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STREET ART AND THE POLITICS OF IMPROVISATION

Andrea Lorenzo Baldini

1 Introduction

“I’ve done a thousand pieces, ten thousand tags,” Spanish writer Spok once told Rafael Schacter, “and they might have a similar style but they’re never the same. [T]he trained practitioner could see the infinitesimal differences that the hand must always make” (Schacter 2014: 153). With his words, Spok emphasizes the improvisational quality of graffiti, arguably the original and most radical form of street art. When creating their works, in effect, street artists never bring to light something that has been fully planned in advance.

The street is a context in constant evolution: The train is moving, a passerby is approaching, or it has started raining. Under risky and uncertain circumstances, street artists are bound to make some artistically salient decisions on the spot. This condition of forced spontaneity is the primary source of those endless aesthetic variations that even similar works of street art show. But there is something more: For the peculiar social norms regulating visibility in modern cities, as we shall see, the spontaneity of street art also carries political significance. In the context of urban aesthetics, the right to improvise becomes then the object of power struggles. I call that phenomenon the politics of improvisation.

While aestheticians have discussed at length the role of improvisation in the musical arts, other art kinds, just like street art, have been largely ignored. Moreover, in the literature, much emphasis has been placed on clarifying the aesthetic and ethical import of improvisation, but little effort has been made to examine its political implications. In this chapter, I set forth to explore the heretofore overlooked connection between improvisation and street art. I argue that street art’s improvisational nature is grounded in its spontaneous uses of public spaces.

As a consequence of their spontaneity, works of street art are rough and unpolished, thus realizing a distinct aesthetic of imperfection. Such an aesthetic significantly contrasts with the authoritarian perfectionism that dominates the appearances of our cities, the landscapes of which are tightly controlled and carefully planned by the authorities. Such a challenge illuminates, within the context of the politics of improvisation, the extra-aesthetic significance of street art’s spontaneity: By encouraging free expression, street art does not simply have the potential to enrich the aesthetics of our cities, but also to create suitable conditions for more satisfactory and joyful social lives. Section 2 argues that, by disregarding social norms of spatial controls, street artists use public spaces spontaneously. Section 3 examines how such spontaneity requires and is revealed in what I call “on-the-spot adaptations.” Section 4 shows that legal works of street art are also improvisational and spontaneous. Section 5 analyzes the political implications that improvisation acquires in this urban art kind.
2 Improvisation, Spontaneity, and Social Norms

To some, the claim that street art possesses an improvisational nature may very well sound odd. In effect, when creating examples of stencil-graffiti or yarn-bombing, street artists do a lot of preparatory work, methodically designing and realizing, in the comfort of their studios or homes, most of the features that will materially constitute the final product. Stencils are carefully drawn and cut with sharp blades in order to produce the intended patterns. Yarn-bombs are crocheted well in advance, and often with a specific installation site in mind. German art historian Blanché (2016: 47) explicitly raises this criticism against my view by suggesting that “[a]s Street Artists prepare often a lot in advance I would not call a stencil for instance ‘spontaneous’ Street Art.”

One could also press the point further: Even other and more extemporaneous styles of street art such as tags and throw-ups usually require prolonged training to be mastered; these are practices “demanding years of endless repetition,” as Chastanet (2015: 4) correctly points out. Tags, the most basic form of graffiti that constitutes the art of street signatures, hide behind their seeming simplicity a “gestural dexterity” that is “a long (and probably impossible) path for the vast majority of people” (Chastanet 2015: 3). These visual katas seem to leave little to improvisation.

And yet, these dismissals of street art’s improvisational nature depend on a naïve and rather misleading understanding of what it means to improvise. In his work, Alperson (1984, 2010) offers a more articulated characterization of improvisation. He describes an improvised activity as one whose features and its product(s) are decided while performing that activity.

In a very general sense, we can think of improvisation as a kind of goal-directed activity (‘I need to find something to get this boulder out of the way’) […] being done on the fly (‘Maybe I can use this branch as a lever to move the rock’).

(Alperson 2010: 273)

Alperson (2010) recognizes that, according to his general characterization, most human activities are improvisational to some extent. Learning how to walk or talk, befriending someone, or defusing a bomb are all activities that depend on one’s capacity to improvise. However, those actions that we single out as improvisational are characterized by a significant degree of spontaneity and freedom. Improvisation – just like tags and throw-ups – often relies on routines, rituals, and repetitions. It is not fully free or unrestricted. However, in activities that we consider improvisational, “freedom seems to be on display in the spontaneity of the activity” (Alperson 2010: 274).

For instance, in jazz improvisation, the freedom of creating a musical passage on the spot is on display. Of course, improvising jazz involves significant musical skills, the acquisition of which requires years of training. A jazz musician’s daily study routine is, in effect, based on – among other things – repeating patterns as a way to appropriate the genre’s melodic vocabulary, harmonic framework, and rhythmic patterns. However, when improvising, this musical knowledge is re-combined and re-constructed in the moment, in spontaneous ways, always giving rise to new variations. This is where we hear the freedom that characterizes jazz improvisation.

But where is that freedom on display when we consider street art? The answer, as I shall argue, is: It is found in the spontaneous use of public spaces that essentially characterizes the activity of street artists. In other words, the spontaneity in appropriating those surfaces grounds the improvisational dimension of street art. Painting graffiti on the side of a train car or installing a yarn-bomb (Figure 20.1) on a piece of street furniture requires one to freely exploit those urban surfaces for creative self-expression. This, in turn, saliently relates to street art’s illegality, which provides optimal conditions for street artists to cultivate their spontaneity in ways that – as we shall see in Section 4 – allow them to improvise also in legal contexts.
Here, I understand spontaneity by drawing on Carl Hausman’s account of creativity and novelty. Hausman argues that “spontaneity manifests itself as a disruption within the world insofar as the world is a system of determinate events and objects existing in accord with enduring patterns” (Hausman 1975: 117). In this sense, spontaneity occurs when we have discontinuities in the anticipated flow of events. A spontaneous hug, for instance, is one that breaks with one’s expectations: It is one that surprises us for it happens under circumstances that contradict or baffle what was anticipated, both by the hugger and the hugged.

Arguably, spontaneity – understood as explained above – in the use of public surfaces appears central to many accounts of street art. Blanché (2016), for example, claims that street art is “self-authorized,” that is, it is art created freely while ignoring external prohibitions. Similarly, for Bacharach (2015), aconsentuality is a necessary condition for an artwork to be street art. Aconsentuality is the property of being created without authorization from the property owner. In her view, street artists act freely as to how, where, and when they create their works.

I also emphasize the spontaneity that characterizes the activity of street artists when discussing what I call street art’s essential “subversiveness” (Baldini 2016a and 2018). Drawing on Lopes (2009, 2014), I argue that street art is an “appreciative kind” (Baldini 2019: 318). Appreciative kinds are groups of particulars sharing a common feature or value (Lopes 2009: 17). And we appreciate a particular $p_i$ qua an example of a specific appreciative kind $K$ in comparison with arbitrarily any other particular $p_x$ in $K$. My view is that all works of street art are subversive. In other words, they share a particular variety of subversive value. This value is a function of street art’s capacity to question the social norms that regulate the uses of public spaces.4

Street artists subvert acceptable uses of public spaces by using them freely. Here, “freely” is intended in two senses. First, street artists use public spaces “for free,” that is, without charge for them or those appreciating the works. Street art, in this sense, is a “gift” to the city (Irvine 2012: 252). This, in turn, challenges the logic of profit that generally determines access to public spaces in modern cities. Using visible surfaces, in effect, generally comes at a cost: It is regulated as an

Figure 20.1 A patch by Lady Muck left on an already yarn-bombed bike rack by Carrie Reichardt. Photo by Carrie Reichardt.
economic transaction (Figure 20.2). I call that system of visibility the *corporate regime of visibility* (Baldini 2016b, 2018: 6 f.). By refusing to be commodities, works of street art transgress such a regime.

The second sense in which street artists use public space *freely* is more important in this context, that is, the analysis of street art’s improvisational nature. The creation of, for example, a tag involves the appropriation of a visible surface in ways that are unconstrained, unplanned, and voluntary, that is, it uses public spaces spontaneously. Such spontaneity defies the rigid control that authorities and elites exercise over expressing oneself in public. The creation of a tag follows, therefore, from a self-generating desire to express oneself, disrupting the expected patterns regulating visual communication in the city. But how does this spontaneity reveal the freedom of street artists’ improvisational activity? The following section looks at just this question.

### 3 On-the-Spot Adaptations and Urban Performances

The spontaneity characterizing street artists’ use of public spaces transforms their deeds into forms of improvised urban performances for the following reason: It puts those artists in the position of making decisions about some fundamental features of their works on the fly. In effect, in spite of how carefully the design of a stencil-graffiti has been planned and prepared, or how rigorously a tag has been rehearsed on pieces of papers or other surfaces, transubstantiating those creative ideas into tangible particulars always requires what I call *on-the-spot adaptations* about one or more salient characteristics of the work.
In order to clarify the nature of on-the-spot adaptations, let me contrast those with what Iveson (2010) defines “tactical adaptations.” Starting, arguably, from the 1970s, an increasing number of local political authorities across the globe have declared war against graffiti. In order to stop or limit graffiti writing, municipal administrations have adopted and implemented sophisticated strategies and technologies of containment and surveillance, often borrowed from the military. Graffiti writers and other street artists have responded by developing counter-tactics involving, among other things, the accumulation of geographical knowledge of the city, the development of more effective technologies of counter-surveillance, and the selection of quickly-executed styles and safer installation places (Iveson 2010: 129). Tactical adaptations, in “chess-like” (McAdam 1983: 735) fashion, aim at neutralizing a situation of potential risk before it can happen. In this sense, such counter-tactics refer to long-term shifts in know-how and know-that, which influence, in particular, the planning stages of creating a work of street art.

However, no matter how advanced and sophisticated the technologies and strategies that street artists implement are, no tactical adaptation can account for all contingencies. For instance, in tagging a wall, a writer has to decide in the moment features such as the exact location and size. Also, yarn-bombers may very well decide in the spur of the moment where to place their knits (Pompilio 2019). While doing a stencil-graffiti, a street artist chooses, on the spot, the level of accuracy of the final design. Moreover, the moment of execution is generally chosen on the fly, in reaction to extemporaneous contextual conditions. These decisions are on-the-spot adaptations.5

Arguably, one can observe some of the most instructive examples of on-the-spot adaptations when watching videos of graffiti writers in action. For instance, Utah’s and Ether’s twelve-episode series Probation Vacation: Lost in Asia is one of the most popular documentaries of that kind.6 Their videos effectively convey, even to untutored viewers, the sense of suspense and the unpredictability of spontaneously using public spaces. In those videos, “the Bonnie and Clyde of Graffiti,” as the American couple have been nicknamed, show very well the level of on-the-spot adaptation that their extreme actions involve (Zio 2015).

Episode 11 – Part 1 documents the work of Utah and Ether in selected Chinese cities: Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Nanjing, and Wuhan.7 While painting a piece on a train in a yard in Shenzhen, we can see Ether speeding up the execution of his stylish work after hearing some workers speaking. A whispering voice – arguably Utah – urges the crew to move: “Let’s go!” Ether exits the frame but, after a few moments, we can hear a voiceover: “One sec!” The Chicago native quickly goes back to the train car and adds just a few details with black spray-paint. Here is a plausible reconstruction of this event: After realizing that there was no imminent danger and the outline could have used a quick touch-up, he decided, on the fly, to add some details to the piece. He is deciding in the moment, then, some relevant features of the piece’s design. This is a paradigmatic example of on-the-spot adaptation.

Another interesting source perspicuously documenting on-the-spots adaptations is the series “Graffiti Fail Compilation” by Daos243. These videos appropriate the popular format of presenting a sequence of actions gone wrong and apply it to graffiti writing. In this sense, they present cases where on-the-spot adaptations were unsuccessful. Just like a jazz player missing a note during an improvised solo or a dancer falling during a piece of impromptu choreography, these writers show the risks that they take in using public spaces spontaneously: This, in turn, provides evidence that street art is truly improvisational. In the opening sequence of the first video of this series, the writers are doing a piece on a train.8 All of a sudden, an electronically distorted voice says, in Spanish: “Ey, nos salieron, nos salieron” (Ey, they see us, they see us) They have been spotted by security guards. From there, the two writers quickly decide to stop painting and leave the site. These actions are followed by other on-the-spot adaptations, including leaving their spray cans behind.9
Of course, as these examples show, street artists take risks in a sense that is literal, whereas in traditional art the risks are generally only metaphorical. Such a literality has interesting consequences: It jeopardizes the very conditions of the performance possibly continuing. However, the differences with other art practices are more of degree than kind. In other improvised art forms, it is true that adaptive failures seldom result in a performative breakdown. And yet, structurally, that is always a possibility (Butler 2010: 152). Though, for instance, in jazz improvisations, performative slips are usually reabsorbed creatively into the phrasing (Bertinetto 2016), a reiterated series of faux pas may fatally break the musical flow (Fordham 2011). Dance improvisers can suffer from injuries that can possibly end not only performances but also their artistic careers. Empirically, in street art, performative breakdowns are surely more frequent but, in this respect, there are structural similarities across different artistic practices.

By clarifying the improvisational nature of street art, the sequences from Utah’s and Ether’s video as well as from “The Graffiti Fail Compilation” also offer us important insights into the ontology of this art kind. They show us that works of street art are better understood as performances rather than visual artifacts of some sort. In effect, fully appreciating the spontaneity of street artists’ use of public spaces and their freedom requires moving away from commonsensical views while reorienting our ontological understanding of street art: We need an ontology that can effectively capture street art’s “distinct performative aspect” (Chackal 2016: 366).

Pre-critical ontologies, more or less explicitly endorsed by many discussants of street art, characterize works of this art kind as visual artifacts. Pictorial styles, just like graffiti or stencil-graffiti, are generally understood as artifacts similar to murals and frescoes (Gouyette 2019). Other varieties that exploit three-dimensional forms are naturally captured under labels of street sculpture. Even those styles, such as yarnbombing, breaking with traditional genres and media of Western art, are easily conceptualized in terms of object-centered ontologies: forms of craftivism. According to those views, the artwork is the physical object that is a product of the street artist’s intentional actions.

Chackal (2016) laments the limitations of object-centered ontologies of street art. In discussing street art’s relationship with the law, he suggests that such ontologies are ill-equipped to capture the audacity of artworks in that kind. Such a feature is often (though not exclusively) a function of the illegality of street artists’ actions. In effect, using public spaces spontaneously is de jure forbidden in many countries. However, most actions that make a piece audacious are not directly related to the material realization of the forms of a work of street art. Audacity often depends not on creating a certain design, but rather on accessing dangerous locations (Figure 20.3). Appreciating that feature requires, therefore, an ontology that understands a work of street art “as a process rather than merely a product” (Chackal 2016: 366).

In my work, I defend a performance-centered ontology of street art (Baldini 2017: 31 f.). Drawing on Davies (2004), I argue that what we appreciate with a work of street art is not the product that is the outcome of a street artist’s actions, but rather the “generative actions” whereby such an outcome was created (Baldini 2018: 18). In line with what Chackal (2016) also suggests, those actions include much more than the limited set of gestures that are performed, for instance, to tag a wall or to wrap a yarn-bomb around a pole. The performance, which I shall also call “generative performance,” is not defined by the creation of some tangible object striclo sensu, but rather by the generative actions of a street artist lato sensu.

This performance-centered ontology of street art aligns well with how Banksy describes the experience and appreciation of street art, especially in comparison with those related to traditional painting. “People look at an oil painting,” the elusive street artist claims, “and admire the use of brushstrokes to convey meaning. People look at a graffiti painting and admire the use of a drainpipe to gain access” (Banksy 2005: 237). With these words, Banksy arguably characterizes an example of graffiti as “a perspicuous representation” of its generative performance (Davies 2004: 117).
Of course, the outcome of such a performance – the work-product – plays a crucial role in the appreciation of street art. However, those manifest properties are not enough. In street art, “the provenance, or history of making, of artistic vehicles bear crucially upon the proper appreciation” (Davies 2005: 67) of its specimen. Manifest properties of the work-product are, if you wish, traces revealing a street artist’s activity, which an appreciator can imaginatively reconstruct when encountering the work-product. And that imaginative experience is crucial, for instance, in appreciating a work of street art’s audacity (Baldini 2018: 18). This understanding of the ontology of street art helps me clarify the deeper sense in which street artists use public spaces spontaneously: They do not simply appropriate visible surfaces, rather, they hijack through their movements a larger portion of the city. In the following section, I show how its performativity is crucial for understanding the improvisational nature of legal street art.

4 Legality, Improvisation, and Street Art’s Aesthetics of Imperfection

At this point, one might wonder whether my discussion of street artists’ spontaneous uses of public spaces allow for the existence of legal street art. With legal street art, I mean those works the generative actions of which do not involve any de jure violation of current norms regulating access to public spaces. Examples of legal street art would include, for instance, graffiti realized in Halls of Fame, murals painted during festivals, and street installations done in connection with sanctioned art projects. In most cases, the generative actions bringing about those focuses of appreciation do not violate any laws.
One way to answer this question is by just biting the bullet and accepting that legal street art does not exist. This, in turn, entails that illegality is a necessary condition for something to be street art. In the literature, Austin (2010: 34) arguably defends this position: Street art, he writes, is “produced illegally in the shared public spaces of the modern city.” Among graffiti writers, this view is widespread: Prominent writers such as KATO and OKER have made clear that legal pieces are not graffiti (Brighenti 2010: 320; “EXCLUSIVE” 2018). It is easy to extend their argument as to cover all styles of street art.

However, the view denying the existence of legal street art is problematic. Many prominent scholars suggest that there are significant counterexamples to that proposal on how to demarcate street art (Brighenti 2010; Young 2014; Bacharach 2015; Chackal 2016). By accepting illegality as a necessary condition, one would have to exclude from street art “works seen as paradigmatic” (Young 2014: 4). I also reject the idea that street art is necessarily illegal. Only judges in court, strictly speaking, can decide de jure whether something is illegal or not. As a result, taken seriously, this view would make judges the true and only arbitri elegantiarum in street art, the final decision-makers about its extension. This implication seems to me as a reductio ad absurdum of the view (Baldini 2018: 24).

The other possible answer is to claim that legal street art exists. However, this move calls for an explicit assessment of the relationship between this variety of street art and improvisation. In effect, at first sight, one might wonder how street artists acting legally would find themselves in that condition of forced spontaneity that grounds street art’s improvisational nature. If one does not need to avoid getting caught while trespassing or committing some other violation, then on-the-spot adaptations seem uncalled for. When legally authorized, in this sense, street artists’ performances seem far from improvisational and spontaneous.

It is indeed true that, when working legally, street artists need not act and react to changing conditions through on-the-spot adaptations. However, their works are still spontaneous and, therefore, improvisational, though in a qualified sense. In an interview, legendary graffiti writer Fra32 expressed some remarks that pertinently illuminate this issue. While talking about festivals and Halls of Fame, where writers usually work legally, the Italian legend turned Australian resident clearly stresses that it is possible to recognize works of writers and street artists who regularly work illegally. “The difficulty of painting in those contexts,” he told me in that conversation, “has to do with keeping the spontaneity of the street. It’s not easy, but kings would know how to do it.”

But how are street artists able to work spontaneously even when working legally? They can do it thanks to the specific nature of street art’s generative performances. In particular, their specific temporality allows those to be spontaneous and improvisational. Generative performances in street art, in effect, are constituted by temporally consecutive actions. In this sense, generative actions individuating a “manifest work” (Davies 2004: 26), that is the product of the generative performance, are completed in one take. That is, there are no pauses, moments of detachment from the generative performance, or times for dispassionate deliberation.

In paradigmatic cases of illegal street art, the specific temporality of street art’s generative performances is primarily a function of the need to execute and leave as soon as possible. However, illegal generative performances do not own a monopoly over temporal consecutiveness. It is certainly possible to bring that particular variety of temporality to bear also on generative performances of street art realized in legal contexts. And, I believe, opting for such a temporality opens up improvisational possibilities for street artists by recreating conditions of forced spontaneity that echo those experienced in the creation of illegal street art.

This variety of forced spontaneity deriving from the temporal consecutiveness of generative performances in street art resembles the one found in different Asian schools of ink painting. Limitations of their respective mediums make corrections, revisions, and modifications impossible, enforcing a type of temporality similar to that of street art. Those are paintings done in one take.

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By drawing a comparison between jazz improvisation and the Japanese school of painting on parchment, legendary jazz pianist Bill Evans well captures how medium limitations connect with spontaneity: “These artists,” Evans writes, “must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere” (Davis 1959).

One could object that, contrary to what happens with ink painting, a street artist could actually return at a later moment to complete a work. This, in turn, would violate the temporal consecutiveness of street art’s performances. I cannot fully address this ontological concern here. In brief, I do not believe that a street artist can return to complete a work within the same performance. This option has several advantages, including sidestepping Davies’ well-known difficulty of specifying the limits of generative performances (Matravers 2005). The visual continuity between two (or more) work-products may give rise to a new whole that one would like to count as a work. However, the two (or more) performances still maintain ontological independence. (Even the first performance constitutes a finished work that can be per se appreciated, though those following may require reference to the previous ones.) Consider this analogy: If today I record the first chorus of a song, tomorrow the second, and so on, the result is not a performance, but the recording of several juxtaposed performances — or, at best, a “virtual performance” (Davies 2003: 37) — that one may count as a work. Similarly, a later street art performance may give rise to a new work, though it was produced via multiple performances.

The lack of deliberation that is forced upon street artists as a consequence of the temporality of their performances has important consequences in terms of formal properties. As Hamilton (1990, 2000) convincingly argues, spontaneity is significantly connected to the aesthetics of imperfection. In effect, the essential “unpredictability and excitement” of improvisations generally result in a “greater incidence of ‘formal imperfection’” (Hamilton 1990: 336). Formally imperfect works possess features that are irregular, unpolished, incomplete, disordered, rough, unfinished, etc. Saito (2017) shows that imperfect features can also be aesthetically rewarding insofar as they can enrich our aesthetic palette, while also vigorously stimulating our imagination. In effect, the exceptional and the deviant can engage our mind in refreshing ways.

Manifest works of street art clearly show imperfect aesthetic features. If looking closely at a piece such as the homage that Fra32 painted on a train in Italy to honor SAME, one can easily see that the outlines do not perfectly encircle the colored filling: Traces of color appear outside the black lines (Figure 20.4). In tags, the most basic and spontaneous variety of street art, color dripping is virtually inevitable. In stencil graffiti, we can see uneven fillings or excessive use of color. Examples of yarnbombing maintain that rough and uneven aspect of DIY items and are quickly deteriorated, among other things, by atmospheric agents.

Street art’s aesthetics of imperfection is grounded, of course, on its paradigmatic illegality. As said above, avoiding getting caught imposes strict requirements on the temporality of generative performances, which are often rushed. However, that particular aesthetic is not necessarily limited to illegal cases of street art. While working legally, street artists can recover the temporality and spontaneity that are forced on them when violating the law. In this sense, by working illegally, they acquire cultural, emotional, expressive, psychological, and technical resources that allow them to be spontaneous in legal circumstances also. This, in turn, is instrumental in achieving that aesthetic of imperfection characterizing originally illegal street art.

The link between street art’s spontaneity and its aesthetics of imperfection has been, I believe, largely overlooked. And yet, it seems key for explaining certain facts about this art kind, especially in legal contexts. Let me examine two of those facts. First, such peculiar aesthetics help us clarify the continuity between legal and illegal street art. Chackal (2016) explains it in genetic terms: Street artists working both legally and illegally bring into existence a socially and artistically unified practice. Those who only work illegally illegitimately appropriate the aesthetics of street art.
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Chackal is certainly correct on this point, but I think that there is more to be said. Artists without street credit – that is, those who do not have extensive experience of working illegally – lack those resources that ground street art’s distinctive aesthetics of imperfection. The work of Mr. Brainwash is not inauthentic and unoriginal merely because he is a fraud. His work is dull, lifeless, and unimaginative also (and perhaps primarily) because it looks and feels so: The perceivable formal features of his work reveal his lack of spontaneity and of those talents and abilities typical of good street artists. What some graffiti writers call “funk,” that is, this state of grace of being spontaneous, is something that one can acquire only by working illegally. And posers can only pretend to have it, while never being authentically funk.

Second, its peculiar aesthetics of imperfection is one of the salient features that distinguishes street art from other kinds of urban art such as authorized forms of muralism and urban installation. Examples of those art kinds, in effect, do not embrace the aesthetics of imperfection that is distinctive of street art. For instance, the perfectionist aesthetics of Andrea RAVO Mattoni’s Classicism Project is one of the reasons why those works are not street art. His reproductions of masterpieces from the history of Western art are praised for their level of detail and accuracy: They do not show signs of the formal imperfection that stems from street art’s spontaneity. Though its aesthetic consequences are important, street art’s improvisational nature also has important political implications. In the following section, I discuss just that.

5 Urban Spontaneity and the Politics of Improvisation

In the previous section, I emphasized the aesthetic consequences of street art’s spontaneity while placing emphasis on its formal imperfection. However, there are also extra-aesthetic implications that we should consider. Some have recognized, for instance, the ethical dimension of improvisation. In particular, among others, Higgins (1991: 7) suggests that improvised jazz interplay provides us with “a musical model for ethics with respect to the interaction of individual
and group.” Here, I am shifting the focus on improvisation’s political implications, which have been heretofore largely overlooked.

In order to understand such extra-aesthetic consequences, let me briefly introduce what I call the *politics of urban aesthetics* (Baldini 2020b). With this notion, I refer to the following phenomenon: decisions about a city’s aesthetics are essentially political. This idea draws on Jacques Rancière’s work on the relationship between politics and aesthetics. He argues that, in its most radical and basic sense, politics deals primarily with processes of inclusion and exclusion from the public arena. To be perceived or visible in public, for Rancière, is a condition for political participation: The beginning of politics has to do with identifying “the community that speaks” (Rancière 1999: 9).

Rancière primarily uses the notion of the “distribution of the sensible” to connect politics and aesthetics while explaining processes of inclusion and exclusion (Rancière 2004). In his theory, aesthetics refers not merely to the study of the beautiful, but also to the original meaning of the discipline investigating the domain of appearances. With the “distribution of the sensible,” Rancière intends – among other things – the set of social norms regulating what can be perceived in the public spaces of a given society. Groups that are excluded from expressing themselves visibly in public are *de facto* excluded from political participation. Therefore, visibility, as Brighenti (2007) shows, is essentially a political category, grounding full-fledged inclusion in the public sphere.

Cities offer contexts that are particularly sensitive to matters of political inclusion and exclusion. Not only do the majority of people live in urban areas, but those are quintessential centers of diversity. City dwellers come from heterogeneous backgrounds: They differ across multiple dimensions, including ethnic and racial origin, upbringing, income, education level, religious affiliation, social habits, personal preferences and taste, and so on. The spatial proximity that urban settlements impose on their inhabitants is likely to turn such diversity into political conflict (Beall 2009).

What I have called the corporate regime of visibility is the particular distribution of the sensible regulating appearances in the city, thus also grounding processes of political inclusion and exclusion in that context. Such a regime has found a powerful ally in controlling the city landscape in the *broken-window theory* (Wilson and Kelling 1982). As is well known, according to this theory any sign of disorder is considered a violation of decorum. Such violations should not appear and be present in public spaces, and, therefore, are made illegal.

Graffiti, loitering, and skateboarding have been traditional targets of policies of decorum. However, the range of forbidden activities has been growing in the last few decades. As an instructive example, consider what happened in the city of Pisa in October 2018. At that time, the City Council passed a bill censoring many behaviors in public spaces (Baldini 2020b). Actions such as sitting on the grass in green areas or occupying benches with food or beverages were labeled illegal. Even resting on the steps outside your own house could cost you a hefty fine, and – in some cases – a forty-eight-hour removal order from the urban perimeter.

Critics of that bill emphasized the exclusionary nature of that piece of legislation. In their view, however, the corporate regime of visibility is the particular distribution of the sensible regulating appearances in the city, thus also grounding processes of political inclusion and exclusion in that context. Such a regime has found a powerful ally in controlling the city landscape in the *broken-window theory* (Wilson and Kelling 1982). As is well known, according to this theory any sign of disorder is considered a violation of decorum. Such violations should not appear and be present in public spaces, and, therefore, are made illegal.

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the effect of eroding spontaneity in urban everyday interactions. Therefore, these authoritarian policies of spatial control significantly limit our possibilities for improvising in the city, in that general sense of improvisation as a “goal- directed activity […] being done on the fly” (Alperson 2010: 273) that I mentioned above.

Spontaneity is meaningfully connected to satisfactory urban lives (Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1980). As all of those who have been living in lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic well know (Baldini 2020a), there is a distinct joy that accompanies being in public. Such a positive feeling depends, among other things, on the possibility of being spontaneous: Being able to move across spaces without limitations, to interact with others at one’s discretion, and to express oneself freely are just a few modalities where spontaneity can manifest itself. As I have shown, policies of decorum significantly limit those possibilities.

This power struggle over urban spontaneity is what I describe as the politics of improvisation. Street art is one among possible strategies of resistance reclaiming one’s right to improvise in the city: Street artists, one might say, react against an authoritarian system of urban control turning our cities into Disney World-like environments. These are places where activities are tightly controlled, and their performance generally requires paying some kind of fee. Under those conditions, urban life “feels commercialized and homogenized, without a sense of authenticity” (Grodach and Ehrenfeucht 2016: 170). Thanks to their undiluted spontaneity, works of street art reinject, if only temporarily, some genuineness into our cities.

6 Conclusion

In a seminal article, Harvey (2008) examines the “right to the city” (Lefebvre et al. 1996; Lefebvre 2003). He suggests that such a right is not merely about one’s ability to access urban resources. It is about something more profound: It is the “freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves” (Harvey 2008: 23), that is, to transform the urban landscape in ways inviting and promoting, among other things, those kinds of social relationships, lifestyles, and aesthetic values that we prefer. In this sense, my discussion here suggests that the right to the city is essentially a right to improvise (in) the city. It is the freedom to spontaneously create and re-create our urban environments and, with those, our lives.

I have discussed the improvisational nature of street art in the light of its connection with this desire to reclaim the city (Iveson 2013). My goal was to add a political region to the topography of improvisation offered in this volume and, more generally, in the literature on improvisation in the arts. Street art is improvisational insofar as it uses public spaces spontaneously. Such a spontaneity puts on display the freedom of street artists, who – with their witty designs and colorful forms – creatively purpose and re-purpose elements of urban spaces. As violations of the dominant order ruling over the aesthetics of our cities, works of street art are instances of a rebellion against authoritarian and exclusionary politics of urban control. With street art, improvisation is not just about expressive power and the pleasures of the imagination, but also about political action. Put in a formula – improvising artistically in the city is a form of resistance. Urban improvers of the world, unite!

Notes

1 For a discussion of graffiti as street art, see Baldini (2018: 9 f).
2 Works that have discussed improvisation in contexts other than music include Carter (2000); Gilmour (2000); MacKenzie (2000); Sawyer (2000).
3 Legendary among students and performers of jazz is John Coltrane’s fascination with the patterns found in Slonimsky (1947), which the saxophonist would constantly practice. This fact of Coltrane’s biography is confirmed in Kostelanetz and Slonimsky (1990: 466).
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4 For a useful discussion of social norms, see Bicchieri (2006).
5 In the scholarly literature, improvisation is often discussed in terms of adaption as well as exaptation to unforeseen situations. See, for instance, Bertinetto (2018).
9 Leaving the cans behind shows a potential interaction between tactical and on-the-spot adaptations.
Writers usually wipe their spray cans before painting in order to remove fingerprints and then use latex gloves while doing graffiti. These tactical adaptations allow them to prevent the police from collecting criminal evidence in case they have to ditch their cans as an on-the-spot adaptation.
10 Here, I am not claiming that temporal consecutiveness is a necessary or sufficient condition for improvisation. My claim is restricted to street art, whose improvisational possibilities are unleashed by such a temporality.
12 Section II of this volume is dedicated to the discussion of the relationship between improvisation in the arts and ethics.
13 Here, following Rancière, I concentrate on the visual domain. This does not imply that other perceptual domains are irrelevant. For informative discussions on this issue see Mullane (2010); Wolfe (2006).
15 Aristotle’s The Nicomachean Ethics and Rhetoric arguably offers the first discussion of decorum and cognate notions. Other important accounts deserving mention include Bourdie (1984); Castiglione (1967); Schiller (2004). For a sympathetic recent analysis on this theme, see Naukkarinen (2014).

References

Andrea Lorenzo Baldini

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