

Public Art in the urban landscape

The connotative use of public art in the urban space through the semiotic analysis of KAFAOS (cable distributor) in the urban space of cities: Milan, Florence, Athens, Thessaloniki

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Abstract

This paper proposes a semiotic analysis of street artworks on the urban public space of cities. Street art works can appear as unimodal or multimodal texts, these latter activating multiple senses outside of vision. Works involved in this study are located on distribution cabinets, i.e., boxes containing thousands of telephone communications cables. An initiative launched in Toronto as a part of the StreetARToronto (START) program gave street artists the opportunity to transform distribution cabinets into artworks. The example of Toronto has been followed by some European cities. The result is a new aesthetic of public spaces, as well as a conception of public art tailored to social and cultural identity of cities and countries.

Key Words

Semiotics; Public Space; Art; Public Art; Street Art; START Toronto

Contents

1. Art and Public Art
 2. Public Art and Public space
 3. Analysis of Public Art on Cable Distribution Cabinets
 4. Conclusion
- Bibliography
Sitography

1. Art and Public Art

In every human function, art is part of a complex set of beliefs and rituals, social and moral codes, magic and science, myth and history. It lies somewhere between what people perceive and what they believe, what they desire and what they are able to achieve. According to Danesi, defining art is as difficult as defining culture. Art is something that everyone recognizes, but it cannot be precisely defined (cf. Danesi 2017: 182). Apart from being a way of expression, art is also a way of communication through the messages that the creator of the work of art wants to convey. But besides being a means of communication, art is sometimes also a means of exercising control by trying to impose order on the natural environment, freeze time or ensure immortality (cf. Steriotis, Zoras 1970).

In any community large or small, the motifs and themes of the art are largely shared. Expressive means and idioms are limited by available materials and tools, by inherited knowledge and know-how, by some special conventions. According to Hegel art is defined as the way through which spirit manifests itself in a specific way. Art, according to the philosopher, must make an idea accessible to ponder through the creation of Figures. These Figures will be an expression of our freedom (cf. Hegel [1835] 1997: 17). Another view of art was formulated by Heidegger, who defined art as the manifestation of truth, its becoming and its fact. Art, therefore, can be understood as a language used to express the physical and spiritual reality of a person. This language captures what is surrounded by people and is then internalized. This action of 'internalization' then emerges transformed into the artist's free creation. Therefore, art is absolutely critical to man because it is the expression of the human spirit (Heidegger [1935-36] 1988: 63).

Within this expression of the human spirit in a non-inert environment that is constantly transforming, man felt the need to express this evolution through various forms of art, such as music, painting, literature, etc. but also in different environments outside of his private space. This is how art developed in public space. One of the forms of painting art is the so-called public art.

This study focuses on the connotations created by public art and how it is integrated and interacts with the urban landscape and the underlying individuals through famous works of art or famous personalities and creates within the urban fabric a new fabric between the conventions of art, expression and in the space where these works are placed.

According to Ursic (2004), whoever talks about Public Art refers to works of art in any form, which are designed/executed with a specific intention: to be placed in the open public space, to be 'out-going' and accessible to all (cf. Evagelou 2021).

Public art has been associated with public space which is the built and natural environment that is outside the sphere of private space, that is, public space is not limited between streets, squares, monuments, recreational areas and transportation networks but is experienced daily in the wider urban landscape of a city (cf. Nikolaidou 1976: 160). According to Friedmann (1988) public space is the space in which people live, i.e. it is a place of interaction

where everything is related to human existence on a political, economic and social level. The space is part of the city where the building areas are formed, it is to be precise the space of the urban fabric where urbanization also exists (cf. Azzali *et al.* 2021: 90).

As Arendt (1958) mentions in her observation on the subject of public art in society, she stated that:

Public art is not the grinding, arduous discovery of a common denominator that absolutely everyone will understand and endorse. It actually assists in the identification of individuals and groups and what separates them, so that agreement on a common purpose is an impassioned deliberation rather than a thoughtless resignation. (Lacy 1995: 69)

Something else that should be added is the state's positioning on the issue of public art projects especially when there exists funding from various sources as Lacy (1995) states. As he points out, according to Lacy (1995) there are community art projects such as "Culture in Action" that rely on a variety of funding sources main foundations, corporate and individual sponsors, business in-kind donations, and of course the National Endowment for the Arts along with state and local arts councils. [...] The case of the Kafaos is paralleled in a similar way. The original idea was first implemented in Toronto and continued in European cities. Indeed, the expression of art operates within contexts that are demarcated between the position stated by Lacy (1995), meaning that the location of the conceptualization and funding of community-based projects makes them "Public Art" in a particular sense (Shiner [1934] 2001: 197).

But also, according to Senie (1992) where some public artworks derive from their artists' strong commitment in bringing art and life together so that it can also be found in many artworks that are 'public' in a more traditional way, meaning projects commissioned directly by government agencies (*ibidem*).

2. Public Art and Public space

Part of public art and one of its most widespread forms are the creations of Graffiti and Street art, that is, it is the art that is done in public spaces and has a visual character.¹

According to Bates (2014), graffiti and the street art creates a combination based upon the communication of the public and enhances the importance of the cultural heritage of each place. Like in every form of art, in public art the means of expression are varied. The inspiration mainly comes from an ordinary perspective rather than a more sophisticated one and therefore is on a more personal level. This can be shown by its increasing popularity among the growing number of public art works. As a result, it gains additional value in the beautification of public space as a means of social engagement charging further its importance (cf. Bates 2014: 66).

¹ <<https://www.lifo.gr/mag/features/3971>>; online the 29/06/2020.

Public Art is partly Graffiti. A historical review shows that the word Graffiti appeared as a term in the mid-19th century and is derived from the Italian word 'graffiato' (scratched). It was first used by archaeologists when discovering the inscriptions in the ruins of Rome and Pompeii. Then after it was registered as a term, it passed from archeology and ancient marbles to modern cities and its impersonal concrete walls.

The term 'graffiti' is a cross-loan of the Italian term 'graffitig', which is formed from the verb 'graffiare' (to carve, to draw), which comes from the Latin words 'graphiare' and 'graphium', which in turn are related to the ancient Greek word 'graphein', which has the meaning of inscribing.

According to Tsamantakis and Pagalos (2016) graffiti has been recognized as one of the great art movements from the middle of the 20th century. There are many different artists who contribute their style and dynamism to contemporary iconography. As well as festivals are held and a lot of graffiti is seen on the internet and on TV. The history of graffiti begins in America, and has its roots in New York in the late 1960s. The various fermentations in the late 60s such as, the war in Vietnam, dictatorships around the world, student mobilizations, uprising minorities, racial rights, etc. formed an atmosphere in which graffiti made its first appearances (cf. Tsamantakis, Pagalos 2016: 10-11).

The contribution, especially in New York, of the inequality and turmoil experienced by residents in neighborhoods with conflicting sides, racism and the police, crime and the drug epidemic, was also important. New York has been a preeminent metropolis of the world with residents of various ethnicities, a melting pot of people and cultures. The course of its changes as white people moved to the suburbs and the remaining residents took refuge in the abandoned and demolished housing, which caused the creation of ghettos, such as the districts of Harlem and the Bronx. Within this setting and in special local conditions, the first writers began at the age of 9-16. The Greek Taki 183 and the Puerto Rican Julio 204 were among the first to mark the genre of this particular era of graffiti. Little by little, the majority of the Bronx began to write their names too, on walls, train cars, subways. Ten years of continuous development reaches graffiti in the 80s, where the first books and the first films on the theme of graffiti were released (*ivi*: 12).

There are many forms of making graffiti and the most popular ways will be mentioned below:

- STENCIL. Stencils are created in advance, usually from cardboard or other materials that leave an impression;
- CLASSIC GRAFFITI. This is an outgrowth of hip-hop culture where artists write or paint in public spaces, directly on walls or large surfaces;
- TAG. It is considered the simplest form of graffiti and consists only of the artist's signature;
- STREET ART. The art that is done in public spaces and has a visual character;
- PASTEUP. A design or stencil made on paper and "stuck" to the wall like a sticker;
- BURNER. A large usually complex design or stencil and because it takes a long time to make it is usually legal (with a permit). We find it on trains, walls and billboards;

- **PIECE.** The graffiti made with 3D effects, shadows, fillings, etc. considered among the most impressive works of the kind.

In the early 1990s, with economic growth and the beginnings of urban regeneration processes, the first large-scale mutation of “tagging” into “graffiti art” appeared. Since the late 1990s, “graffiti” has been accepted by ever wider sections of the urban population as “Street Art”. As a new form of public art, Street Art, it was able to claim legal status (cf. Giakouvakis, Kalogeraki 2018: 11-12).

3. Analysis of Public Art on Cable Distribution Cabinets

Street art artists create visual narrative texts within the context of communication, transmitting messages to an external environment, street art, that is, was expressed in the urban public spaces of cities (cf. Stampoulidis 2019: 26).

Thus, public art functioned on the one hand as a means of communication and on the other as a means of expression, signaling a change in the art of not only interior – private spaces, but also exterior – public spaces. The public space can be adapted to two levels. In the strictly functional and in the cultural-symbolic. The first level, the functional one, reflects human needs as they derive from the patterns of behavior that have been incorporated into the various constructs. At the second cultural-symbolic level, the public space symbolizes memories. That is, specific elements that mark the space more easily, emotionally charged, that are consumed symbolically and give the value of its use (cf. Nicolaidou 1976: 160-161).

Within the public space of the cities and between these two levels, the functional where the cable distributions are placed, which are boxes containing thousands of telephone communication cables and the cultural-symbolic, the artists create works on these cable boxes and turn them into works of art. This initiative was launched in Toronto as part of the StreetARToronto (START) program. Toronto’s example was followed by some European cities, giving the public space a new aesthetic look and view of public art adapted to the social and cultural identity of each city and country. Through the art of cable distribution cabinets, the public space in modern cities is transformed and functions sometimes less and sometimes more symbolically, giving a new perspective of view and attitude, creating a kind of aesthetic coverage of the public space in a kind of web that is weaved between the spatial structures and the social-cultural structures, turning the public space into a field of representative signs of a semiotic system of the signifier and signified.

Thus, we are provided with a new interpretation to the public space of the city as a system of signifiers and signified to determine its essence, to the root causes, to the organization of the modern way of life, to the overthrow of the old models of communication (cf. Ledrut 1973: 41). So public art within the space it is located in interacts, changes and shifts from function to communication giving new meaning to the identity of the space. According to Nicolaidou (1976), the identity of the space is transformed into a method of understanding needs and desires, so that the weight shifts from function to communication, the space is identified with a system of reference points, the reading of which becomes the main purpose (cf. Nicolaidou 1976: 379).



Picture 1. A project that represents a perspective of the architectural construction aspect of the city of Milan.

According to Kuittinen (2010), who is an enthusiast of street art, neglected and rubbish heaped buildings as well as billboards acted as a canvas and a surface for imprinting, thus giving buildings more value than they have by themselves. Street art artists enhance the disused space by creating an aesthetic interest. Although this may undermine the ownership of the building, yet the work of public art belongs to everyone and not to someone (cf. Bates 2014: 66).

Thus, the public art of cable distribution cabinets, on the one hand, creates works for aesthetic reasons and on the other hand, to express and narrate a text through its visual communication. The themes vary depending on what each artist wants to express. They can be either representations of everyday life such as the example from the city of Milan or from famous works of art such as the examples of Florence and Thessaloniki, or portraits of globally recognized artists such as Maria Kalas.

The first example is the cable distribution cabinet in Milan (picture 1),² a project that represents a perspective of the architectural construction aspect of the city of Milan. Milan, the capital of Lombardy, is the most densely populated and developed regional city in northern Italy, as well as the symbol of the economic and industrial center of the Italian north and the headquarters of the Italian stock exchange.³ Within this economic and social field of the city, public art found itself applied in public spaces, creating its own literal and symbolic interpretation. According to Barthes (1971) the reference to the symbolic interpretation of space, and especially of urban space, involves risks,

² <<https://www.pickpik.com/power-boxes-graffiti-milan-via-santa-croce-wall-paint-75418?fbclid=IwAR1kZ5frXDePx7y14DlBfyc2cchokvqRQ9IvyAJJKlxy8ZcyVHpb1Ve98yo>>; online 21/2/2022.

³ <<http://6lyk-acharn.att.sch.gr/yliko/cs/y1011/milan1011t.pdf>>; online 21/09/2022.



Picture 2. Johannes Vermeer's famous painting The Girl with a Pearl Earring.

to the extent that architecture as a specific human action in space has a dual quality. To the extent that it is art, it is or can be symbolic, to the extent that it is part of social production, it is an economic activity (cf. Stefanou 1979: 137-162). Thus, the work in the public space is transformed into a representation of the reflection of the economic and social background of the city itself as a result of the industrial revolution that created the accumulation of the citizens in the cities creating their mass settlement in spaces which on the one hand would fit them and on the other hand should meet their needs.

As Marrone (2009) puts it, from a semiotic point of view the city is not a thing, a more or less objective reality, a constructed part of space where a powerful concentration of people lives and works, but a relationship. A mutual relationship between two levels, an interdependence that emerges as an expression and something else that is its content, so that one cannot exist without the other and vice versa (cf. Marrone 2009: 2). Through this relationship, an interconnected coupling is created between the space and its people so that public art constitutes a spatial communication system.

The second work on a cable distribution cabinet analyzed comes from Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer's famous painting *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* (picture 2)⁴ an oil painting on canvas from around 1665. The work depicts an imaginary young woman in an exotic dress and with a large pearl earring. The work is permanently housed in the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague.⁵

In the work on the cabinet, the artist has added a sea mask to the girl with the earring and the background is blue, as if she is in water, but with this specific mask it refers to the sea. Here there is a strong variation with the artist's intervention on the girl's face with the addition of the mask. The expression of each artist is free and spontaneous, so that the visual intervention focuses, as Lynch (1960) formulates, on legibility. That is, its central concept is the legibility of the elements of the urban space, i.e., their ability to create a strong Figure. According to Lynch (*ibidem*), this property is due to two main components in identity, i.e. the recognizability of the objects and structure, that is, the existence of relationships between the objects and between them and the observer. The legible is for Lynch (*ibidem*) the level of the urban system that organizes opinions and activities and provides the raw material for social symbols (cf. Lagopoulos 2017: 66).

Thus, the legibility in the public art of this specific cable distribution cabinet creates the feeling of the known work of art but, at the same time, it stimulates and creates the enigmatic expression in combination with the mystery of its identity. The work of art 'The girl with a pearl earring' is a much-discussed work of art that, when viewed on the cabinet, creates various connotations. Some may argue it leads to comparisons with the ambiguous Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci circa 1503-1519. Unlike the Mona Lisa, however, The Girl with a Pearl Earring is not a portrait, but a 'tronie', a Dutch term for a character or type of person. A young woman may have been a model for Vermeer, but the painting is not intended to depict her or any specific person, in contrast to the manner of the model that in Leonardo's work depicted an existing person possibly Lisa Gherardini, the wife of a Florentine merchant. The Girl with a Pearl Earring is a much-discussed painting that was adapted into a novel in 1999 and an Oscar-nominated film in 2003 starring Scarlett Johansson as the fictional Greet and Colin Firth as Vermeer. Art itself, with its much-discussed works, creates in itself a point that acquires this multidimensional character between the literal and the figurative, between the signifier and the signified, giving a new dimension to public space through the ambiguity of the new perspective of the work of art. The viewing of the work can provoke the deep thought of what this addition of the sea mask means, but also, the thought that an artist simply varies the original aspect according to some of his own experiences.

According to Lagopoulos (2017) there are certain processes in the urban space with a semiotic stamp. A rapidly evolving urban phenomenon is the 'thematization' of urban space (cf. Lagopoulos 2017: 67). Thus, the thematiza-

⁴ <https://www.romeing.it/florence/street-art-in-florence/?fbclid=IwARoNp2CGSxJpo_YWHGiGhpPoLEHjbuXGg2_19Qwn_LU96wUb_q2v-WdZSOo>; online 21/2/2022.

⁵ <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Girl-with-a-Pearl-Earring-by-Vermeer>>; online 21/09/2022.



Picture 3. Maria Kallas.

tion of the urban space of the cities under study has the artistic intervention of various works of public art, but which are not necessarily from copies of other works of art. A characteristic work that gave a multidimensional Figure to the urban space of Athens, is the one portraying the great soprano of the lyric stage Maria Kalas. The works of street art can appear either as unimodal texts, that is, there is only one semiotic system of communication so that a work of public art is for example perceived at least visually, or as multimodal texts which activate multiple senses apart from vision, for example on a metaphorical level touch and hearing (cf. Bal 1991: 89-95; Neef 2007: 418-431).

This is how the connotation of Maria Kalas (picture 3),⁶ is transferred so that the automatic thought of the viewer - receiver of the message of the public project is referred to the lyrical sounds of the great soprano. According to Stamboulidis (2019) there is a conceptual and terminological distinction

⁶ <https://mikropragmata.lifo.gr/guest_posts/athina-apithana-erga-apo-ta-kafao-diaforon-geitonion/>; online 25/2/2022.



Picture 4. Reverie.

between polysemiotic communication and multimodality in terms of street art. Multimodality is actually a multidimensional word which is closely related to the notions of modality and semiotic function used conceptually in different disciplines. Stamboulidis (2019) and Zlatev (2019) distinguish perceived senses such as sight, hearing, taste and semiotic systems such as linguistic, visual and gestural systems. It is important to note that the terminological and conceptual distinction between the semiotic systems of language and Figure is not always clear, especially in the case of street art and graffiti. Therefore, street art is usually a form of highly semiotic communication, and thus, is limited by the monosemiotic term either in the case of primarily Figure-dominant or primarily language-dominant graphic representation (cf. Stampoulidis 2019: 26-31).

Thus, the sight of Maria Kalas creates this multimodal semiotic system of communication because its connotation refers to music with the characteristic voice of the soprano. Creating automatic associative thought and recall of her wide range of voice and special acting abilities of the so-called “diva” of the opera.⁷

Thus, through music the appeal to emotion is first caused, where according to Lazarus (1991) in the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions, people decide what to feel after first interpreting what has happened. That is, there is the following sequence: an event causes thought, which affects simultaneous arousal and emotion.

⁷ <https://el.wikipedia.org/wiki/%CE%9C%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%AF%CE%B1_%CE%9A%CE%AC%CE%BB%CE%BB%CE%B1%CF%82>; online 23/09/2022.

Therefore, connotatively the thoughts related to the perception of the work in a public space causes a primary cognitive evaluation which will lead to emotional connotations (cf. Lazarus 1991: 173-174).

Through public works of art, art itself is sometimes represented when works of art are copied from the originals. As if art is expressed by art through a filter of a space - time that gives new meaning to the space - time of the different perspective of the context in which it is placed.

According to Lagopoulos (2017), aesthetics and the aesthetic code are the standard point of reference for traditional evaluations of spatial forms (*ivi*: 68). Within this aesthetic code is placed the last work analyzed from a copy of a painting entitled: "Reverie" of 1904 (picture 4),⁸ by the English painter John William Godward, belonging to the Pre-Raphaelite / Neoclassical period. Godward specialized in portraying women alone in settings suggesting antiquity usually decorative, dark-haired beauties in diaphanous gowns created with ingenious contrasts of colors and flesh tones.⁹

The work represents a woman who is lost in her thoughts; a languid young woman lounges on a smooth veined marble bench terminating in a herm figure, probably representing the type of the poet Homer with its heavy beard thick hair and narrow ribbon around the head. John William Godward probably included it for the delight of juxtaposing such varied textures and colors. He painted the silk, fur and marble with great accuracy, approaching photographic realism and arranged them to enliven the subtly colored composition.¹⁰

The contemporary thematization of spatial forms, as well as the semiotic spatial practices of pre-capitalist societies, reveal a semiotic world much richer than the aesthetic one, since the forms, beyond and outside of their aesthetic value, incorporate and communicate multitudes of other connotative codes, such as the cosmological, the anthropomorphic and the religious, the historical and the cultural, the political and the experiential (cf. Lagopoulos 2017: 68). Within this thematicization of the spatial forms of modern cities, this work feeds into a connotational code that embodies a form of visual communication between space and art.

4. Conclusion

Through the concept of public art and art itself, there is a framing and a rearrangement of the space in a placement from the private to the public sphere. Art without losing its essence gives meaning to works in public spaces expressed through the perspective of each artist. Each artist as a creator does not place the works within strict cultural and historical contexts, but, regardless of which city they are in, the artists express what they originally want to represent through their work, as an attitude and a point of view.

⁸ <https://www.typosthes.gr/thessaloniki/248292_thessaloniki-kafao-eginan-erga-tehnis-sti-nea-paralia-foto>; online 21/2/2022.

⁹ <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_William_Godward>; online 25/09/2022.

¹⁰ <<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103REP>>; online 25/09/2022.

The urban landscape of public spaces is transformed through the works of public art into a closer relationship between the artists and the people who interact.

The public space through the works of art represented on the KAFAOs transform these colorless iron and icy-looking boxes into more elegant ones and create a new public space in between a intercourse between the point of space, time and the expression of the works art. The statement of aesthetics creates, gives birth in essence to the manifestation of a deeper relationship between art and space giving a multidimensional aspect of the work of art. Public art constantly expands through artistic expression and creates webs of interaction within social environments and through almost abandoned surfaces where they are transformed into palettes of expression acquiring new meaning.

Public art, through the example of KAFAOs, participates and collaborates in the urban landscape, giving a deeper meaning to the simple appearance of a work of art, going beyond the simple statement of a representation and passing to the manifestation of the deeper Figure, the interaction and the connection between the work of art and the viewer -receiver giving a new perspective to the new environment that is created.

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