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Scene Data: Map photos and locations captured by Maria Wolfe @baltimurals.

Introduction

In April 2015, Baltimore, Maryland was thrust into the national spotlight when Freddie Gray, a twenty-five-year-old African American resident, lapsed into a coma while in police custody.

His death and subsequent funeral triggered a wave of protests in the state’s largest city. While these events sparked a period of unrest, Baltimore community members also responded in meaningful and powerful ways through the creation of street art.

One of the first efforts got its start at a candlelight vigil for Gray. Local street artist Justin Nethercut, known as Nether, teamed up with Gray’s friend Brandon Ross to create a commemorative mural near the spot where Gray was arrested in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood (Giordano 2015). The mural they created shows Gray, front and center, flanked by historic civil rights leaders Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Thurgood Marshall on one side and contemporary protestors under the banner of the Black Lives Matter movement on the other (Giordano 2015; [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1 : Freddie Gray Mural by Nether in Sandtown-Winchester. Gray is pictured in the middle, surrounded by activists past and present. Photo by Meredith K. Stone.

Once completed, Nether noted, it was Ross who mobilized the community and brought

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Gray's family and friends to visit. Longtime Baltimore Sun editorial writer and arts columnist Glenn McNatt said neighborhood people came to treat the site like hallowed ground.

History

Street art, a visual art form created on-site and often without formal approval, works in ways that museum and gallery art cannot. It comes into view without warning, surprising observers with imagery that can be both beautiful and provocative. Unlike a traditional museum experience where one goes expecting to see art and may even know precise pieces and where to find them in the galleries, street art is more likely to catch audiences off guard. Typically, its site is part of its subject and stands as a form of commentary—sometimes subtle, sometimes not—on the political and social climate of its location. The Freddie Gray mural was imbued with messages about racial inequality and conflict. Studied carefully, it, like much other street art, reveals the diverse motivations and power dynamics of Baltimore.

Baltimore's history makes it especially apt for street art. Inequality, segregation, and poverty were perpetuated through slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, and housing discrimination (Pappoe 2016), leaving the majority of its residents without power or voice. According to an interactive map produced by the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts (BOPA), however, there are at least 165 murals in the city today that raise new voices ([Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2: [Map of Murals](#) in Baltimore since 1987. Colored points represent murals sponsored by different entities. Source: Baltimore Mural Program, a program of the Baltimore Office of Promotion & The Arts.

In 1910, Baltimore enacted one of the country's first segregation ordinances; it was the first city to designate "white" and "black" blocks. Following World II and continuing through today, decades of deindustrialization, housing discrimination, and white middle class migration to the suburbs have left a legacy of segregation, disinvestment, vacancy, and poverty in inner city, low income areas (Friedman 2012; Pappoe 2016). Police violence has frequently occurred along racial lines.

The collective result of these policies is a spatial pattern of occupancy in the city known today as the "black butterfly" and the "white L." Predominantly African American neighborhoods concentrate in East and West Baltimore forming the wings of the "butterfly," while mostly White neighborhoods cluster in the middle and then wrap around the harbor in an "L" shape (Brown 2016; [Figure 3](#)). Brown (2016) indicates that the "White L" enjoys better transportation options and more favorable relationships with city government. At present, black citizens comprise sixty-three percent of Baltimore's population and twenty-three percent of city residents live in poverty (United States Census 2015).

Figure 3: The “black butterfly” and “white L” map of Baltimore. Source [WashingtonPost](#).

Drawing on conversations with six artists and educators, this paper explores how this powerful form of expression is perceived as a catalyst for social change. Street art’s murals are symbolic artifacts in and of themselves. Produced for specific sites, the symbolism of murals gets reinforced by their location. Writing about murals in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Neil Jarman (1998) contextualized street art by stating “A sense of place can always be understood in terms of the content of the paintings...” but to fully engage “demands some wider recognition of placing, of the area beyond the immediate frame or the edge of the wall, which all too often is the limit or boundary... To see them as site-specific requires awareness of the physical and social environment in which the images are produced and with which they interact. Meaning changes as the frame widens.” It is as though one must see the wall and entire room beyond the picture frame to understand street art. Belfast’s murals, when understood within the larger frame, become a conversation about violence and social unrest (Jarman 1998).

Recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations highlight the value of artwork as a way to help communities grieve and heal (Brooks 2016). Social media sharing of art related to #blacklivesmatter allows images to extend their effects further than the local communities where violence has happened. Thus the movement captured in street art becomes a very visual experience. Danielle Brooks says this is “a new age of injustice, one with a heightened awareness of state violence and a national reckoning with the state-sanctioned disposability of black lives... With the rise of new technologies, the killings of unarmed black men as well as women – Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Rekia Boyd – are etched into our public consciousness” through art in different forms (Brooks, D. 2016)

What is Street Art?

French philosopher Henri Lefebvre once wrote, “There is nothing, in history, or in society, which does not have to be achieved and produced” (Lefebvre 2009, 68). People are actors in creating their own environments, and, art is intimately connected to how humans and their social establishments are linked. In *Cities Within the City*, Kurt Iveson (2013) states that while we create our environment, the way we do so is complicated by differences in power between contributors. For Lefebvre, it is important to know who produces, what they produce, how, why, and for whom. Only then can one understand urban space, its creators, intentions, and consumers.

Figure 4: Mural in Sandtown-Winchester commemorating Freddie Gray and the Black Lives Matter Movement. This mural sends an explicit political message. Photo by Meredith K. Stone.

Yet there is no explicit text that states the contributions, especially of the less powerful. That is where street art comes in. “Street art,” is usually defined as a type of visual expression that conveys meaning through different media such as murals, posters, and installations. It is primarily an urban phenomenon and has strong ties to the hip hop culture of the late 1970s and 1980s. It is rooted in the tradition of graffiti, but street art and graffiti are not synonymous. According to Lewisohn (2008, 15) graffiti’s origins were less political than street arts’. Graffiti wasn’t “so much about connecting with the masses... it’s an internal language, it’s a secret language.” It was often viewed negatively as an illegal nuisance (Lewisohn 2008, 15). But as it evolved during the protest movements of the 1970s, graffiti gained some recognition for its artistic creativity and its ability to spread political and social messages (Cowick 2015; [Figure 4](#)).

The street art movement evolved out of this milieu and is perhaps best understood as an expression of lost voices and of resistance. According to Carmen Cowick: “Street art has the ability to provide a historical narrative to a disenfranchised voice. When the historical narrative is created by those in power due to media control, the people sometimes take to the streets to create their own narrative in order to level the playing field” (2015, 31). Street

art often calls audiences and viewers to action, encouraging them to fight for social justice, political action, and justice (Miladi 2015).

This connection to social purpose is part of why street artists are often recognized as artists, unlike graffiti “writers.” Street artists must spend a considerable amount of time preparing pieces in advance, whereas graffiti artists need not prepare anything before painting a wall. According to Lewisohn (2008), street artists may be seen as part of the “fine-arts” community (Lewisohn 2008). Banksy is perhaps the best known example of a socially engaged street artist, with Shepard Fairey—creator of President Barack Obama’s iconic 2008 campaign poster—a close second (Warnes 2013). Street art pieces, such as those created by Banksy, tend to be site- and content-specific. By contrast, graffiti art’s content is not location-driven and can feel ubiquitous, rather than specific (Lewisohn 2008). In practice, these distinctions can blur, especially as cities vary in how they define, permit, and engage with these different types of art and artists and as communities feel empowered to create their stories.

While graffiti differs from street art as a less formal and more personal public art form, the commissioned public monument is a more formal and officially sanctioned art form. Baltimore was known as “The Monumental City” during the late nineteenth century due to the many bronze statues and memorials that adorned its parks and squares (Kachadourian 2010). Many of these monuments depict past events and people in a way that systematically erases, damages, or excludes disenfranchised and marginalized groups or politically and socially distressing events (Miles 2010; Burk 2006). They produce a story, a legacy, and a landscape, as many scholars have discussed (Lowenthal 1975, Foote 1997, Hoelscher 1998, DeLyser 2001, and Stone et al. 2016) that does not represent the city’s current residents and may even harm them. As Adrienne Burk (2006, 953) points out, an unsettling aspect of this art form is that memory is both “organized forgetting as well as organized remembering.” Derek Alderman (2010, 90) reinforces this notion when he points out that “what is commemorated is not synonymous with all that has gone on in the past; what is defined as memorable or historically significant is open to social control, contest, and negotiation.” Whose conception of the past and what is suitable to be commemorated is, in large part, a political process where those in power control the outcome. In Baltimore, street art challenges our conception of what is “memorable” or “historically significant” and gives residents the chance to tell a story that has been purposefully forgotten or otherwise erased from historical consciousness ([Figure 5](#)).

Figure 5: Pontella Mason's "The Baltimore Wall of Pride-Africa East to West," a mural in Sandtown-Winchester depicting major black leaders. Photo by Meredith K. Stone.

Street Art in Baltimore

Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and Baltimore Office of Promotion & the Arts (BOPA) are important sponsors of street art in Baltimore. Students enrolled in MICA's Masters of Fine Arts in Community Arts program work with communities to initiate and complete art projects, including, but not limited to, murals and street paintings. For them, neighborhood members' input is essential. BOPA also works closely with the community but on a different scale because of its status as a quasi-governmental entity. BOPA is a 501 c (3) nonprofit organization that functions as the city's arts council. One longstanding effort promoted by BOPA has been its mural program. Launched in 1975, under former mayor William Donald Schafer, the program has sought "to make Baltimore neighborhoods more attractive, instill a sense of pride, provide employment for local artists in their own field, combat graffiti in neighborhoods, and engage young people in the beautification of their own communities" (BOPA 2016). This initiative has contributed to a tradition of mural making in Baltimore that has enabled local artists to engage with neighborhoods on a deeper level.

Two other active organizations are Creative Alliance and Jubilee Arts. Both have close relationships with MICA and BOPA but function more at the neighborhood level. Creative Alliance is located in Highlandtown, a diverse neighborhood in southeastern Baltimore, and supports a growing Latino presence in the city through collaborative arts projects and

creative spaces. Jubilee Arts is located in Sandtown-Winchester, Freddie Gray's neighborhood, a neighborhood that struggles with vacancy, poverty, and drug abuse. The organization focuses on creating a space for art, engaging youth in mural projects, and remembering the historic neighborhood's most famous residents, such as Thurgood Marshall and Billie Holiday. Jubilee Arts has been extensively involved in justice-motivated projects since the Baltimore uprising in 2015.

Public events have played important roles in Baltimore's street art landscape. Open Walls, the annual street art festival in the Station North neighborhood, describes itself as an "unparalleled street art project managed by and located in the Station North Arts & Entertainment District" (Open Walls Baltimore 2014). Gaia, a well-known artist who splits time between Baltimore and traveling the world, curates the project. While Open Walls has come under fire in recent years for its lack of community outreach and support for local artists—a criticism that has been leveled at BOPA and MICA at times-- all these groups have offered support in varying degrees to the city's artistic community.

A Catalyst for Change

In October 2016 we interviewed six artists and arts educators about what constitutes street art in Baltimore. As we talked with them, it became increasingly clear that street art is hard to define. In large part, this stems from the fact that what distinguishes it is neither materials nor techniques so much as purpose and immediacy. Equally difficult, there is no agreement on what it is.

Maria, a public art specialist who works for BOPA, even questioned the usefulness of the term, viewing it as incredibly transient:

I see street art very much as this sort of I don't know how to explain it ... but it's essentially hip public art. I would even venture to say that it's falling out of fashion as a term. I think people are starting to get kind of bored of that name ... I'm convinced that in like four years it will be called something completely different because ... thinking of public art as something very stale, often geometric and inaccessible, and not engaging or too permanent, not responsive enough to the now ... Street art is far more temporary, far more quick.

--Note that pseudonyms were used to allow interviewees to remain anonymous.

A critical aspect of Maria's definition of street art is that it engages with people, is constantly changing, and responds to current events. She does not mention political activism, but the term "hip public art" implies work that is responsive and innovative.

Another interviewee, Patricia, an artist and educator at MICA, favored a broad definition of

streetart: “Street art ... can incorporate everything. It could incorporate every genre of art. It can be performance. It can be painting. It can be sculptural forms. It can be oral histories as you go walking down the street. It depends on what one views as art, and again, art is in the eye and ear, in my opinion, of the beholder.” She sees the street art as there to motivate and empower residents: “It can be used as a catalyst to incite change, to facilitate change, to coerce change. It can be beautiful and terrible. It can have a terrible—I’ll put it this way, it can have a terrible, terrible beauty to it. It can be painful. It can be inspiring. That’s what I see. But it is about the [collective] people more so than a [individual] person or an entity.”

Both Patricia’s and Maria’s remarks suggest street art hangs on its ability to bring people together to inspire and to effect change. Joe, a community organizer and artist, agreed. Talking of events surrounding the Black Lives Matter uprising in Baltimore when several buildings in his neighborhood were set on fire, he invoked street art as an important response. He said:

[A] streetartist that’s doing street art is much more relevant and important to the community than someone you paid a lot of money to come in and do what they do. And I think [in] Baltimore because it’s trying to very much push empowerment and transformative change that you get people that represent ... you know what? We don’t want to just fund another mural that’s just pleasing to the eye. We want stuff that’s going to speak about what we’re challenging because when you’re in a community, when things are burning down, it’s the forethought. You don’t want to be having conversations about race on burning buildings on top of rubble on top of burned down buildings and if you have these conversations beforehand ... that’s when they’re authentic that’s when they’re earnest.

Joe’s view is that any mural that addresses socio-political challenges facing the community is far better than a “top-down” approach to art that enlists someone to come in and paint something pretty on the wall. He advocates for street art that calls attention to the very specific racial tensions that exist in Baltimore communities. He believes that streetart can be used as a tool to facilitate productive conversations and foster empowerment and transformative change.

Figure 6: Sandtown-Winchester mural depicting Black Lives Matter activists by artist Pablo Machioli. Photo by Meredith K. Stone.

The belief that street art should be used as a vehicle to promote social change finds voice in other quarters as well. In his critique of Open Walls, Baynard Woods of the City Paper argues that the festival lacks the “political edge” of other street art projects: “The best street art has always had a subversive, political bent,” he writes. “In fact, Wall Hunters—curated by the street artist Nether in conjunction with Carol Ott, a Republican who runs non-profit Housing Policy Watch, to draw attention to vacant houses in Baltimore—feels, as a whole, so much more successful than Open Walls because it maintains this political edge.” He continues: “Nether is able to accomplish the rare task of seeking community input by taking their side against an enemy, helping them draw attention to the deplorable condition of some of the vacants in their neighborhoods.” Thanks to the fact the project is not publicly funded, he adds, it “feels rebellious and punk and yet also righteous” (Woods 2014; [Figure 6](#)).

American and Argentinian street artists Matt Fox-Tucker, Alfredo Segatori, Pablo Machioli, and Richard Best collaborated on a project, Roots/Raíces in 2016 that produced a mural depicting an early species of human called Homo naledi (Smith 2016). An extinct species, part of our common human ancestry, is used as an implicit contrast with the racial divides found in both countries. “What interests me in particular with street art in Baltimore is that it feels really connected to the community,” comments international artist Matt Fox-Tucker. “It is a form of protest, if you like, but it's also about trying to bring communities together.” Fox-Tucker recognizes the importance of protest and community-based art and sees this as a unique and positive aspect of Baltimore’s art scene. Put another way, street art is good at making political statements but it means so much more when it represents real people in a real place. It is an outlet for their voices, the things they care about, and the history they wish

to preserve (Smith 2016).

Maura Callahan, a local artist and student at MICA talked of the role of artists: sometimes they instigate and lead social movements; sometimes they serve as historians, but they are always a part of them. Here she discusses the ethics of political art and the drawbacks of creating art behind closed doors:

If an artist creates political images in support of a movement to be exhibited in a museum or gallery, but fails to participate in the movement's activism directly, there is an obvious gap between the ideas their art communicates and the ideas it intends to represent. If artists are to make effective political art, they must be directly involved in the movement ... and not be totally isolated in their studio. And even when art is made in direct proximity to revolt, it should not be seen as a symbol of a movement, but as a result of that movement. Those artworks exist and they are effective because they express the anger, despair, or perplexity of injustice.

Though Callahan does not specifically use the term street art, her meaning is clear. Artists must participate in the movement's activism if they want their art to amplify the voices of the people involved. She believes that artists are responsible for documenting their times: "Art has the power to heal, to distract, to offend, and, perhaps most importantly, dictate how history is represented. So it seems appropriate to say that artists should respond to contemporary, real world issues through their art, especially when non-political art can feel like distractions—or worse, entertainment—when shit is going down." For Callahan, one of the major aspects of using art to oppose injustice is that it can influence the way our world is presented. Documentation through the arts can be a powerful way to show current struggles as well as joys. Art should also be opinionated, according to Callahan. She argues that art that does not make a political statement is not engaging and instead feels trivial, like fun and games, when serious challenges are at stake (Callahan 2015).

Conclusion

Local artists and citizens use street art as a tool that creates value. It can beautify vacant lots and buildings, advocate for justice, and spark dialogue for sustained conversations about race and social conflict in American culture. The Baltimore uprising of spring 2015 was a catalyst that led to a surge of community-based street art designed to call attention to culture, pride, grassroots activism, and those who have lost their lives due to police brutality. Afterward, Nina, of Jubilee Arts in Sandtown, wanted the neighborhood murals to send positive messages that are socially empowering: "We ended up painting those eight murals in Sandtown and those murals had a different theme. They were about community pride,

empowerment, and cultural history. If you drive around you can pick [them] out based on themes we did.” The Sandtown murals, part of the youth mural program Art @ Work organized by Jubilee Arts and BOPA, can be identified through their themes of community pride, empowerment, and cultural history. Nina wants young people to be united and empowered. Here, she discusses one of her favorite pieces in the neighborhood:

It’s called “The Thoughts in my Head” by Megan Lewis and it’s an image of a black woman and she’s holding a tiny little world in her hand. Her hair is this huge afro and the top blends into these protestors and they’re in silhouette form. It’s really beautiful but I think it perfectly walks that line between something that is beautiful and striking—the aesthetics are incredible—but it doesn’t let you off the hook. It still kind of pokes at those bigger social ideas, without hammering you in the face with them. I think that’s where art can be so powerful. It can talk about those things without being didactic or preachy... I think it’s really powerful ([Figure 7](#)).

Figure 7: Megan Lewis’ “The Thoughts in my Head.” Photo by Meredith K. Stone.

This mural, just a few blocks away from the Freddie Gray memorial mural gives people who

walk or drive by it every day art that is beautiful and inspiring social change. For all the street artists with whom we spoke, this is what makes the best street art—or any kind of art. Through collaborative street art projects communities are able to resist racial oppression and visually protest inequality, when they come from the bottom-up. Street art is one way black Americans can claim the narrative of their lived realities and experiences yet there is still much to learn about the dynamics of urban public space and street art.

Today, racial politics in Baltimore remain complicated. To mark the two-year anniversary of Freddie Gray's death and the riots that ensued, NBC News revisited Sandtown. Comments from locals indicate that serious problems persist, though police-resident relations may be starting to improve. One anonymous interviewee commented: "I think there's more respect... The police come to community meetings and they're trying to build relationships." At the same time, community activists and artists continue to promote dialogue and create art. According to Nether, creator of the Freddie Gray mural, painting a mural "isn't going to solve police brutality... But it can act as a catalyst to change people's thoughts" (Campbell 2015). As the artists and educators we interviewed for this paper noted, street art also can help us bind our wounds as we chart a course towards a more just society.

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