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Street SmART — Socially Connected Visual Arts

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Oscar Wilde stated: ‘Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Many contemporary artists now create projects designed to intervene in life, not just to imitate it as Wilde suggested, and often today to improve life for audience participants.

My study, Street SmART – Socially Connected Visual Arts, has drawn on these concepts and investigated art, in particular Street Art, as a driving catalyst for empowerment and social transformation.

The belief that art can be used as an agent of change is not a new one. It has been examined throughout the ages, but relating it to learning beyond the classroom, particularly in a female classroom, is a novel approach. My aim was to empower female high school students to extend their social understanding of, and contribution to, the world and to move beyond their oftentimes hyper-individualistic sense of self. My purpose was to have these students make art that actually intervenes in life, art that deals with issues that affect them socially and politically. Art that is meaningful for themselves and others on multiple levels.

To accomplish this I contacted contemporary female street artists and developed partnerships with them. These links supported my pedagogy, and also contributed to innovative and creative approaches in contemporary visual arts education with a broader application beyond my own classroom.

Focus of My Study

To achieve my goal of pairing students with artists to create collaborative works beyond the classroom, I travelled to international cities and met with female artists who shared a common purpose. In Berlin, London, New York, New Orleans and Buenos Aires I met with small, close-knit groups of women, street and graffiti artists, who have managed to penetrate and flourish within the competitive, male-dominated contemporary art world scene.

Paradoxically, many of the artists I met indicated they did not want their work to be defined through the prism of gender. This was an essential communication to bring home to my Australian students in the classroom. ‘It seems that just by inherently being a woman, your art is subject to being evaluated in terms of gender. This shuts down a more nuanced appreciation of art made by women, and takes the control away from the artist in shaping her own narrative.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

The focus of my meetings and discussions centred on:

* + using street art to convey sophisticated ideas
  + using street art to endorse causes
  + using street art to empower females
  + using street art to change and highlight social malaise
  + using street art as a collaborative tool across time and space.

Significant Learning

My learning from this experience can be summarised as follows:

“Visual Arts as a subject provides for various interpretations of the visual arts that are both contemporary and relevant. Visual Arts places a high regard on how students develop an informed point of view and encourages tolerance, diversity and empathy between students, teachers and others in the expression and representation of different points of view. Visual Arts recognises the contribution that practical, theoretical and conceptual knowing make to understanding. It acknowledges different sets of beliefs and values condition understanding and practice.”[[3]](#footnote-3) For instance, art can be about the appropriation of art from other times that is absorbed, art can be about subjectivity, the use of symbols and how cultures express their identity.

Moreover the Visual Arts syllabus allows and encourages students to cultivate their practice as informed by their understanding of the field of the visual arts and its changing interests over time.

Event – Femme Fierce Reloaded

While researching for my the scholarship I discovered a remarkable event, *Femme Fierce 2014*, in the Leake Street Tunnel, London, and decided that it would be a ideal vehicle for not only investigating the practice of female street artists but also as a model to replicate in Australia and one in which my students could be involved. What follows is an account of the 2015 spectacle and insights I gained.

The inspiration behind this event was an initiative by the organiser, Ayaan Bulale, to locate positive female role models for her young daughter, to give to her a real world context to the slogan that “girls can do anything”. ‘The much anticipated [*Femme Fierce*](http://inspiringcity.com/2015/01/10/femme-fierce-2015-launches-with-a-kickstarter-campaign-and-promises-to-be-bigger-than-ever/) returned to the thoroughfare known as Leake Street underneath Waterloo station for the second year running and transformed it into a sea of murals with artists ranging from young beginners to some of the Worlds very best taking part. Hosted for the past two years on International Women’s Day, the charity partner this year was Plan UK. Their “[Because I’m a Girl](http://www.plan-uk.org/)” campaign has been raising awareness of the issue of child marriage with a number of the *Femme Fierce* artists having taken part in the painting of a mural on the Shoreditch Art Wall the previous day in recognition of the campaign.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Bulale says of the event, ‘2015 went more viral than ever … we ended up with 10,000 people, 150 artists painting and £35,000 of free art!’[[5]](#footnote-5) 150 female Street Artists participated in the event which linked women from all over the United Kingdom and internationally. It was held in conjunction with The Vault Festival,[[6]](#footnote-6)where I was invited to deliver a presentation discussing my passion for art teaching/interventions beyond and outside the classroom*.*

There was immense diversity in the works produced that day. All forms of street art were represented, from spray can, stencil, liquid paint to even a full-scale site-specific installation. Some work tended to be political, with themes of anti-violence and the bravery of Malala Yousafzai. The women produced works from the hauntingly beautiful, but disturbing, anti-FGM (female genital mutilation) message to flamboyant tag names and sexy portraits. There was also humour and a carnival mood.

The day was a testament to the belief of how far feminism has come, galvanised through the masterminding of Ayaan Bulale. ‘The atmosphere was absolutely electric. Street writing, by its very nature, tends to be a solitary activity. But this was a festival of creativity, a celebration of humanity, complete with a hip-hop and can-rattling soundtrack … Street artists can come from all over the world and create things to honour women, to remind of us those in trouble, in pain, in fear, to invite us to look at the world in a new way.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

From this all-encompassing experience came many of my further introductions, and it provided a common point of interest for our further interactions, which have been rich and frequent.

*Insights*

* + Social conscience and commentary are alive and well and expressed in a variety of formats.
  + Leake Sreett was a creative epicentre for female street art on International Women’s Day.
  + This event provides a viable model to facilitate public art opportunities and engage students.
  + The street art movement in London appears open to and tolerant of women.
  + The street art movement in London had fewer rules and embraced a broad range of styles and techniques, for instance spray, stencil and full-scale installation.

Individual Snapshots

The anonymous aliases so often adopted by street art creators reveal no hint of gender. Popular opinion has the street art scene pegged as a man’s world, but a scratch beneath the surface shows female street artists are no invisible outliers. In fact, many female artists are active on the streets capturing the public’s attention and making relevant and incisive statements through their art. Artists that I interviewed, filmed and spent time with are testament to this idea and as such are appropriate selections for student role model status.

Artista*, Farringdon, London, United Kingdom*

Artista whose name is derived from the tag of artist + a star is a brilliant street artist who works across media. She has formal fine arts training and is no stranger to public accolades, having won her first prestigious art competition at age four and half. Her other major awards include the Young Tate prize, which she won in 2009, and since then she has been working as a full time artist. Even though sometimes difficult, she lives out her own personal adage: ‘If you really want something and you love what you do, you should just go and do it and don’t worry about the barriers!’[[8]](#footnote-8)

Her quirky, appealing style is character-based and she is well known for her flying toast with legs and her triangle with eyes and legs. ‘I just tend to do stuff and not get caught up in the politics. My characters are genderless and that is what I really like about them, they are not male or female, they’re just there. Sometimes that is just what we all need to be, just do our thing and be there.’[[9]](#footnote-9) She believes that art has helped her focus her whole life and she uses it to tell stories, as social commentary and to ‘create her own platform’.[[10]](#footnote-10) She sees herself as an, ‘artist that puts her work on the street’ and is wedded to the ‘rawness of the image’ that the setting affords.[[11]](#footnote-11) ‘Coming out of the studio and working on the street is a completely different vibe and it brings art to the people.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

Gilf, Brooklyn, New York, USA

‘What I am always trying to do is just give people the opportunity to see things through a different part of the kaleidoscope. Everything can change. A slight 10-degree change can really open up your world. You can have empathy for people that you wouldn’t otherwise have, a perspective that maybe I’ve been looking at this all wrong and maybe there is another way for me to see this – to grow and change.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

Gilf is an artist with a social conscience and she is not afraid to disclose it. In her 20s she spent some time in Italy (during the American invasion of Iraq 2003), and she credits that event to triggering her craving to express outrage at the social injustices she felt both then and now. Street art was a strategic vehicle, as she ‘did not have to be the face of the conversation. On the street people could take it or leave it.’[[14]](#footnote-14) It was empowering to discuss these issues and share this adrenaline rush, as society, she says, is too complacent. ‘My existence became more vital, my life seemed to have more meaning. It was more exciting to be me!’[[15]](#footnote-15) She believes that with 21st century privilege comes responsibility, and this is the aspect of her practice that is most relevant to the Street SmART project. ‘As an artist it is my duty to speak out against that corporatized, sheep-like mentality [that surrounds us].’[[16]](#footnote-16)

Stephanie Rond, Columbus, Ohio, USA

The work of Stephanie Rond dovetails well with the aims of my mentorship program. I interviewed her while I was in Brooklyn. She is an active street artist and committed feminist. She asserts that equality of the sexes is the driving force behind her work and that we [females] need to reclaim spaces to express this axiom. She states, ‘Street art is not a product; it’s something you experience, no one can own it – except the person walking by.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

She is formally trained and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Ohio State University. In 2007 Stephanie began to use spray paint as her primary medium. She is very interested in interacting with her [street] audience and always uses her own name, as she says, ‘I want other women and girls out there to know I’m doing it – it is easier to deliver my message when you know who I am. If my message is kind, it gives people a platform to think about it more.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Stephanie sees herself as a strong and effective role model who is ‘entrenched in gender equality’ and it is this element that drew me (and ultimately my students) to her practice. ‘It’s all about who owns the environment, who owns the space. Outdoor space is a very male dominated space to be in, so most of the reason I do street art is to show the ladies that it can be safe for us to work here too. It can be our space as well, there is a way to do it that is not loud and aggressive.’[[19]](#footnote-19)

Nina Kunan, Almagro, Buenos Aires, Argentina

‘Street art isn’t legal in Argentina, but like many South American countries its government has bigger problems to worry about. In Buenos Aires authorities simply turn a blind eye. A severe economic crisis hit the country in 2001, resulting in high unemployment, huge public debt, devaluation of the Argentinian peso and looting of shops. Afterward, street art became a cathartic way for many people to express themselves.’[[20]](#footnote-20)

The residents of Buenos Aires, true *porteños,* are tolerant of street art. There’s no need to obtain permission from the local authority; all one needs is the consent of the property owner. Artists frequently work collegially and often the best designs are left alone for years out of respect for the artists and the works. This makes the art produced there unique in size, form and subject matter. All of these aspects drew me to investigate this exceptional situation and the artists that thrive within its ‘‘warm embrace’’.

Nina Kunan took me on a gallery tour of her main works. This entailed a walk around her home neighbourhood of Almagro, not far from the recognised nerve centre of Buenos Aires street art, Palermo. ‘I just like the street, the street is the most immediate, the real thing. Everything happens in the street [describes people]; if you want to get close and in contact with what you have near you and what surrounds you, do your work in the street. I just like being in that place, I like to give something of what I know to that place, my intentions are good.’[[21]](#footnote-21)

And give she does she paints massive murals using spray paint and brushes, she does not use stencils and her formal training is in art history, although she has had residencies at artist’s ateliers. Her works have both human and abstract elements and she enjoys expressing what it is to be a woman. ‘It’s not always easy being a woman. I like to paint women to make them strong. Women have to deal with things that are invisible; they have to fight – this is why I like to put them on the map. I paint as a woman, for women.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Her audience provides the interchange that enriches her works: ‘I like to just get in touch. It is the exchange all the time with others’ opinion and others’ imagination; it is a way of knowing the reality around you.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

In addition to these artists, I interviewed Rabea Senftenberg in Berlin. In London, I interviewed Neonita, Zabou, Hoshiko, Simoni Fontana, Fiorela Silva, Mariana Cute and Aliki Andreiwmenou, who were all participants in the *Femme Fierce Reloaded* festival. In Buenos Aires, I interviewed Mariela Ajras. All these artists have been invited to participate in the Street SmART mentorship program and all have agreed. Herakut and Miss Hazzard, two artists I was not able to interview on the study tour due to their clash of commitments, have also agreed to be part of the program.

The realisation of this research in the classroom is as follows. My Year 11 students (fourteen) have all been paired with a like-minded artist. The students have communicated with their artists by email, extending and testing the limits of the traditional classroom, and the mentorship has begun. At the time of writing the students have designed and are painting a street art-styled mural with input both in subject matter and form from their artist, in the grounds of North Sydney Girls High School. The project is scheduled for completion in October 2015.

Conclusion

There’s no doubt that interest in street art is growing. In a globalised world, the movement is evolving, city authorities are getting involved, books are being written and festivals arranged. I’m not even sure that the terms street art or graffitiare helpful as descriptors today. I prefer the phrase Urban Contemporary Art. By that I mean art in an urban space. It could be lettering, more traditional picture-based images or full-scale installations. A free gallery in which to debut and draw attention to public artworks and the ideas they entertain.

It is the regenerative potential of street art in urban spaces that is engaging audiences. It can be a powerful conduit for any kind of image: big scale makes a big impact. Street art can be a form of resistance, a tool to break chains and embody the social conscience of societies in transformation or a vehicle to create personal images and express them freely.

In many ways the street is also a democratic art space. Many of the artists interviewed expressed the opinion that audience and peer reaction rather than industry validation is what makes or breaks an artist. A few admitted that the inescapable risk factor was an integral part of the genre.

Street art is constantly taking the temperature of various urban issues. Many female street artists are connecting to these issues, which in turn enhances gender solidarity, making them ideal empowerment models for female students.

Moreover, the mentorship program with the female street artists was key in:

* + extending the conventional understandings of artists’ practices and relationships within the agencies of the art world through the focus on collaborative and participatory practices
  + providing opportunities to engage with such theoretical approaches to artmaking as Nicholas Bourriard’s writing on relational aesthetics and his interpretation of current art practices, stating that some artists are ‘learning to inhabit the world in a better way’[[24]](#footnote-24)
  + investigating rich social programs for communities that focus on empowering female students in a variety of social situations
  + allowing a deeper understanding of the complexities of practice and providing a richer understanding of specific artworks and forms
  + providing a sustainable and achievable model for future joint programs between artists and students.

Participation in this project and the subsequent pairing with a knowledgeable practitioner was of the utmost value to my students, not only in their artmaking decisions but also in their future approach to life in the 21st century.

I would like to thank my sponsors for making the study tour possible; it has invigorated both my professional practice and my personal quest for excellence in the NSW Visual Arts classroom.

More information can be found on the project at the Street SmART [Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/Street-Sm_ART-513236912142823)

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