

Visual communicative practices: Towards a more inclusive visual rhetoric?

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Abstract

In this conceptual article, I examine the term “visual communicative practices” in order to understand the ways in which it can broaden the research object and concepts of visual rhetoric to offer a contemporary study of any visual object. Although calls for a more audience and reception-focused Visual Studies are not new, when coupled with a need for a decolonised approach and subject matter, the term “visual communicative practices” provides one way of starting to grapple with what these ideas and approaches mean in practice. As an example of how this term could be beneficial, the challenges associated with studying the contextual, lived and experiential visual practice of street art and graffiti are explored. These examples are used since the subject matter and research methodology do not fit entirely into any singular discipline and instead have to employ a more transdisciplinary approach to the visual and the visible. Although at times this approach can present methodological challenges, it opens up and invigorates ideas around how to critically study contemporary and contextually situated visual practices. This is particularly relevant when considering these forms in the “semiotic marketplace” that is South African public space, and the “second-life” of images in the digital realm.

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Introduction

The loaded interplay of the words “rhetoric” and “visual” in visual rhetoric makes the term anything but straightforward. The complexity of visual rhetoric is this — if these two separate terms are placed next to each other, we are given a concept (rhetoric) that describes an entanglement of ideas, thoughts, states of being, experiences and physical responses to the visual. This “visual” can refer to a visual object, visibility, the act of looking, the state of being seen, or the power dynamic of representation. In other words, the concept of visual rhetoric ‘works on the premise that images are made by people and for people and as a result deal not only with impersonal theoretical or philosophical abstractions, but with the psychology of the experience in both making and interpreting images’ (Reyburn 2013:74).

In this article some of this complexity is explored, and it is suggested that if the visual object is the visible manifestation of our everyday lived experiences then visual rhetoric should be able to provide a vocabulary to describe, discuss and contest those manifestations. It should also be agile enough to change as our experiences and expressions do. As a response to this contemporary call, I interrogate if some of the complexity of visual rhetoric could be sidestepped through the use of the term “visual communicative practices”. When employed, this term focuses on the communicative potential of any visual and visible object and moves away from historical or discipline-specific limitations and instead focuses on its semiotic significance. This presents a more accessible approach to the visual and creates space for a wider and more inclusive scope of subject matter. By looking at the rhetoric associated with each term, namely “visual” “communicative” and “practices”, individually, I discuss the benefits of the addition of the term to an ever-evolving visual rhetoric is discussed. It highlights ways in which using the term visual communicative practices allows the visual to ‘move beyond the logic and structure of colonial systems of power and knowledge’ (Zembylas 2018:4).

As an example of this potential, the key challenges in the study of graffiti, street art and public art are used as a practical case study of the way in which visual rhetoric could become more accessible and inclusive through the use of this term. This subject requires academic consideration since ‘[s]treet art (or if you prefer, graffiti), in its various forms and manifold designs, is one of the most ubiquitous sources of visual culture in the contemporary urban metropolis’ (Schacter 2008:35). By employing the term “visual communicative practices”, the cultural and semiotic significance of street art, graffiti and public art can be explored without concerns about semantics, legitimacy and disciplinary turbulence detracting from their significance.

What do you call these?

At first glance, the term “visual” might not seem overly complex. However, one need only try to make sense of its definition,¹ to understand where some room for ambiguity could creep in. The term ‘visual’ is both a noun and an adjective whilst its Latin root derives from the term *visualis* (from *visus* “sight” and *videre* “to see”). Therefore, any rhetoric about a word that is a noun, an adjective, takes an adverb form and has verb origins, necessarily requires further exploration. Traditionally, this exploration has largely been considered to be the subject of an art historical study where ‘art is something present to the eye and touch’ (Gardner 1986:3). Furthermore, widely used art history textbooks such as Helen Gardner’s *Art Through the Ages*, explain how the art object ‘expresses in myriad, arresting forms, the highest values and ideals of the human race’ (Gardner 1986:19). In this worldview, art is required to be both aesthetically pleasing and to hold high cultural value associated with order, rationality, clarity and refined judgement (Schirato & Webb 2004:116). In order to ‘understand and appreciate’ the art object, the art historical method requires a contextual understanding of chronological time, placing and of course, the artist (Gardner 1986:5). These ideas are further broken down into categories of classification such as style, iconography and historical context, as well as more technical terms such as form, space, perspective, proportion, scale, tone, colour, and light (Gardner 1986:5). Although this method can tell the student about the structural, historical, and perhaps a western ideological context in which a piece of art was created, it does little to answer questions about a broader socio-cultural context beyond the artist. It also notes the metaphorical elephant in the room that asks “what about all the other visual practices or objects that were not (or perhaps are still not) considered art?”.

When I first made use of the term “visual communicative practices”, I resorted to it because I was interested in studying outdoor “art”. Naïvely, my art historical background had taught me that most forms of outdoor art were public art. This is largely because the categorisation of art in public space has traditionally been presented through the research or study of public art. Emerging from a broader discussion that includes the Situationists, Phenomenology and Land Art, public art is art that can be experienced in

a multitude of places – parks, libraries, public squares, city streets, building atriums and shopping centers [sic]. Public art projects are often commissioned in order to enrich an environment with an artwork that is intended to integrate with the surrounding architecture, urban design and landscape, with the aim of enhancing the socio-cultural context of a specific site (Waclawek 2011:65).

However, when I started to engage with the work popping up in local cultural developments and precincts in Johannesburg, this term did not provide an accurate description for what I was studying. An encounter with a Banksy piece in London in 2012 introduced me to the concept of street art. The more I started to research this “street art” term the more convoluted it became. Waclawek (2011:65) explains this sometimes paradoxical and symbiotic relationship between street art and public art,

street art and public art practices are not entirely different, even if street artists rarely acknowledge ‘official’ public art, and public art discourse is all but devoid of street art analysis. Both models are conceived and contextualised within a city – a complex realm that can be understood as a set of relationships between objects, places, people and time. However, necessary differences do exist. Illegality, motivation, medium and place of diffusion are the foremost aspects that differentiate street art from public art. While both public and street art necessarily explore the very meaning of public space, the nature of that interaction is different.

One of the main things that I learned in this study of existing literature was that the terms “graffiti” and “street art” should not be used interchangeably, yet there was no clear-cut way to differentiate the two from each other, or from public art, other than discussing what they were not. This is evidenced in the interdependent relationship between graffiti and the subsequent development of street art. This alluring visual form challenges ‘preconceived ideas about [what] art and creativity is ... as street art and graffiti both have the peculiar ability to exist in the mainstream of culture and at the same time on its periphery’ (Lewisohn 2008:19). The birth of street art from graffiti can be attributed to many things, namely the photography of the art form and its second life on the internet (Schacter 2008; Schiller & Schiller 2010) or even a move away from the ‘dogmatic regime of graffiti culture’ (Jake 2012:7). This relationship is discussed by exploring the overlap of the two terms in the sections that follow.

Graffiti versus street art

Historically, graffiti was seen as a decorative medium that was not confined to specific spatial classes (Lewisohn 2008:27). It also had a great deal of social relevance and involvement in communication with figures of authority. The naming of graffiti can arguably be traced back to ancient Pompeii, where eighteenth and nineteenth century art historians dubbed carvings found on the walls as graffiti. As Lewisohn (2008:26) notes, these carvings had been there since early Ancient Pompeii times, this was just the first time that it had been dubbed as graffiti owing to a recent fashionability in the study of ancient art forms. This newfound interest in the concept of graffiti saw it as ‘an uncultured artform and as the product of a pure urge to create [that] starts to be associated with activities related to lower elements of society’ (Lewisohn 2008:26).

Its lower cultural position was cemented during the Industrial Revolution where graffiti was seen as a product of the lower classes, who were not associated with conventional cultural production as the Victorians had returned to “real art” (Lewisohn 2008:27).

The schism between graffiti practices as cultural (but not aesthetic) public expressions and the world of real, high and fine art is not a new one. As Waclawek (2011:25) notes, ‘the culture of graffiti rebels against established art forms and modes of communication’. This mentality is epitomised by the infamous Banksy in the introduction they wrote in their 2005 book,

Graffiti is not the lowest form of art. Despite having to creep about at night and lie to your mum it's actually the most honest artform available. There is no elitism or hype. It exhibits on some of the best walls a town has to offer, and nobody is put off by the price of admission. A wall has always been the best place to publish your work (Banksy 2005:5).

To build on Banksy's logic, graffiti has always been seen as more of an internal language and marker than as an aesthetic artform associated with high-culture, elitism and exclusivity. Technically, although it is illegal in many places, it can be made anywhere, by any person without much more than a spray can or permanent marker. It is best understood as a form of visual protest and a contestation of public ownership (Chalfant 2008:8). All of these factors make it a highly contentious art form that is often not well-received in many formalised settings. The fact that it often defaces public property does not help either.

A pivotal turning point in the study of graffiti was the publication of *Subway Art* (1984) by sociologist, Henry Chalfant, and prolific street photographer, Martha Cooper; and later *Spraycan Art* (1987) by Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff. Although graffiti forms had been appearing in American cities since the advent of Cornbread in the 1950s and 1960s (Waclawek 2011:7), Chalfant's books were the first publications to present this practice as an art and cultural form to the rest of the world. Furthermore, it also inspired a generation of graffiti artists, and has come to be known as the rulebook of graffiti. This is seen in the foreword to *The mammoth book of street art*, where street artist Jake (2012:6) describes the importance of *Subway Art* to his development as a graffiti writer and later street artist,

I was still at school when *Subway Art* shone a light on the hidden world of graffiti lore, with its talk of fatcaps and skinnies, throw-ups, end-to-end burners, kings and toys. I can clearly remember being obsessed with the book, endlessly practicing handstyles as I attempted to mimic this new art. My own experience mirrors that of so many writers, biters and scrawlers I have spoken to over the years.

Equally, from a South African perspective many of the “original”² graffiti artists who emerged from Cape Town³ during a time when South Africa was still under heavy apartheid sanctions, drew inspiration from a single copy of *Subway Art* (Olckers 2013:16) that was smuggled into the country. Although they risked harsh punishment owing to alleged political association in the 1980s, many pursued graffiti and the interrelated hip-hop scene as an escape from gang violence and the harsh realities of everyday life (Olckers 2013:18). Graffiti styles include the “tag” or the signature of the author (Lewisohn 2008:15), as can be seen in Figure 1. The development of the simple tag towards more elaborate “throw-ups” (often seen on trains, as in Figure 2) and later elaborate pieces or “wildstyles” (Figure 3) show the ways in which graffiti forms are constantly morphing according to the subcultures that create them. Figures 1, 2 and 3 three examples of South African expressions of varying forms of graffiti.

The movement of graffiti towards the realm of academia, art and more positive public sentiment is a direct result of the pioneering work of Cooper and Chalfant in *Subway Art* (1984), where they presented graffiti, particularly the ‘throw-ups’ or large, illegal tags that appeared on the New York Metrorail as an artform. According to Brown (2015:4), ‘this documentation culture allowed graffiti to exist beyond the time and place where it originally occurred’. This grew and changed the visual form, reception and culture associated with graffiti until it eventually became something much more



FIGURE N° 1



TAPZ tag, Johannesburg, 2015. Image by author.



FIGURE **Nº 2**



“Throw up” on Metrorail, Cape Town, 2017. Image by author.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



“Wildstyle” on park wall, Delta Park Johannesburg, 2017. Image by author.

practiced, pictorial and developed. Some theorists call this development “street art”, or ‘a sub-genre of graffiti’ (Lewisohn 2008:15), whilst Chalfant (2008:8) sees street art as graffiti’s ‘natural heir ... rooted in the creativity of the dislocated and alienated urban communities’. Either way, street art sits in a precarious space between graffiti, mural art, vandalism, and the formal art world (Brown 2015:3).

A good distinguishing factor of street art is that it’s ‘often highly reflective of the place where it is installed ... and is reflective of its creator’s political opinions and creative desires’ (Lewisohn 2008:65). It is also intended to stand in stark opposition to the capitalist consumption of public space, namely outdoor advertising. According to Schiller and Schiller (2008:11), ‘[s]treet artists bemoan the rapid disappearance of public space ... with each piece of free public art, they reclaim a part of the city that has been sold off to advertisers’. Owing to their place-specificity, street art forms can change from place to place. However, a few commonly accepted forms include ‘uncommissioned murals, public performance pieces, street installations, sticker-bombing, stencils, “green art” and billboard defacement (culture jamming) to name a few’ (Brown 2015:7).

Whilst both graffiti and street art are a big part of global contemporary urban life and visibility, a key frustration arises in the fact that scholars of graffiti and street art cannot seem to agree on a consistent or singular naming convention. Terms that encompass everything from specific graffiti references such as “graffiti-art” (Lewisohn 2008), “post-graffiti” (Wacławek 2011), and “spraycan art” (Chalfant & Pringle 1987), to more comprehensive umbrella terms such as “Independent Public Art” (Abarca 1960) or “uncommissioned urban art” (Schiller & Schiller 2008), are used in reference to these art forms. Some researchers are happy to note the progression of graffiti to street art under a single term (Schacter’s 2014 re-appropriation of “Independent Public Art” in *Ornament and Order*), whereas others note the importance of the graffiti movement of the 1950s and 1960s and subsequent “post-graffiti” iterations (Wacławek 2011). Referred to as “street art”, “neo-graffiti” or even “urban art”, this new term ‘identifies a renaissance of illegal, ephemeral public art production’ (Wacławek 2011:29). Furthermore, ‘... the greatest distinction between graffiti and post-graffiti is the substitution of the letter for the logo or the figurative image. Street artists replicate and subvert the signs and symbols of urban environments, sometimes with an overtly political agenda’ (Wacławek 2011:32).

The semantics of what is and is not graffiti or street art highlight the difficulty in researching something that is not consistently called the same thing and is practiced differently in all the places it is encountered. Equally, these practices, in their unsanctioned, non-commissioned, and unofficial forms, do not want to be part of a formalised, let alone academic discourse. The combined contribution of both of these

factors makes researching the 'quintessential art movement of the twenty-first century' (Wacławek 2011:8), both intellectually stimulating and methodologically challenging. The reward, and the challenge, is this: the same fluidity of naming practices and disciplinary overlap that makes this subject matter intellectually riveting, also makes it a methodological nightmare to research. Historically, it has predominantly been looked at from four distinct fields:

- Art Historical approach (Bengtson 2013; Ross 2000; Wacławek 2011);
- Marketing research approach (Visconti, Sherry, Borghini & Anderson 2004);
- Urban Studies approach (Miles 2005; Penfold 2016; Young 2013);
- Sociological approach (for example, Schacter's 2008 Ethnography or Chalfant's pioneering 1980's publications, or the emerging field of Visual Anthological work).

Each discipline provides a particular approach and categorisation method that allows researchers to define and differentiate these practices from each other. As illustrated in the discussion in the previous section, rather than attempt to give a clear cut yet all-encompassing definition — it is often easier to define these visual practices by what they are not. I was interested to see if there was any overlap or common categorisation with these visual forms and so I placed some of these visual outdoor and public practices side-by-side. I did this by drawing on a variety of commonly cited sources⁴ in the study of street art and graffiti and created Table 1.

	Graffiti	Mural Art	Street Art	Public Art	Monuments	Formal Artworld	Advertising
Location	Walls, trains, signage	Walls	Walls, pavements, billboards	Public areas	Public areas. Heritage and remembrance sites	Galleries	Billboards, trains, street poles, media
Legality	Illegal	Quasi-legal	Quasi-legal	Legal	Legal	Legal	Legal
Funding	None	Sometimes sponsored	None	Commissioned by government or corporate sponsors	Commissioned by government or heritage	Commissioned and/or sold	Selling of "advertising space"
Permission	No	Yes	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes. Strict codes
Permanence	Depends on placement and territory	A few months, sometime years	Short lifespan, usually depends on work	A few years depending on how the space is managed	Supposed to be forever	Written into history or catalogued	Changes regularly
Issue	Territorial, representational practice "getting up"	Social issues or decorative. Can also be an educational tool	Political issues, anti-capitalist (sometimes), conceptualisation of space	Social and political issues and sometimes the decoration of space	Commemorates certain people and places that hold historical importance	Broad range of issues - however artists create for commercial value	Promotes a particular brand/product/ideology/lifestyle or experience
Audience	General public, gangs (mostly internal language)	People within the immediate area or those who encounter the mural digitally	People within the city, forces them to stop and do a double-take	People within the city, forces them to stop and do a double take / promotes brand ideas	General public, acts as educational and remembrance tool	Art critics, curators, collectors, art historians, gallery visitors.	As many people as possible within given spatial location. Demographic of target audience specific to location is carefully considered.

TABLE N° 1



Differentiating categories between visual communicative practices (Brown 2015).

This table highlights that little information of broader consequence can be gained by positioning one practice as “less official, more permanent or more legal” than the next. This only enables some of the semantic and disciplinary conundrums that I had initially faced with the categorisation and classification methods of art history. It also required a level of detail and specificity that did not provide an appropriate method for further study. In fact, this approach raised more questions than it did answers. For example, not all advertising is paid for and not all graffiti is illegal. I needed an approach that would allow me to see the overlap between all these forms and explain why they are both powerful and provocative. Although it is understood that visual texts have the ability to communicate owing to their polysemic and intertextual nature (Rose 2012:5), I had missed an important area of overlap — their visibility. This visibility is the true communicative potential of these visual practices. In order to develop a more comprehensive picture of how this meaning is made, I needed to understand how this visibility was encoded and decoded. I decided to focus on the two categories where I could learn the most about these practices, regardless of what they were called. By looking closely at the “issue” each one dealt with and its respective “audience”, I realised that this public outdoor space was the space where visual, visible and communication came together to create meaning. This is the area that warrants significant academic attention. However, the communicative potential of the visual has not always been the focus or approach used when dealing with the visual. This is evidenced in the critiques and developments leveraged in the next section. Communicative potential takes centre stage when hegemonic meaning and practice are denaturalised.

What exactly is being communicated?

As the table in the previous section illustrated, the assumption that all studies of visual material regardless of content, context or audience should be assigned to art history is problematic. As a discipline, art history has struggled to contain the fluidity of practices and human experience that an evolving visual rhetoric has confronted it with. Wide-scale disillusionment with the elitist, westernised and short-sighted methods of an art historical pursuit in understanding the visual have been around since the 1970s, where the interventions of feminism, socialism and Marxism created an environment of scrutiny (Cherry 2004:479). The “new” art history that emerged as a result of these critiques leveraged critical theory, psychoanalysis and the work of Michel Foucault, and it also expanded its object of study to include photography and film (Cherry 2004:479). However, this scrutiny was not just based on the object and approach. Scholars started to pay attention to the act of looking and of representation itself, overtly hidden in the ‘scopic regime’ of a westernised and socially exclusive

perspective (Mirzoeff 2006:68). Since the 1970s, the cumulative result of these movements has been a critical and ongoing re-evaluation of subject matter, perspective, discipline, approach, and terminology. An emergent wave of Black Scholarship challenged the colonial gaze and neo-colonial agenda of the social sciences as a whole (Eagles, Hayes & Sibande 2012:507). It also emphasised the need to move away from single story narratives and hegemonic perspectives and towards different lived experiences. Black Scholarship rejected the idea of a pre-literature and “less-than” African, and instead championed the agendas of anti-racism, black consciousness, Africanism and valuing African cosmology (Eagles, Hayes & Sibande 2012:507). This paradigm and ideological pivot had important ramifications across the social sciences that are still being felt today.

The knock-on effect of these developments resulted in the call for a more egalitarian approach towards the visual as well as a re-evaluation of if the word “art” should even be used, since it had connotations of western aesthetic ideals and high society. From an African perspective, many scholars such as Nuttall (2006:13) have considered it morally reprehensible and superfluous to focus on aesthetics where ‘the study of beauty would distract our attention from the multiple permutations of social distress with which we are confronted’. The importance of this rebellion against aesthetics is paramount, as it emancipates the ‘normative aspects of philosophical discourse on aesthetics, freeing us from the need to measure ... artistic production by an exclusively Western yardstick’ (Winter 2004:6). Subsequently, as the call for a more inclusive cultural approach emerged, various tensions between new art history and traditional disciplinary limits surfaced. At this point in time, it seemed that art history could only stretch its disciplinary boundaries so far. The inclusion of visual culture into a new art history is seen by many art historians to be this exact ‘obliteration’ of the study resulting from ‘a systemless distribution of material’ that moves away from the traditional corpus of a chronological art history. This mentality is clearly noted by De la Croix and Tansey (1986:vii) in their preface to *Gardner’s Art History Through the Ages*,

[t]hough a corpus of monuments essential to the art history survey course has long been forming, and though there seems to be considerable agreement as to what constitutes it, there will naturally be differences of choice serving from differences of emphasis. A radical departure from the corpus might well obliterate the outlines of the study. To avoid the random, systemless distribution of material that might result, we have generally adhered to the corpus ...

As a response, contemporary studies of the visual started to present a space where ‘all those visual artefacts, natural forms and way of thinking that make up perception in our everyday life, as well as the interdisciplinary technologies of analysis’ (Schirato

& Webb 2004:4) are considered. However, the inclusivity of this new approach and method is not without its own internal contradictions as Cherry (2004:480) points out that this field of study constantly has to remind itself what it is, where it has come from and where it plans to go — which often can result in disciplinary upheavals. These upheavals are perhaps most evident in the sometimes confusing and interchangeable use of the terms “visual studies”, “visual culture” and “visual culture studies”. Each manifestation of the term presents a more contextualised and contemporary response to an ever-evolving approach to studying the visual.

More contextual responses to the visual have largely been influenced by the work of two key theorists, Nicholas Mirzoeff and WJT Mitchell. Mirzoeff (2006:76) understands the visual subject as something that represents ‘a key intersection between agents of sight and discourses of visibility that implies an engagement with the politics of representation in a transnational and transcultural form’. For Mirzoeff, the visual is visible. When something is visible, it can be seen by all and therefore makes a political statement. Understanding this statement is not something that can be confined to a singular discipline and instead presents a ‘post-disciplinary academic endeavour’.⁵ On the other hand, Mitchell (2002:178-179) sees the study of the visual as a ‘de-disciplinary’ exercise that,

looks at the strange things we do while looking, gazing, showing and showing off such as hiding, dissembling, and refusing to look. In particular, it helps us to see that even something as broad as the image does not exhaust the field of visibility; that visual studies is not the same thing as image studies, and that the study of the visual image is just one component of the larger field.

This larger field of study is not a disciplinary rhetoric. Neither is it a purely theoretical exercise. It is a living and breathing manifestation of how to make sense of the over-saturated ‘hot media’⁶ visual world that we live in. Mirror-like, this world looks back at its viewers from a variety of shiny screens and porous canvases. Through the eyes of the viewer, this reflection showcases the physical form and contextual surroundings. But perhaps more importantly, it partially reflects the viewers themselves. As Berger (1972:2) importantly notes, this mode of engagement understands that ‘we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves’. In the same way, contemporary circumstances have shifted the global agenda to the emancipatory project of Black Scholarship where the conversation around race⁷ moves into a broader societal and psychological context, and topics of social relevance take centre-stage. It also opens up a space where a ‘transdisciplinary form of thinking, a critical modality of engagement’ (Ratele 2012:539) is needed, since the complexity of human visual experience cannot solely be studied from a singular disciplinary perspective. This, in turn, opens up a space where the dynamic and fluid manifestations

of culture and identity can be examined. Thus, any aspect of the visual that is tied to the cultural needs to be understood as an invitation to continuous discourse. This discourse does not provide answers to 'the problems of medium-based visual disciplines' but rather problematises 'the conceptual scheme of modernity and the representation that underlies it' (Mirzoeff 2006:67).

This is particularly true for a South African iteration of the field, as first presented in *South African Visual Culture Studies* (2005) edited by Jeanne Van Eeden and Amanda Du Preez. The collection of essays presented the visual as inextricable from the cultural in the construction of South African visual identities (Milton 2006:204). Although the work has since been critiqued for its overt emphasis on encoding at the expense of audience and subsequent reception (Milton 2006:205), it remains relevant nearly 20 years later owing to that fact that it illustrates two key concepts, namely the power of the visual in academic discourse, and the multiplicity of the experience of identity from a localised South African perspective. These two key ideas pave the way for an exploration of what Reid (2013:vii) refers to as a response to the situated and specific experience of culture. This identity is not static and is able to acknowledge the complexities of culture and experience. The present-day call to decolonise academia and dismantle institutionalised racism presents daily evidence of this multiplicity of experience. These sentiments have grown in strength and impetus since the 2015 South African advent of #RhodesMustFall and subsequent #FeesMustFall movements.⁸ In 2020, the popular resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement on an international stage was sparked largely by the viral video of George Floyd's murder⁹ by four white policemen, thus once again enforcing the idea that visibility is power, and invisibility is oppression.

A critical and localised practice

Earlier on, the inextricable link between the visual and the cultural was asserted. Whilst the visual and the cultural are linked through their communicative potential, each aspect requires a different approach. For instance, the development of visual studies from art history highlighted the need for a more transdisciplinary approach to the visual. On the other hand, the emergence of various critiques of hegemonic and westernised representations of culture showcased the need for more specific and localised expressions of the cultural. The visual communicative practices of street art and graffiti present an illuminating case study of how a transdisciplinary approach to the visual and a more localised expression of the cultural could enrich the visual rhetoric. This is because they subvert traditional cultural and ideological practices, semantics and understandings. Furthermore, through their ephemeral and performative nature — once subverted people, ideas and representations take up public visual

space and demand attention (Smith 2018, Schacter 2008, Ulmer 2016). They have a unique capability to ‘respond to the environment of a city inasmuch as [they partake] in the creation of its visual culture’ (Wacławek 2011:65). Even if they are removed, painted over or subjected to natural wear and tear, they still live a powerful and provocative second life in an arguably more public and visible space — the internet. Here, they are presented with a ‘global audience for a truly global art form’ (Lewisohn 2008:153). The dual visibility owing to the combination of their first (specific temporal and spatial) life and second (re-produced, de-contextualised digital) life create a unique discourse that occurs on many different levels and interacts with various audiences. This visual and visible discourse becomes a practice in itself. The question then becomes, how should these practices be studied?

Let’s revisit Table 1 for a moment. When I looked for areas of overlap between public visual practices instead of employing a divisive categorisation mechanism, I found focusing on the “audience” and “issue” of each practice to be the most insightful because collectively, these areas told me about the power and reach of their communicative potential. There was a correlation with their degree of visibility and their communicative potential. The crux of this communicative potential being a practice is that it is constantly changing to respond to different lived experiences, it has a strong bias for action and it is best understood in the context that it is received. This means that depending on the audience, the meaning of a visual communicative practice changes. Visual rhetoric should be able to account for the various audience experiences of a visual communicative practice. This means that both a re-presented Instagram post of street art and the original work in its geographical location have a unique ability to communicate. However, what needs to be accounted for is the fact that the audiences and meanings derived from these two instances are different. The “issue” that is communicated depends largely on the context in which the practice is received.

For the study of street art and graffiti, this moves the object of study away from the celebrity days of Banksy and Shepard Fairey, as seen in *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) and closer towards the site of reception. Schiller and Schiller (2010:51) describe this location, stating that ‘location is everything; context and content are ultimately the most measurable difference between what is written in the bathroom stall and... the Brooklyn Bridge’. Street art, just like graffiti and public art, are first and foremost spatial works that exist ‘within the medium of the street, amidst the dirt, the cacophony, the very concreteness of the city’s walls. These material acts were engraved onto the very surface of the city, scraped onto previously constructed forms’ (Schacter 2014:20). They are given meaning through their context instead of through their creation. Since meaning is inherently linked to culture, it’s important to understand

the street as a 'large cultural laboratory' (Burnham, cited by Wacławek 2011:7), where culture is created, preserved, negotiated and destroyed through discourse, some of which is visual.

In a South African context, visual discourse in visible space can easily become culturally convoluted as struggles over status and power reduce the discursive space for moderate opinions and conciliatory gestures (Dubin 2012:235). Nowhere is this more evident than in the on-going culture clashes over public space and the short-lived ideals of the Rainbow Nation. Dubin (2012:235) explains how the realm of visibility presents a space for power struggles; according to him,

cultural tensions, once diminished or suppressed through the deliberate segregation of racial and ethnic groups, now emerge with greater likelihood as different constituencies recover, create anew and promote distinctive values and beliefs, rituals and symbols. This liberated and expanded semiotic marketplace has become a crucible for generating cultural conflict as different segments of people confront each other, each rallying under the banner of their own special sense of identity.

In order to understand the 'multiplicities and simultaneities, presences and absences' that this semiotic marketplace creates, it should be studied in its own lived-time (Mbembe, cited by Mirzoeff 2006:76) or the specific and localised instance in which it first occurs. The specific situatedness of this response highlights the fact that there is no singular or hegemonic representation of identity and culture (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler 2016:455). Understanding this allows researchers to apply the specific cultural conditions of social and ideological understanding that are needed in order for the message of a visual practice to be properly disseminated (Schirato & Webb 2004:17). Instead the visual creates a unique space of continuous communication and experience. When one tries to make sense of the visual within a cultural context, what they are saying is that they want to understand what is being communicated and experienced at that particular moment in time, in that specific space. Rose (2012:3) notes that any 'interpretation of visual images must address questions of cultural meaning and power'. Even if a visual work is stripped of meaning, decontextualised, erased or scrubbed clean, its lack of discourse becomes a form of communication and commentary in itself.¹⁰

When the term "visual communicative practices" is used, the loaded nature of each word in the term acknowledges the visible, meaning-making and localised experience of public visual forms. It creates a critical platform from which to examine how context-specific meaning is created. This critical platform draws on elements of post-colonial critical theory that is not as much of a precise methodology as it is a standpoint or stance. In order to bring about change, a critical standpoint has a strong bias for

action which is evident in the methods used,¹¹ subjects studied and the rejection of philosophical and hegemonic academic traditions. According to Eagles, Hayes and Sibande (2012:501) these “methodologies” have three important premises: firstly, to conduct a deep analysis in order to uncover hidden meanings, ideas or concepts; secondly, to create change in an emancipatory or liberated direction; and thirdly, to shift the focus to disempowered or voiceless populations. In practice, when this approach is applied to street art or graffiti in a South African context, researchers are able to learn more about the specific spatial, cultural and historical conditions that create meaning instead of trying to categorise or define terms that revel in their lack of definition. Secondly, using these uncovered meanings, they are able to explain how their highly visible nature leads to struggles over multiple interpretations in the form of “culture clashes” that pervade any engagement with the visual in a public South African context. Thirdly, and most importantly, these ideas and conclusions can serve as evidence of the importance of shifting both visual rhetoric and disciplinary exclusivity to make the study of the visual more inclusive, contemporary and accessible.

Conclusion

By exploring dances between theory and practice, the terms “visual”, “communicative” and “practice” were discussed sequentially to explain the areas where visual rhetoric can be further supplemented through the term “visual communicative practices”. By employing a transdisciplinary perspective, the theoretically disruptive and highly pragmatic field of street art and graffiti is used as an example of a case study to explain key areas of overlap in context and visibility. This case study presents the importance of a contextual lived approach to the multiplicity of identities that exist in the localised instance of the “semiotic marketplace” of South Africa. In order to study or discuss this field, a critical cultural approach to the visual is needed, as it emphasises the total meaning-making process of these practices. Thus, the term “visual communicative practice” presents a rhetoric that encompasses disciplinary dances, struggles over meaning and the distinction between high art and low culture. It also answers the call of the critical scholar to decolonise subject matter and methodology in order to create a more inclusive and accessible rhetoric of the visual.

Notes

1. Visual: adj, of or relating to seeing or sight. n - a picture, piece of film, or display used to illustrate or accompany something (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 2002:1603).
2. In a South African context, for instance Kim Jamo, Mak1 or Falko (Olckers 2013).
3. Initially in areas created by the Group Areas Act such as Mitchell's Plain and the Cape Flats. Later the

Southern Suburbs (areas from Rosebank to Bergvliet), which are seen as predominantly more white and affluent suburbs (Besteman 2008).

4. Including but not limited to Blackshaw (2008), Irvine (2012), Schacter (2008, 2014), Wacławek (2011), Seno (2010).
5. As paraphrased by Cherry (2004:480).
6. Understood in the McLuhan sense, where hot media is media that is overly saturated with information (in this case visual information) and therefore requires less audience participation (McLuhan 1964:22).
7. See Kendi (2020).
8. See Bosch's (2017) article, 'Twitter activism and youth in South Africa: the case of #RhodesMustFall' for an in-depth discussion on this.
9. See Hill *et al.* (2020).
10. See Brown (2016) for a further elaboration of these ideas.
11. According to Eagles, Hayes and Sibande (2012:501), more action-centric methods include a research agenda that is tied to activism and demonstrate similarities to action-orientated, community or participatory-based forms of research.

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