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GAIA

STREET ART AND CIVIC DIALOGUE: AN INTERVIEW WITH GAIA

The following interview is with Gaia, a Baltimore-based installation and studio artist widely known for his international street work that addresses contemporary and historical social issues. He is a prolific, yet thoughtful and informed artist whose work goes beyond decorating urban landscapes. Recently, his work has condensed complex concepts of race, class, and community engagement into vibrant and striking murals.

Shelly Clay-Robison: Should we call the work you have made outside and on architecture street art, mural art, or graffiti and why would terminology matter?

Gaia: I would like to make a distinction that may seem insignificant, but is very important. Street Art, as I personally define it, is an umbrella term that seeks to explain any intervention understood as an artistic gesture, in a shared space, and must necessarily be illegal. The purview of Street Art entails anything under the rubric of contemplation or performance; tactical urbanism, painting, sculpture, etc. Murals on the other hand, are legal, sanctioned and are much more stringently understood as painting. Finally graffiti, as a tradition where the scrawling of a name becomes stylized, is a more pure action that is self-identified by its various participants as "writing" and not in fact "art." Hence the continued relevance of the Street Art distinction.

SCR: So is it just an issue of legality then? Or are their social implications behind which type of work or medium is chosen?

Gaia: I stress these distinctions so firmly because we are at an extremely problematic crossroads within this rhizomatic movement, where the mural in the Americas, traditionally understood as within the realm of celebration, especially of colonized and oppressed peoples, has been wrested from the control of community art, by the spirit of Street Art. What I mean to say is that the production of a mural in the United States has traditionally been a multilateral, consensus-based process, but now control is being wrested from civic groups and representatives. Instead, the procedure of creating a mural is increasingly being determined by property owners with the power and means to circumvent community, and thus, facilitate work that speaks to an imagined, future audience. I call this a liberalization of the mural: international, highly skilled individuals, who have transitioned from illegal, singular authorship to unilateral, sanctioned mural production have created a race to the bottom that defies the old Works Progress Administration model of full employment and is instead more aligned with the 10-99 subcontractor economy.

This new breed of Street Artist-cum-Muralist is predominantly of European descent, highly skilled, and works under unprecedented time constraints in

order to create a mural that is efficient, and whose content looks beyond the demographic complexion of a neighborhood towards a flattened, depoliticized realm. The contemporary muralist undermines the notion of 'pride' and instead extends the scope of the mural beyond the politically correct or the celebratory. The Street Art mural circuit is founded on the aesthetics and practice of white supremacy, competition, and the investment of merit.

SCR: Taking that into consideration, contemporary Street Art and mural production will have inherent biases and practices and may not fairly represent a community or could perhaps influence it negatively. Instead, how can Street Art and murals be a vehicle for changing perspectives about public space and promoting civic dialogue?

Gaia: Street Art, as we have defined it for the purposes of this discussion, is for the most part guerilla branding thinly veiled as a method of promulgating unfettered dialogue in the spaces that we share. The tradition of illegally intervening within spheres of commerce, transit, and leisure, occurs most frequently in cultures that exalt the primacy of the individual, and are loosely defined by an upheld pattern of civil rights and democracy. In cultures with a different relationship to public behavior, war zones, or underneath regimes of oppressive governments, Street Art becomes significantly more difficult to execute without dire repercussions, but its application becomes significantly more urgent and consequential. Certain cities give more priority to private property than others. Buenos Aires is brimming with scrawls from amateur people writing love letters to one another along bus routes, whereas downtown Dubai or most American suburban subdivisions are entirely sterile. The more informal the physical and social arrangements are in a place, the more freedom of expression for lack of a coherent mechanism for control. In this way the illegal action becomes a barometer for liberty and is constantly searching for the margins of jurisdiction.

For example, light industrial neighborhoods in the United States that have been rendered redundant by global competition or by the shifts in zoning policy are becoming hotbeds for the clutter of Street Art and graffiti. Williamsburg, Wynwood, Miami, and downtown Los Angeles were all at one point burgeoning with the ad hoc layering of posters, paintings, and graffiti. But now as each respective neighborhood has undergone intense reinvestment, those sacrificed spaces where Street Art blossomed like bacteria to a corpse have since been slowly erased, as each building is demolished for infill development or building owners finally find more lucrative use of their property. Was Williamsburg a more civically engaged place prior to its visual sanitization in the wake of gentrification? I am not sure there is a scientific metric for making such a judgment, but seeing as most of the work put up was, as I stated before, guerrilla branding pushing the visual language of career rather than neighborly dialogue, I would anecdotally claim that any work aimed at addressing issues of reinvestment or bridge-building between the Puerto Rican transplant and Hasidic community were drowned out by the efforts of promotion.

To address the question more precisely though, the presence of Street Art and graffiti in the streets becomes a barometer of looseness, and the more that

informal interaction is permitted, the more possibilities for analog networking and communication arise. Whilst looseness authorizes messiness, the ratio of uninhibited interaction to legal repercussions can have two consequences: a sense of fear amongst those who are more conservative and a sense of freedom amongst others. But the lower the threshold of punitive ramifications for making communication and art in the streets, the more voices arise amongst the walls.

SCR: In communities like Ferguson, MO or Baltimore, MD, where there is a need for engagement across and through class or racial boundaries in order to inspire empathy and a recognition of the humanity of "the other", how can Street Art be a component of healthy dialogue especially when dominant or empowered groups have a knee-jerk reaction of disgust or anger toward its existence?

Gaia: While "parachuting-in" accurately denotes military engagement, it is ultimately a perfect metaphor for most contemporary Street Art operations. Ideally, an artist who works within the fabric of the public sphere functions as a tool for community—a set of skills to be employed to help promote a message that challenges the status quo and advocates for systemic change. Furthermore, this promotion of alternative narratives is enacted in such a fashion as to challenge the primacy of private property rights upon which liberal, representative democracy is founded.

In the United States, the ethnocentric majority rules the land, but internationally, a white minority is still capable of controlling access to resources under the aegis of empire as evinced in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa to name one example. The United States' apartheid system of de facto segregation through uneven development allows for entire swaths of our country to be sacrificed at the altar of innovation and global competition. These become breeding grounds for the informal systems of governance, and therefore a ripe environment for illegal image making. Detroit is one such example where a municipality and its residents feel as if they are under siege from outside forces treating their city as the Mecca of graffiti. Such circumstances can lead to Street Art as invasion in the wake of creative destruction rather than the bullhorn of resilience.

Considering the audience and exposure of international street artists, ostensibly the reach for their work resonates beyond the immediate surroundings through social media platforms. Through the proper methods of identifying representatives of community and listening, it is possible to produce work within a small locale that speaks to the entire nation, or the entire world, and promote the humanity of those who have historically been vilified by democracy. That is why ultimately the visual language promoted by Street Artists intervening in the public sphere should be a force of translation: a method of intimately understanding our differences whilst accentuating the universal qualities within us all.

SCR: Can you imagine a future where Street Art authentically honors and reflects local and perhaps disempowered voices while also speaking to the larger global community in a way that does not trivialize or sanitize social issues? How has your own work evolved to encompass this goal?

Gaia: The Street Art Festival model has found its purpose within the urban landscape as the visual manifestation of "reactivation." This method of heralding a reinvestment strategy serves both public and private interests and its fiscal niche sits comfortably below the larger budgets of institutional and corporate Public Art programs. In order to stay within such tight budgets, artists are often asked to accept exposure over sustainable monetary compensation, and thus must enter a global festival circuit that functions at a breakneck pace often leaving no space for deep community engagement. This whirlwind gate often leaves an unsatisfying taste in my mouth at the conclusion of a project. Despite such time constraints, good listening and consultation are still possible, and there are some examples within my own personal painting and curatorial practice that have engendered fulfilling results.

Last fall, I was in Gainesville, FL for 8 days and took it upon myself to reach out to a local activist organization and library called the Civic Media Center. They connected me with a local activist and scholar named Faye Williams who tentatively gave me a tour of her neighborhood, the Porters community, and was able to suggest content for my mural that would acknowledge the African American community on the periphery of a rapidly gentrifying downtown. Despite the urgency of the schedule, after three days of consulting various residents and organizations, I was able to complete the five-story wall within four days. The response from many passersby was a feeling of acknowledgement and sensitivity in a model that often feels like such a jarring parachute effect. The responsibility of consultation has been shifted almost entirely to the artist in most cases, and it is solely incumbent upon us to do the difficult groundwork.

Furthermore, a long term project that has been unfolding over the course of four years with my friend M. Holden Warren, who is a documentarian, organizer, and artist, has been an ongoing collaboration with the arabber community on Fremont avenue in Baltimore, MD. The arabber tradition of selling fruit from horse drawn carriages has been slowly dwindling as a sustainable financial prospect for so many of its members despite being uniquely suited to serve vast food deserts otherwise ignored by supermarket chains, and we have been trying to develop strategies to turn the space into a cultural center as well as a functioning stable. This has resulted in many stages of murals inside and outside their stables in the Sandtown neighborhood of Baltimore as a method of telling the narratives of their patrilineal tradition.

Collaborative content development and contemporary mural production has created a new landscape of uneven sites throughout the world that become spaces of potential tourism. For Tor Marancia in Rome, 999contemporary produced a mural project entitled Big City Life that resulted in the painting of 19 large walls within the suburban, mid-century-modern housing complex. Taking advantage of the tourism engine that is the ancient city center, residents of the housing projects give regular guided tours and sell merchandise celebrating the mural program to the droves of visitors that come every week. If this model became too diffused in other Roman neighborhoods, Tor Marancia as a site of tourism would lose its potent attraction. Hence this kind of outdoor gallery as

tourist site has its limits of egalitarian exposure but, nevertheless, has created an immense sense of ownership amongst the residents in this particular neighborhood and has furthermore become an additional source of revenue for the housing association.

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