in favour or against but also insiders or outsiders of the meaning they previously built.
- Finally, participants reacted in consequence to their reidentification. They expressed that when they see these Graffiti on the streets during a contentious time, the streets are not the same, and they are not used in the same way. Their understanding of public space changes, and their behaviour changes with it.

In essence, scholars employ a similar methodology when conducting research—they engage in interviews with people and collect both written and spoken data. Consequently, this technique solely enables researchers to interpret



Figure 3. Researcher collection. Rebellious cartoons.

meaning through language and narratives, assuming that the communication between the object and the people is unidirectional. As a result, there is a tendency to disregard the stages of the process, bidirectional communication, and other substantial forms of communication (verbal and non-verbal) and meaning building that is related to aesthetic/political opinions, emotional and sensorial factors, temporal association, and spatial change.

3. Using Embodiment to Extend the Concept of Context

Context is a crucial aspect of GSAR literature. In Valikonja's terms (2020), context is not only a possible starting point for GSAR, but contextualisation is compulsory for finding meaning. Moreover, the context where Graffiti is placed can affect the emotional reactions of its perceiver (Gartus & Leder, 2014). Thus, to understand GSA's place in the world, researchers need to examine where and when GSA is placed and how this place and time conforms to an emotional setting.

In GSAR there are at least three elements of context to consider: (1) Where and when? Space and time and its active relationship with them. (2) What or which elements surround it? Graffiti's message begins and ends with its environment. What matters is not only the Graffiti but also whatever surrounds it since Graffiti without its wall (or whatever surface it is situated on) is not Graffiti. Moreover, (3) Who is (or are) behind it? Graffiti cannot be understood isolated from other Graffiti by the same author, crew, or political group. From a semiotic point of view, Graffiti is, like any other sign, always a part of a wider Graffiti oeuvre and connected to others in the same system of meaning. One can understand it only by understanding its entire symbolic frame. (cf. Velikonja, 2020, pp. 6–7).

However, "Outer Space and Inner Time" aims to delve into a fresh viewpoint on how we comprehend context, time, and space, with particular attention paid to an individual's internal realm. This methodology acknowledges the significance of the social construction of space and the part that memory

plays in our perception of time. Conventional practices may not be adequate to fully understand the intricacy of this interplay, and embodied research may be a promising avenue to gain more profound insights into GSAR.

Embodied research design puts the focus on the body and particularly considers the interaction between the mind, brain, and body, as well as how systems behave and interact (Changaris, 2020; Spatz, 2017). This approach shifts the focus from just the effect A has on B to the contexts and circumstances in which it occurs. By incorporating context into the research process, embodied research design develops more accurate theories of biological, social, and mental phenomena (Changaris, 2020). The embodiment has three core principles that can be used as guides for a method of embodied study construction and research design (after Changaris (2020, p. 3)):

- “The first of these three principles is that embodiment is “situated,” i.e., there is a specific time, place, memory, working model, and history (Barsalou, 2008; Wilson, 2002). Rather than attempting to separate out history and location, embodiment recognizes that history and location are core aspects of understanding a process.
- The second core aspect of embodiment is that bodily/system states change outcomes. States often act like a filter on the behaviour of the system, e.g. stress changes memory test outcomes.
- The third aspect of embodiment is simulation. The brain is fundamentally developed for actions and predicting outcomes of actions, which requires a model (i.e., simulation) of the self, one’s ability, and the world. Embodied simulation creates working models of the environment and the available responses to the world (i.e., affordances) (Barsalou, 2008; Gallese, 2011; Wilson, 2002).”

In an embodied research design, and particularly through the idea of situated embodiment (Changaris, 2020), the three elements of the context might experience few changes. Embodied methodology emphasises the importance of the physical and socio-temporal contexts and the interactions with all people involved in the study (Fransberg, Myllylä, & Tolonen, 2021). In situated embodiment, this is framed

into three core questions about the phenomenon: when, in what context, and what other factors must be present for an outcome to occur (Anderson, 2003). These situated systemic factors have two core components – structures (defined parts of a system that interact) and dynamics (how the parts interact and create emergent properties and system behaviours).

Then, this physical-socio-temporal context involves relational elements in the space in addition to the “when, where, and who” of GSA process. For the interaction between all these elements or part of them, I propose to consider the concept of the social construction of space through its triad, that is the space that is conceived, perceived, and lived (Lefebvre, 1991). The perception of space is related to the perception through our bodies, which are not only things but also ‘interspaces between things’ (Maurice Merleau-Ponty in Löw (2006, pp. 120–121)). This means that in perceiving through our bodies, we form syntheses in our everyday activities—our lived space—as a means of linking together a great multiplicity of objects to form—or conceived—spaces. In so doing, the body leads to a noteworthy double existence. It is not only the medium of perception but is itself a placed object. As such, it is staged, styled, genderised, and permeated by ethnic constructions. Thus, it is becoming a highly precarious ‘building block’ of spaces (Löw, 2006, pp. 120–121). As Lin (Lin, 2019, p. 872) notes, the body creates space and becomes the space itself.

Consequently, the context in GSAR should include two more elements: (4) Who is (are) the one(s) interacting with it? GSA are made to be watched, which kind, type, or genre of people is the audience, how they lived, conceived, and perceived the space and how they remember this experience. In other words, how does Graffiti build the context of the audience and vice-versa? Finally, (5) How do these four elements bodily interact with each other, and what are the practices and techniques performed by the bodies in question?

These five elements of context understand the interaction around GSA as an indivisible process between all the bodies involved, including the artist, artwork, audience, and both internal and external context. To address this complex web

of interactions, I turn to the 'Model of Embodied Aesthetics' (Lange et al., 2020, p. 215).

4. Model of Embodied Aesthetics

The Model of Embodied Aesthetics was developed by Koch (2017) for the study of Creative Art Therapies, aiming to define the effects of art. This model focuses on both art perception and active artmaking and argues that there is a continuous process between the active and receptive aspects of the aesthetic experience. Additionally, taking the idea of 'the ambiguity of the body' by Merleau-Ponty (1962), this model understands the body as the only object in the world that can be perceived from the inside and outside. Therefore, when people create art, they express something related to their thoughts and emotions, and this expression feeds back into their thinking and feelings. In other words, the artmaking process is circular, with a constant interchange of expression and impression (Lange et al., 2020, p. 215).

Adapting this model may enable scholars to understand GSA interaction as a simultaneous experience of expression and impression as active and receptive bodies. Additionally, it enables scholars to observe participants' embodied experience and aesthetic response, data that goes beyond perception and invites scholars to observe and analyse more than words.

For instance, a 'felt sense' is a bodily experience that occurs before we use words or symbols to describe a situation or object, such as art, theories, or relationships. By delving into these felt senses, we can gain new perspectives that can alter our outlook on past events. It is crucial to understand that felt senses are distinct from emotions or thoughts and are not mere physical sensations. Rather, they hold inherent significance and can guide us in determining our future actions. As Gendlin (1992, p. 343) points out, a felt sense is a constantly evolving, present experience.

An aesthetic response is a distinct and bodily response to an occurrence in the imagination, an artistic act, or an artwork's perception. This term has been developed and extended into the concept of aesthetic answering that can be used as a research method to generate knowledge around an

epistemological question (Weiser Cornell & McGavin, 2020). According to Weiser Cornell & McGavin (2020), creating and perceiving art can offer insights that cannot be fully expressed in words. This nonverbal material provides valuable knowledge and meaning that traditional research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, cannot capture.

Therefore, by paying attention to the aesthetic responses and felt sense of either the artist or the audience, it is possible to identify both the internal and external (inside and outside the body) interaction process. Additionally, through their active or receptive behaviour, it is possible to identify impressions and expressions that are shaped before words, emotions, or thoughts. At this point, it is important to concentrate on silence, sounds, body movements or gestures.

To obtain this data in GSAR, a variety of methods can be used, ranging from observation, interview, embodied narrative, photography, video, and others (Bresler, 2006; Fransberg et al., 2023; Hannula et al., 2022). The possibility of laboratories, spaces prepared to investigate performing arts, has also been argued (Scialom, 2021). This will depend on the focus that researchers want to give their study.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to delve into how Graffiti and Street Art (GSA) and its audience interact in a social movement context. By using embodied research design, this article introduces a fresh perspective on the meaning of context, time, and space.

On this journey through outer space and inner time, two specific findings are worth emphasising. First, the possibility of extending the conceptualisation of the GSA context by incorporating two important elements: the context of the audience, including their construction of space and their memories, and the interaction between the context's elements. Second, the introduction of embodied research design and the model of embodied aesthetics as a promising means for studying the interaction between GSA and the artist/audience. Hopefully, this proposed literature can help with further research on GSA.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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