

Photo: Cathedral, Hosier Lane, Melbourne. By Jason Goroncy

ON THE GIFTS OF STREET ART

Jason Goroncy

One of the things good art does is to shed light on the true nature of things; it broadens our horizons, it enriches our capacity to see, it alerts us to dimensions of reality gone unnoticed and for which words, sometimes, are simply not enough. The arts, therefore, can encourage the kind of imagination and vocation that the Good News itself fosters, encourages, demands, makes and invites. Street art is no exception here. One of the reasons I am so enthralled by this art form is because of the gifts it shares in helping me to read cities, and to read myself as I move in and through them.

In fact, one might argue that there are indeed things that make street art uniquely positioned to undertake this kind of work. First, street art is 'essentially antithetical to the art world because it cannot easily, if at all, be incorporated into the art world's institutions of preservation, display, history, and appreciation' (N. Riggle, 'Using the Street for Art: A Reply to Baldini', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74 (2), 2016, 193). As (usually) an unsanctioned interventionist practice, street art challenges art institutions and commissioned public art, even while the two are in some ways mutually parasitic upon one another. Secondly, street art witnesses, in ways usually more intentionally and more starkly than does art produced for galleries, foyers and homes, to the impermanent character of the stuff that constitutes the world. Like spiritual practices, street art (which itself can certainly be a form of such practice) is also easily threatened and vulnerable to vandalism, reminding us that streets are always more delicate than a purely-functional assessment allows. Streets, like faith, are fragile. Streets, like faith, can be exploited and destroyed – sometimes by street artists themselves, at

other times by something as menacing as fame. Thirdly, the practices of graffiti writers and street artists are both guided by and guide a city's visual aesthetic insofar as they both assimilate that environment and recreate it. Context, its givens and its possibilities, is almost everything. And, finally, through their work such artists call into question the ethos of ownership by approaching the public commons in ways unfixed by the dominating stories that narrate our lives. Antitheses, impermanence, vulnerability, celebration and development of culture, redefinitions of proprietorship – sounds a bit like the geography of the New Testament.

'As unauthorized art forms manifested in public spaces, graffiti and street art suggest that public art is as political as the space it inhabits' (Wactawek, *Graffiti and Street Art*, 2011, 70). It provokes conversations about things that really matter to the polis and its citizens – about loss, about hypocrisy, about injustice, about race, about boredom, about alienation, about capitalism, about fascism, about poverty, about greed, about humour, about spirituality, about localism and internationalism, about our relationship with the earth itself, about love, about love's desires and hopes, about all that concerns us and about all that moves us. One of the things that most strikes me about the street art that I have observed in many of the world's streets and laneways is just how frequently such is, in different ways, a memorial to violence of many kinds – suicide, domestic violence, war, colonialism, police brutality, etc. I also observe much play – with symbols, with rituals, with notions of 'private' and 'public', etc.; the extraordinary gift of not taking ourselves too seriously. And I observe hope – whatever the subject matter, and whatever intolerable burden from which the

work arises, making art in forgotten spaces represents an attempt to 'make a vineyard of the curse' (W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', *Selected Poems*, 1979, 83). It is indeed an act of shared hope, and as such bears witness to 'the intolerable burden of God's presence' (G. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, 1980, 353). Memorials, play, hope – things that also smell much like the Good News does.

A significant number of street and graffiti artists – including Garrison Buxton (Londonderry and New York), MOMO (New York), CDH (Melbourne), Tom Civil (Melbourne), Ad Deville (New York), Invader (Paris), Ron English (New York), Jean Faucher (Paris), Alice Pasquini (Rome), Blu (Berlin), Zhang Dali (Beijing) and others – have identified their work primarily as intentional opposition to the ways that commercial advertising now dominates public space, particularly in our cities, transforming cities into branded hubs. Not all street and graffiti artists are so motivated, of course, as evidenced by the fact that many works of art appear in places not dominated by advertising – parks, laneways, construction sites, fences etc. Regardless of motivation, however, the effect of such work is to challenge the commercial use of public space. With stencils, wool, paint, metal, plastic, wallpaper etc., their work disrupts the dominating order and represents an act of reclaiming public space for citizens rather than merely consumers. As Banksy, the world's best-known street artist, has stated:

The people who truly deface our neighbourhoods are the companies that scrawl their giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you're never allowed to answer back. Well, they started this fight and the wall is the weapon of choice to hit them back. (Banksy, *Banksy*, 2005, 8–9)

At the very least, street art is a form of civic dialogue; or, as Gaia, a Baltimore-based installation and studio artist well known for his international street work, described it, 'guerilla branding thinly veiled as a method of promulgating unfettered dialogue in the spaces that we share' (S. Clay-Robinson and Gaia, 'Street Art and Civic Dialogue: An Interview with Gaia', *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 16 (1), 2016, 90). We might otherwise think of street art as being about the enabling and constraining, the producing and the keeping alive of an argument with a view to bringing about physical and cultural reconstruction. Oftentimes, street art provokes cognitive dissonance. Those who dismiss street art on the basis that it represents 'illegal' or 'anti-social' activity might do well to remember that some of the world's greatest literature, including the Bible, provides an historical record of subversive witness given, in part, to undermine the power of established systems and institutions. Insofar as both function to disrupt our idolatrous comforts, they are gifts to us. Indeed, among the many gifts that street artists offer – gifts not infrequently 'hurt ... into' from 'ranches of isolation and the busy griefs' (Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', 82) – is a proclivity to bear witness to how things are and not merely to how they might appear to be. Such a proclivity involves a telling of the truth about those largely-untampered-with and untraversed spaces of our urban worlds, about what is present but underexposed or disregarded; and

even, as Auden hints, to lead with 'unconstraining voice' the way toward healing and toward a renewed sense of enchantment, freedom and praise beyond the pedestrian and clamorous. Such a proclivity is also a form of urban spirituality. It can even be a form of public theology.

It seems that among street artist's concerns – concerns shared with poets, playwrights and other endangered species – is not so much a 'celebratory sense of being at home in the world' but rather an 'acute awareness of the world not being at home in itself' (R. Williams, 'Poetic and Religious Imagination', *Theology* 80 (675), 1977, 178), an awareness about which the responsible artist has a marked sense of personal complicity. The world, in other words, is dislocated. And artists – street artists and other – are called to survive in order to speak responsibly to that dislocation, to speak with fidelity not only to time but also to eternity, and to acknowledge the meaningful relation of both to human being in the world and, in so doing, dignify the human condition. To this end, street art can parody the promise that God's call to life comes from and invites persons towards the countercultural margins and hells where the Christ who is undomesticated by the Church is to be found. As William Stringfellow once reminded us, 'the first place to look for Christ is in hell' ('No Priesthood: No Laity', in *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow*, 1994, 165).

...STREET ART CAN PARODY THE PROMISE THAT GOD'S CALL TO LIFE COMES FROM AND INVITES PERSONS TOWARDS THE COUNTERCULTURAL MARGINS AND HELLS WHERE THE CHRIST WHO IS UNDOMESTICATED BY THE CHURCH IS TO BE FOUND.

In addition to those matters aforementioned, one of the things that distinguishes street artworks from their counterparts in museums is their unavoidable relationship to place. Street art is art of, belonging to, dependent upon *the street*, just as sculpture is the art of space and volume, and dance the art of the moving body. Its 'power lies in its ability to harness the function of the street without destroying it' (Riggle, 'Using the Street for Art', 194). Street artworks are 'part of the urban texture and necessarily incorporate elements of the urban landscape in their respective structures' (A. Baldini, 'Street Art: A Reply to Riggle', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74 (2), 2016, 187). The context – the street, the train, the pole, the wall etc. – is not in any way at all insignificant or inconsequential to the art work but is inescapably and deliberately *internal* and *essential* to its meaning. Mark Jenkins's street sculptures, or Bruno Taylor's 'Bus Stop Swings', or C. [Christine] Finley's 'Wall-paper Dumpster' project are a case in point. Rather than subverting the public space, they each harness and augment its essential function as public. One might even suggest that in doing so they add value to the street, not least by showing how well the street as cultural space can more fully realise its functions. Such an approach recognises that context is irreducible to spatial and logistical considerations and is in fact a socio-cultural reality – 'a place where we can express ourselves in public, present our style, declare our commitments, allegiances, and values' (Riggle, 'Using the Street for Art', 192).



Photo: Human Ants - Liverpool Street, Melbourne. By Jason Goroncy

It is, therefore, always a contested space ripe for public discourse – for, among other things, gossipping. 'The "urbanistic character" of street art ensures diversity of its forms, breadth of expansion and heterogeneity of its participants, including professional and amateur authors and the unlimited range of residents and guests'. This is fed by a global population that is increasingly on the move, 'cross-pollinating, miscegenating, hybridizing, and inventing new media, new multilingual expressions, and new art forms' along the way (C. Carlson, 'Timely Stencils, Timeless Meanings', in *Stencil Nation: Graffiti, Community, and Art*, ed. Russell Howze, 2008, 13). This calls for undertaking the ongoing and challenging work of translation, of seeking to understand better what makes us different and what we share in common. At its best, therefore, street art represents the enactment of the hopeful possibility of a kind of ecumenical homemaking, the transfiguration of the public commons into a commons that truly serves the civilisation of the public – a welcome response to modernity's separation of art and life, and the contemporary world's proclivity to ghettoism.

I suggested earlier that street art might be celebrated as a form of public theology. It seems that, for most Christians, theology is something that is meant to be done with words and not with images. But, of course, every decision we make about how we choose to communicate the Good News is already pre-loaded with visual symbolism that reinforces a perception that God communicates with us in a particular kind of way. The question, therefore, is not whether or not we should communicate visually; it is, rather, *how* we do so and what we say when we do. Artists see how things are with the world differently, but no less truthfully, than do scientists. It seems to me that if we are to walk in our world well, and justly, and with the mercy of God, then we cannot do so without the kind of re-imagining of reality and of human society that the arts, including street art, promote and invite.

But this is risky, isn't it. Because ultimately, of course, there can be no guarantee that misunderstanding and misinterpretation will be avoided. But neither do we have any such guarantee in the use of our words. In both cases, it seems, what we offer is an act of faith. We offer so much as we have understood, knowing it to be partial, inadequate and marred by our own brokenness. For Christians, we do so in the name and under the inspiration of the God who makes eloquent the stumbling witness of our faith, and who moulds our communication to good and loving purpose. It's risky, but it's God's risk too.

To take up invitations to consider street art as a form of urban spirituality, and of public theology, as I have been suggesting here is to be confronted with questions of what happens to religious symbols (symbols that are frequently employed by street artists) when treated outside of their traditional contexts and interpretations. To whom do such symbols belong? Do religious believers

and/or religious bodies have a monopoly on their use or are they truly public and so properly shared by others? Such questions become even more interesting, I suggest, when considered in the context of street art where issues of 'ownership' are judged quite otherwise than they are in other gallery spaces.

While in some cases street artists look at religion merely as a social phenomenon, for others religion provides stories, space – permission even – to raise bigger issues that affect those inside and outside of traditional faith communities. Yet others look to religion as a way of making sense of the world. Even for non-believers, religious symbols and stories can provide a larger narrative for our fragmented and information-saturated lives. This fascination with religious themes suggests a longing for repeated and repeatable points of orientation for the meaningful ordering of our lives – liturgical punctuations in an otherwise fluid existence. For others again, dealing with religious themes provides opportunity to revisit the faith of their childhood and to explore how it connects to their current experiences of being-in-the-world. The fact is that fragments of religious imagery and symbolism are often caught in the recesses of our shared cultural subconscious, a reminder that religious images and symbols cannot be contained within the traditions from which they originated but become:

a part of the culture and lie far beyond the final control of the church, ... imaged in diverse ways by non-Christian as well as Christian artists, often contrary to the church's dominant interpretation. But this should not be viewed as threatening but as a means by which, paradoxically, the traditional symbols are kept vital – are kept alive in the midst of human life (W. Yates, 'Conflict and Conversations Between Religion and Art: Brooklyn and Beyond', *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 12 (1), 2000, 4).

Such witnesses to religious experience, when captured by artistic imagination, can, I suggest, not only contribute to a deeper understanding of religion as such, but, indeed, open up alternative avenues of theological meaning and interpretation – to, as it were, see the world again. Far from being some kind of gimmick, such engagements might even be more than a capitulation to contemporary efforts at enchantment. They might be an expression of an eastering of the ordinary. They may be nothing short of being an expression of God's own life among us.



JASON GORONCY

is Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Whitley College, University of Divinity. He blogs at jasongoroncy.com and is an editor for artandtheology.net.