

# SYMBIOTIC POSTURES OF COMMERCIAL ADVERTISING AND STREET ART

## Rhetoric for Creativity

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**ABSTRACT:** An ongoing tension between new ways of achieving novel, meaningful, and connected forms of expression is permeating the practice of advertising and igniting a lively academic debate. Novelty and social connection have long been preoccupations of art worlds. In this paper, we explore the creative tensions and synergies between countercultural and commercial communication forms of street art and advertising. Viewing each form as a species of rhetoric, we analyze a set of rhetorical practices employed by street artists that not only reflect, but might also be used to shape, commercial advertising in the near future.

Advertising has been acknowledged as art (Twitchell 1996) and christened *capitalist realism* (Schudson 1984). Even though rhetoric in advertising has different purposes compared to art (e.g., El-Murad and West 2004), the rhetorical process in the two contexts is similar (White 1972; Zinkhan 1993). In the same way art influences and gives meaning to our life, advertising shapes contemporary consumer culture (e.g., Elliott 1997; Willis 1990). As art mirrors the shared truths, ideals, and metaphors of a given society, advertising reflects our popular culture. As art embodies universal fantasies, feelings, and thoughts, advertising expresses the rational and emotional experiences and moods of consumers. Rhetoric in both art and advertising is strictly influenced by the social context within which it originated (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1999).

A parallel art form that poses a creative challenge for the advertising industry is the one we categorize as the global Street Art Movement, or, more simply, street art. Street art might be characterized as capitalist surrealism, postmodern realism, or perhaps even as "subvertising" as it converts,

diverts, and inverts advertising proper to promote noncommercial consumption. In this paper, we analyze street art as a species of advertising, explore the use of advertising by street artists, and examine the implications of street art for advertising creativity. We focus in particular on the potential contributions of the creative rhetoric employed by the stakeholders of street art to advertising practice.

As with its commercial counterpart, street art is a product that embodies its own advertising. Seen as a countercultural response to commercially or statist-induced alienation, street art is a populist aesthetic, a consumerist critique, and an urban redevelopment project. Street art espouses a vision of space reappropriated as place, where commercially noisy or entirely silent streets are reclaimed by artists for their proper "owners." Iron shop gates become canvasses for publicly held open-air museums. Subway trains become moving installations conveying subversive meaning to residential areas. Such subvertising parodies, appropriates, and occasionally capitulates to its commercial counterpart.

Street art has the visual and cognitive effect of commercial advertising, and many of its brand dynamics, but carries messages of enjoyment, ideological critique, and activist exhortation rather than of commercial consumption. It offers both an implicit and explicit challenge to advertisers, who ultimately will be tasked with appropriating street art's authentic essence to revitalize their own commercial efficacy (Holt 2002).

Street art can be framed as advertising, promoting the artists as well as their ideologies. Moreover, it can be framed as an alternative template for advertising. Some street artists are employed in the advertising industry, and some aspire to become advertisers. Some street art is used for commercial advertising purposes, in both legitimate and faux forms. Some street artists rail against advertising and the consumer culture. However advertising is imbricated, street art has a multistranded relationship with its commercial counterpart.

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Relying on a long-term ethnographic and netnographic (Kozinets 2002) engagement with the global Street Art Movement, in this paper, we analyze a set of rhetorical practices employed by street artists that not only reflects, but might also be used to shape, commercial advertising in the near future. We approach the craft of advertising as rhetoric (Deighton 1985; McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Pracejus, Olsen, and O'Guinn 2006; Scott 1994b; Scott and Vargas 2007) where symbols are used to persuade and take into account the visual aspects of advertising (Kenney and Scott 2003; McQuarrie and Phillips 2005; Scott 1994b; Scott and Vargas 2007). We contribute to the existing knowledge on the rhetorical process of advertising and identify strategies that can be applied in order to enhance creativity (El-Murad and West 2004). The rhetoric in street art can stimulate advertising practice in two domains: idea generation (e.g., Reid and Moriarty 1983) and social engagement (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007).

## THE RHETORIC OF ADVERTISING AND STREET ART

### Rhetoric and Creativity

Rhetoric is a pervasive trait of both commercial and noncommercial creativity in communication. We use the term *rhetoric* to address both verbal and visual street interventions. Initially, rhetoric was considered an exclusive domain of verbal language (Kenney and Scott 2003). Recently, the issue of visual rhetorical practices has entered the advertising researchers' agenda (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006, p. 55; Pracejus, Olsen, and O'Guinn 2006; Scott 1994a, 1994b). Hence, an analysis of visual rhetoric considers how images work alone and collaborate with other elements to create an argument designed for moving a specific audience. In this light, advertising and street art share a common interest in elaborating communication structures that inform and persuade their audiences.

Recently, there has been a demand for the development of a general theory of advertising creativity (e.g., Reid and Rotfeld 1976; Smith and Yang 2004; Zinkhan 1993) for which a rhetorical approach holds much promise. Scholars have applied contributions from psychology and adapted their prescriptions to advertising. Blasko and Mokwa (1986, 1988) adopt a Janusian approach, which is rooted in the logic of paradoxical thinking, apparently opposite or contradictory ideas that can be resolved and accepted by an appropriate emotional mental processing. Reid and Rotfeld (1976) have proposed an associative model of creativity that shows a relevant relationship among some specific copywriting abilities and attitudes. Novelty actually involves uncertainty of outcomes (Sternberg and Lubart 1999) and, as a consequence, creativity involves risk (West 1999; West and Berthon 1997; West and Ford 2001). Empirical evidence shows that an attitude toward risk taking

is linked to higher levels of creativity as measured in terms of advertising awards won (El-Murad and West 2003).

Interestingly, each of these elements (paradoxical thinking, associative ability, and novelty/risk taking) is also reflected in street art visual rhetoric. We thus demonstrate that advertising creativity can be studied as rhetoric (Deighton 1985; McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Pracejus, Olsen, and O'Guinn 2006; Scott 1994b; Scott and Vargas 2007). Advertising is rhetorical communication, and creativity has to serve this goal. Our study focuses on emergent visual rhetorical practices that can inspire advertisers.

### Social Use of Advertising

When investigating the intersections between street art and advertising, the social use of advertising by its audiences needs consideration. The current debate on existential consumption (e.g., Elliott 1997; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Willis 1990) considers consumer creativity as a form of agency that is carried out within the constraints imposed by the hegemony of the market (e.g., Goldman 1992), often expressed as the manipulation and reinterpretation of advertising by active consumers.

Advertising is a cultural product consumed symbolically by consumers independently of the products being promoted (Elliott 1997; Willis 1990). While some authors have advocated a deeper understanding of this phenomenon (e.g., Ritson and Elliott 1999; Scott 1994b), the social use of advertising has been an underdeveloped research topic. Some exceptions have shown that advertising messages have a cultural meaning in everyday life (McCracken 1988), are an incentive for word-of-mouth conversations (Sherry 1987), represent a way to reveal an individual viewpoint to others (Mick and Buhl 1992), and influence existing rituals (Otnes and Scott 1996). Consumers are aware of the rhetorical conventions of advertising and are able to interpret its rules of language in the same way they are able to understand visual conventions applied in movies (Pracejus, Olsen, and O'Guinn 2006).

Young people are particularly prone to engaging in the creative use of material culture in their daily lives (O'Donohoe 1994, 1997; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Willis 1990). They elaborate meanings, combining the irony, playfulness, and ephemerality of advertising. They manage a vast repertoire of codes and conventions typical of advertising messages, revealing a combination of control and power over advertising with a certain degree of vulnerability (O'Donohoe 1997). Moreover, through the processes of consumption, young consumers produce "grounded aesthetics" (Willis 1990, p. 21) that make the consumption of advertising vital and pleasant, emphasizing the search for beauty through the symbolic use of common culture, experienced and reinterpreted as an authentic form of art.

Streets and walls provide the virtual and physical grounds where social interpretations and manipulation of ads are performed. According to our field notes, conversations are not the only privileged way to share interpretations and build social meanings around advertising. Texts produced by consumers are alternative forms of grounded aesthetics, a different form of intertextuality where the creators are able to interlace market ideologies and codes with resistance and rebellion. The creativity of these forms of material culture easily becomes popular and appreciated by dwellers in public spaces.

## METHODOLOGY

Our study is a multisite ethnography and netnography (Kozinets 2002; Sherry and Kozinets 2001) of street art. This methodology is consistent with our objectives since we are focusing on the symbols and meanings of rhetoric (Scott 1994b) and on cultural practices of creativity by street artists and advertisers (Arnould and Thompson 2005). As a transcultural phenomenon, street art exhibits both global commonalities and local nuances. From 2005 through 2008, we conducted naturalistic inquiry with global Street Art Movement stakeholders (e.g., street artists, passersby, public institutions, etc.) in several cities in Europe (Milan, Pavia, Turin, Rome, London, Dublin, Brussels, and Amsterdam) and the United States (San Francisco, Phoenix, and Minneapolis). Netnographic inquiry expanded our observations to many other sites. We immersed ourselves in the phenomenon, attending events and monitoring news and reportage presented in the local press and mass media.

Our multicultural, bigender research team included four principal investigators and several assistants. Its composition allowed us to function as both insiders and outsiders in the inquired cultural contexts, which facilitated access during data collection and sharpened interpretive acuity during data analysis (Sherry 2006). Researchers operated as individuals, dyads, and triads, and held periodic strategy and analysis meetings as both full and partial groups. Internet connections permitted teammates to share new data, emerging insights, and local media coverage of street art in real time.

Because street art is illegal in the cities we studied, trust building was a crucial component of our research. Participation was elicited through our habitual presence, personal contacts, key informants, snowball sampling, and word of mouth. By establishing trust with one street artist, we often gained acceptance with a network of street artists throughout the country. Most interviews ranged between two and eight hours, and informants were usually both observed and interviewed iteratively. We conducted personal in-depth interviews with 12 key informant artists in Italy and 8 in the United States. The ongoing exchange with these informants allowed us to investigate the activity of the most important groups and art-

ists in our field sites. We also interviewed 60 consumers in the act of appreciating art or retrospectively commenting on their experience. Netnography was appropriate given the extensive diffusion of street art images throughout the world on street art sites and blogs. We monitored these sites and blogs, obtaining information on activities, thoughts, and critiques of both street artists and consumers. Examples of these sites included [www.woostercollective.com](http://www.woostercollective.com), [www.banksy.co.uk](http://www.banksy.co.uk), [www.graffitti.com](http://www.graffitti.com), [www.streetsy.com](http://www.streetsy.com), and [www.thedisposablehero.com](http://www.thedisposablehero.com).

Data were recorded electronically and manually. Field notes and verbatims of interviews were transcribed and photos and videos were classified according to multiple criteria. We built a data set of 800 pages of transcriptions, 58 pages of blogs on the Internet, 450 photos, and 15 hours of video. Data were analyzed and interpreted according to conventional qualitative research standards (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Hirschman 1986; Kozinets 2002; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Spiggle 1994), and involved member checking, horizontal and vertical analysis, and an ongoing comparison of details by tacking back and forth between the particular and the general. Specifically, emergent themes and patterns were identified. These interpretations developed over multiple readings and the interaction between previous and emerging insights (Spiggle 1994).

While verbal data and narratives inform and sustain our interpretation, in this paper, we rely more on visual data in our representation to mirror the prominence given in the literature to the visual aspect of advertising (Kenney and Scott 2003; McQuarrie and Phillips 2005; Scott 1994b; Scott and Vargas 2007). Thus, we employ the same hermeneutic strategies of close reading and deconstruction that researchers in the consumer culture theory tradition have imported from art and literary criticism and applied to advertising in particular (Scott 1994a; Stern 1996) and material culture in general (Belk and Sherry 2007) to reveal the rhetorical practices at work in our electronic corpus of images. We provide examples of each practice as sedimented in street art itself.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Contemporary Street Art and Commercial Advertising

Street art is a global phenomenon that encompasses several physical and virtual forms of expression, including traditional and stencil graffiti, sticker art, video projection, urban design, tags, art intervention, poetry, and street installations. The formerly monolithic aura of the global Street Art Movement as an illicit practice is losing its ideological primacy, giving way to perspectives that encourage a coexistence with institutional forces such as government and the market.

The current era of street art has become associated with cultural trends such as fashion, music, popular art, sports, movies, video games, entertainment, and advertising. Companies

such as Sony, Ikea, Saatchi, Nokia, Porsche, Opel, and Diesel have borrowed the aesthetic of street art in order to give their products an urban and artistic aura. Street art is thus institutionally celebrated and acquires an increasingly legitimate cultural role.

This cultural conjoining of art, marketing, and urban discourses has progressed to the point that the typical dwellers of public spaces find it harder to distinguish between authentic and spontaneous street art and commercial messages. Boundaries blur into an emerging picture that fosters new creative expressions culminating in the following main street art rhetorical practices identified as themes during our analysis.

### Visual Rhetoric of Street Art Creativity

Despite growing interest in street art evinced by popular media as well as by managers and academics, no previous research has adequately investigated the nature of street art creativity or questioned its potential effect on advertising practices. In this paper, we explore the implications of the rhetorical practices generated by street artists that we discerned in our study for creating more effective, contemporary, and socially sensitive advertising. The patterns of practices and the communication codes elaborated by street artists can be borrowed by agencies to nurture creative processes and stimulate future campaigns. In particular, we illustrate seven rhetorical practices found in our research: (1) aestheticization, (2) playfulness and cheerfulness, (3) meaning manipulation, (4) replication, (5) stylistic experimentation, (6) rediscovery, and (7) competitive collusion.

Table 1 anticipates the following discussion of rhetorical practices, of their intertextuality with contemporary advertising, and of the possible contribution in terms of advertising creativity. Parallels as well as distinctions emerge from opposing street art and advertising, which reciprocally benchmark, replicate, and subvert established rules. Each rhetorical practice can be explored and rigorously deployed in advertising and in street art like other techniques, and steps are suggested for creative processes (e.g., Bengtson 1982; Blasko and Mokwa 1986, 1988; Johar, Holbrook, and Stern 2001).

#### *Aestheticization of Functional Media*

Street art is rooted in rebellion against institutional reality and its multiple forms of oppression. Contemporary street art reverses this original logic while sharing the idea of stimulating consumer identity and agency. We found the graffiti of urban defacement to be overcome by forms of intervention marked by a quest for pleasant aesthetic effect. Current graffiti, tags, stencils, stickers, murals, and other forms of street art are designed to achieve higher levels of aesthetic performance and response.

Our study indicated that urban design is perhaps the most remarkable example of aestheticization. Some artists produce creative works that give an aesthetic value to functional, everyday objects in public spaces. Garbage cans, curbstones, and asphalt are painted and transformed into playful objects, full of humor and cheerfulness (Figure 1).

The celebration of hedonic traits of production and consumption and the quest for aesthetic quality spur street artists on to ever higher performance. Here we observe a parallel with commercial advertising practice, as far as beauty and pleasant aesthetic impact of communication is concerned. Nonetheless, street art emphasizes the opportunity arising from the aestheticization of frequently forgotten functional media and displays (e.g., walls, curbstones, garbage cans, stairs). Mirroring or replicating this rhetorical practice, advertising creativity can be fostered through an innovative use of traditional media (e.g., placards, posters, boards), or through an ongoing tryout of new and unconventional media (e.g., sculptures, parking lot floors). Recent studies (Dahlen 2006; Sasser, Koslow, and Riordan 2007) have shown that creative media choices can facilitate consumers' perceptions of ads and thus enhance brand attitudes. Street art practice might encourage managers to imbue traditional commercial ads with new functions such as decoration, curiosity, surprise, or entertainment, or to utilize new unconventional media as suggested above.

#### *Playfulness and Cheerfulness*

Most newer street art relies on a language dominated by playful and cheerful codes in contrast to the at times melancholy of contemporary towns. Characters, subjects, forms, shapes, styles, and colors are often borrowed from cartoons and comics, giving rise to the "cartoonification" of urban landscapes. Our passersby consumers suggested that walking in the decorated streets was similar to reading a fairy tale liberating them from the mundane experience of living in ordinary towns.

The border between the serious and the humorous is often transgressed, and the result is a creative mix of meanings. Novelty, an intrinsic feature of creative products, converted dull aspects of everyday life into meaningful or light-hearted ones. As one of our artist informants observed:

If the world is gray, we do try to color it a little bit. . . . It is a fantastic world through which we all try to create a world better than our reality. . . . Personally, I feel like a clown, a juggler who works in the streets . . . to offer a smile. I want to enforce the idea of public space as a meeting place, which helps people feeling better. (Pao, Milan)

The mode for this rhetoric is an apparently childlike representation of reality, which may translate any stimulus from everyday life into humorous symbols. Even when the perspective is critical and the aim is to subvert the existing market

**TABLE I**  
**Intertextuality Between Street Art Movements and Advertising Practices**

Street art rhetoric	Intertextuality	Implications for advertising creativity
Aestheticization of functional media	<p><i>Analogies:</i> both give primacy to aestheticization (e.g., ads' use of fashion models, pleasurable settings)</p> <p><i>Differences:</i> street art beautifies trivial, forgotten supports (e.g., trash cans, iron cages)</p> <p><i>Overlapping:</i> partial</p>	<p><i>Attitude:</i> beyond the ordinary advertising supports (e.g., flyers, placarding)</p> <p><i>Process:</i> —</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> creative deployment of new functional media that extend the supports and forms of urban advertising</p>
Playfulness and cheerfulness	<p><i>Analogies:</i> both use ironic codes such that representations are better than reality</p> <p><i>Differences:</i> they differ for the meaning embedded in ironic communications (i.e., gift vs. commercial)</p> <p><i>Overlapping:</i> high</p>	<p><i>Attitude:</i> subverting the use of ironic codes in terms of gift-giving attitudes (i.e., rewarding audiences vs. convincing them)</p> <p><i>Process:</i> diversified creative processes in terms of ironic codes deployment</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> from desirable products to exceptional representations of ordinary ones</p>
Manipulation of meanings	<p><i>Analogies:</i> both multidisciplinary and applying détournement techniques</p> <p><i>Differences:</i> street art shows stronger political involvement and resistance, critical elaboration of companies' brands (i.e., brandalism), and extension of détournement from communication signs to the physical context of its location</p> <p><i>Overlapping:</i> low</p>	<p><i>Attitude:</i> rereading CSR (corporate social responsibility) in the light of détournement (e.g., playful ethics)</p> <p><i>Process:</i> extension of creative use of détournement on the location of ads</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> more contextualized ads</p>
Replication of symbols and messages	<p><i>Analogies:</i> both aim to obtain attention and recall by means of repetition (broadcasting) and grant visibility to communication sources</p> <p><i>Differences:</i> street art mostly pursues the construction of non-brand-focused communities, whereas brand is central in advertising. Further, street art extends the logic of replication from logos to traits, topics, and typical supports being deployed</p> <p><i>Overlapping:</i> high</p>	<p><i>Attitude:</i> fostering sense of community*</p> <p><i>Process:</i> deployment of multiple forms of replication (not only messages and logos)</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> more varied replicated ads</p>
Stylistic experimentation	<p><i>Analogies:</i> both look for innovative styles and attribute importance to style per se</p> <p><i>Differences:</i> street art invests on stylistic experimentation for totally different reasons: cocommunication and search for not necessarily compliant reactions (street art does not importune, but stimulates critical answers from its audiences). Further, street art tends to reject its own sacralization and any dominant position, opposing craftsmanship and populism</p> <p><i>Overlapping:</i> low</p>	<p><i>Attitude:</i> refining a dominant approach to the market and fully compliant behaviors</p> <p><i>Process:</i> involve audiences in the coconstruction of advertising creativity (not only for testing)</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> more familiar, intimate, bidirectional and open-ended communications, probably helped by new technologies (bidirectional and real-time communications)</p>
Transfiguration as restitution	<p><i>Analogies:</i> both share the notion of creativity as vision</p> <p><i>Differences:</i> street art tries to stretch audiences' capability of perceiving invisible places and lifetimes (e.g., metro stations, ugly streets) whereas advertising tries mainly to reduce consumers' perceptual scope (mostly, by focusing attention on a given consumption option)</p> <p><i>Overlapping:</i> very low</p>	<p><i>Attitude:</i> subverting the attempt of minimizing audiences' perceptive scope (e.g., by linking the brand to its social context)</p> <p><i>Process:</i> in this case, creativity is the opposite of détournement in the sense that transfiguration does not aim to generate new meanings but to restore its own meaning to silent carriers.</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> oversized or downsized ads</p>

(continues)

TABLE 1 (continued)

Street art rhetoric	Intertextuality	Implications for advertising creativity
Competitive collusion	<p><i>Analogies:</i> both face competition and adopt benchmarking</p> <p><i>Differences:</i> street art presents distinctive features in the way it discourages communicational overlapping among different street messages whereas advertisers aim to prevail over other messages. Further, street art presents gratuity and limited authorship since artists may not even sign their work or use collective brands</p> <p><i>Overlapping:</i> low</p>	<p><i>Attitude:</i> discouraging hierarchical approaches and solipsism</p> <p><i>Process:</i> insert advertising creativity in a ongoing, participative discourse</p> <p><i>Outcome:</i> use of street art aesthetic codes and co-optation of street artists in advertising campaigns</p>

\* The city of Milan has recently posted ads using graffiti to discourage the spread of graffiti.

FIGURE 1  
Urban Design

A Curbstone by Pao, Milan



Frankenstein Stencil on the Asphalt, Milan

hegemony, the codes can nonetheless be amusing (Figure 2). The lesson for advertising is that playfulness as a rhetorical practice can impart a fresh, positive look, which helps engage the audience's attention and melt its perceptual and cognitive resistance.

As far as advertising creativity is concerned, this implies reaching and maintaining a certain connectedness with the audience (Ang, Lee, and Leong 2007) based on the offering of pleasant representations of reality symbolically given as a gift. Even though this may imply a higher degree of risk with some clients (West 1999; West and Berthon 1997; West and Ford 2001), it may force advertisers to explore as a habitual creative practice the opportunity to transform ordinary and dull entities into playful and cheerful ones. This mental exercise can diversify creative processes (Johar, Holbrook, and Stern 2001).

#### *Manipulation of Meanings*

The third rhetorical pattern that we observed was *détournement*. *Détournement* is the practice of playfully recombining the elements of a particular discourse in such a way as to subvert the meaning of that discourse. Street art is a multicultural *mélange*, part melting pot and part mosaic. In borrowing contents from other cultural domains (politics, marketing and advertising, popular arts), street art appears "multivocal" and "eclectic" (Brown 1993; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). As such, street art also mirrors the symbolic and syncretic nature of commercial advertising (Twitchell 1996) and adopts an attitude toward divergence that suggests ways to foster advertising creativity (Smith and Yang 2004). We found the material and stimuli provided by these institutions were employed in unexpected ways, in keeping with the *détournement* methodology

FIGURE 2  
Playful Codes in Critical Perspectives (TV Boy, Italy)



FIGURE 3  
Elaboration of Stimuli from History and Politics (Unknown Sticker Artist, Berlin)



in visual rhetoric proposed by Debord and Wolman (1956; see also Harold 2007; Moore 2007). In our case, this involves destabilizing the dominance of advertising by incorporating elements of advertising into a new aesthetic creation.

The power of *détournement* originates from the double meaning and the enrichment created by the coexistence of old and new senses. Street artists built bridges across and linked distant concepts. The beard can be the visible trait-d'union for political leaders belonging to different moments in time and space (Figure 3). The historical and political cross-references were sarcastically contrasted, and the images

of these leaders were contextually elaborated in stylized and artful ways.

In addition, icons were deployed in oppositional terms, contrasted to their original purposes (Figure 4a). This was often accomplished by a transfer of symbols to spaces that were ideologically in opposition to the key message of the artwork (Figure 4b). Using this rhetorical practice, street artists were fond of elaborating on companies' brand logos and advertising images. In 2005, Banksy ([www.banksy.co.uk](http://www.banksy.co.uk)), for example, coined the term "brandalism" (Moore 2007) to define those practices of street art aiming to short-circuit the

**FIGURE 4**  
**Manipulations of Meanings**



(a) Banksy, New York, canvas temporarily displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



(b) Unknown Artist, Berlin

one-way communication of established brands and declaim the independence of the individual voice.

The rhetoric of manipulating divergent cultural meanings holds three implications for advertising that would enhance effective and creative communication targeted to urban dwellers: (1) the contamination of codes, which are melted or juxtaposed and transformed into completely new contents; (2) the decontextualization of symbols, icons, and brand logos, which find fresh associations given the new terrain of their location; and (3) the interplay between images and their places, which emphasizes the need for contextualized creative communications. In so doing, communication signifiers are first decontextualized to grant innovative meaning and later recontextualized in consistent urban settings.

### *Replication of Symbols and Messages*

Replication was the essence of the broadcast strategy of street artists. In this rhetorical practice, advertising was a reference point for street artists who benchmark, replicate, and subvert established managerial rules. Not surprisingly, most street artists exuded a certain degree of confidence in their grasp of managerial praxis, as they were critical consumers themselves.

Mirroring and integrating advertising practices, the rhetoric of mass replication observed the following steps: (1) the construction of a unique and recognizable personal/collective creative template, (2) the transfer of some shared street art values to this template and its replication through connected variations, and (3) the adoption of a variety of media to mass-communicate and replicate the message.

Building distinctive and pleasant creative templates (Goldenberg and Mazursky 2002) fueled success both within the street artist community and across its target audiences. Distinctiveness was variously achieved by adopting (1) specific subjects (e.g., Pao's penguins, Ivan's poetry), (2) recurrent traits (e.g., Bros's stylized vertical eyes that animate every conceivable urban object), (3) personal logos (i.e., the previously mentioned "tags" and other individual or collective brands), and (4) unique space/supports (e.g., again, Pao's predilection for curbstones; Figure 1).

Through meaning transfer and replication, street artists crystallized their specific creative style. Thanks to replication, each individual or collective group benefitted beyond his/her/its personal value. It was common to observe commercial merchandising that resembled artists' languages or to witness market trading for street artists' works. Replication typically occurred through different levels of variation (Figure 5), which stimulated both attention and recall as happens with creative advertising (Stone, Besser, and Lewis 2000; Till and Baack 2005).

Finally, creative templates and messages were mass-communicated. Street artists spread their logo using various media, from the traditional (i.e., walls and public spaces) to the unconventional (personal Web sites working as virtual walls, merchandising, museums, and markets). This broadcasting system was described by our informants as a way to give creative outputs greater visibility. Several audiences thus become acquainted with the multiple expressions of street art and may even have used these symbols to inform their clothing style, or to build social discourses (Willis 1990).

This rhetorical practice is already most resonant with commercial advertisers, so a simple statement of lessons to be reinforced from the street should suffice. Evocative symbolism is essential not merely for establishing memorability but also for creating community. Replication through unusual placement of messages encourages consumers to receive content

FIGURE 5  
Replication of Similar Artworks by TV Boy



not merely as an epiphany but also as a gift from the source. The unexpected delight produced by these little discoveries is a powerful bonding agent.

#### *Stylistic Experimentation*

Cautious in labeling themselves as artists, writers openly stated that they do not perceive their work as "art" in the sense that they were not entering any philosophical debate about aesthetics. Their concern was directed toward the social and stylistic dimensions of their work. As such, street artists did not subscribe to dominant aesthetic rules, but acted to gain attention from dwellers. By renouncing artistic sacralization, the rhetoric of stylistic experimentation allowed freedom in the search for more powerful communicational codes (e.g., through provocative interplay between the work and its place; Figure 4b) that ensured exposure, attention, interpretation, and retention (Aaker, Batra, and Myers 1992). Stylistic experimentation involves audiences by means of (1) replicability, which increases the chances of exposure and retention; (2) desirability, which breaches the barriers of audiences' attention; (3) accessibility, which strives for easily understood codes interpretation; and (4) participation, which is the artists' ability to involve passersby in discursive activities and behavioral changes.

Replicability was attained through multiple techniques and media: writing, stickers, stencil, and urban design. While some of our informants specialized (e.g., Ivan's poetry, Pao's urban design, Obey's stickers), others hybridized and diversified their stylistic codes (e.g., Bros operates through graffiti, stencils, stickers, and even canvasses).

Desirability and accessibility were accomplished through the emulation of famous artists' styles, and icons were used in a strategy of manipulating familiar and accessible communication codes. Examples were countless: Warhol and pop art represented a dominant genre, but surrealism (e.g.,

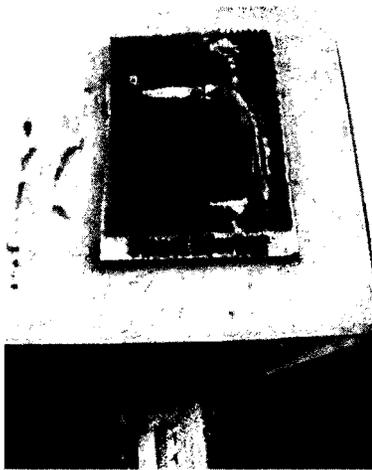
FIGURE 6  
Pollock-Style Dripping and Mary Poppins Wall Stencil  
(Anonymous Artist, Milan)



Dalì, Max Ernst, Magritte), informalism, and action painting (e.g., Pollock, Rothko, Vedova) were also appropriated (Figure 6).

Finally, the stylistic experimentation of street artists elicits audience's participation in ways that may inspire advertisers in the search of socially inspired and effective communications. These ways include (1) intimacy, which artist communicators gained through dialogues and by dwelling in the audience's space; (2) amusement, which softens criticism of the dominant culture; (3) familiarity, derived from the adoption of well-known cultural codes later translated into new fields of meaning; and (4) bidirectionality of communication, fostered by incomplete or challenging messages.

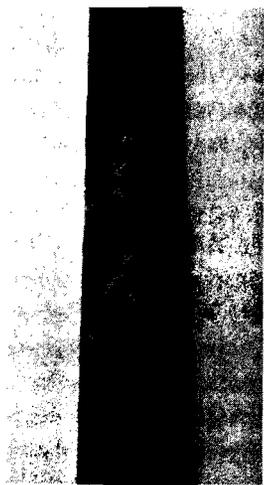
**FIGURE 7**  
Macro and Micro Interventions



Sticker, Milan Building



Sticker, Ground-Level Intervention in Berlin



Obey's Streetlamp Stickers, Milan

### *Transfiguration as Restitution*

Street art rediscovers the unseen. Street art stakeholders participated in the visionary quality of creativity, as they continuously rediscovered forgotten spaces and dimensions of urban life. As one walks the streets, attention is typically captured by the city skyline, the shops, or other passersby. As a consequence, many other places are invisible. Through playful codes and virtuous spectacular performance, street artists celebrated unusual and lost areas of towns. Stickers was occasionally placed at the tallest heights of buildings or streetlamps, which required heroic effort by the artist. Alternatively, stickers were placed at ground level so as to evoke the infinitesimal scope of mundane life. Macrocosmos and microcosmos were encompassed in these stickers (Figure 7). In other cases, artworks covered neglected and vulgar pieces of urban landscapes: floors, stairs and handrails, benches, garbage bins, curbstones, junction boxes, or shops' iron gates. Through street art, pedestrian material was brought to (new) life: pieces of poetry fill the lines of subway stair-steps, colorful frogs jump onto road signs, and garbage bins or junction boxes become trendy displays of urban design (Figure 8).

Rediscovery is built on the attribution of voice to previously silent meaning carriers. Instead of adding "conversation" to crowded areas, street artists redirected such conversation toward new horizons. Mainstream communications were surpassed through the exploitation of previously silent corridors. Transfiguration goes beyond the mere aestheticization of cities, since it aimed to reanimate the invisible landscape of everyday life. Interestingly, where advertisers aim to reduce the consumer's sight-scope to one single purchase option, street artists strive to extend the capability of passersby to observe normally unobserved, invisible urban lands.

This rhetorical practice offers insights for advertising since transfiguration highlights the relevance of the following tenets: (1) transformation as regeneration, which celebrates a paradoxical form of communicating (i.e., things are changed in order to become visible as they are and appreciated for their original meanings); (2) oversizing and downsizing, which increase the chance of gaining unexplored venues for communication through the discovery of "out-of-touch" territories of meanings; and (3) ennobling as the capability of making silent or marginal topics more vocal and central ones. Transfiguration as restitution is the opposite of *détournement* since transformation is not directed toward subverting meanings but toward making visible the "true" meaning of unquestioned space.

### *Competitive Collusion*

Street art often exhibited a confrontational character. The creative factory founded by Andy Warhol in New York in 1963 represents a useful metaphor to describe the way street art

replicated, perhaps subconsciously, the logic of these creative labs, where individual work is intertwined with others' codes, behaviors, and narratives.

Street art's factories are living examples of "creative socialism," evoking communal values, democracy, denial of hierarchies, and open sourcing of both creative outputs and cultural competencies.

This confrontation assumed multiple forms. It involved criticism, competition, evaluation, negation, and legal reactions as well as pride, cooperation, collusion, and creative partnership (Figure 9a). The only recurrent trait in this confrontational ethos was the celebration of respect beyond occasional conflicts and groups' parochialism nurtured by street artists' strong tie to the territory. An unwritten and now largely respected rule states that no street artist has the right to destroy the work of another (Figure 9b). It was common to observe walls with sets of interventions, each of them visible and attributable. They comprised a kind of open-air, open-source collection with a free ticket for all:

A writer seldom writes alone. He creates a group. . . . People you meet and who love the things you do. . . . I give friendship great importance. To me, the memories of these guys, even now that I don't see them anymore. . . . We shared moments of fear, of pride, of happiness. . . . We were partners! (Poo, Milan writer)

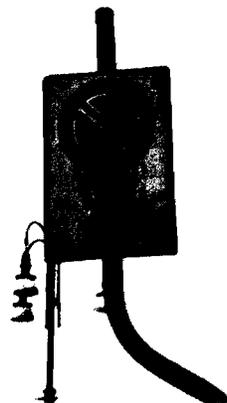
Respectful confrontation illuminates the praxis of street art communication by highlighting: (1) the rejuvenation of creative collective movements (i.e., the progressive dismissal of solipsism and self-referentiality); (2) the formula of competitive collusion, as a vital combination of reciprocity and sound individualism; and (3) the territorial rooting of contemporary communication flows ("tell local, speak global"). The rhetorical practice of competitive collusion seems tied to commercial advertising most vividly in social media and co-creation of advertising. Furthermore, it unpacks the transient moods, feelings, and attitudes of postmodern citizens whose fragmented lives are fueled by the dualism of belonging and egotism. This awareness should sensitize advertisers to ways of promoting products and services, as well as in competing with other agencies.

### CONCLUSION

Street art can be considered as an emerging template for commercial advertising and its associated rhetoric. In addition to the visual and cognitive effect of commercial advertising, street art also carries messages of enjoyment, ideological critique, and activist exhortation, while unpacking and demystifying contemporary urban consumption.

Our multisited ethnographic account describes the various ways in which street art is a product that embodies its own

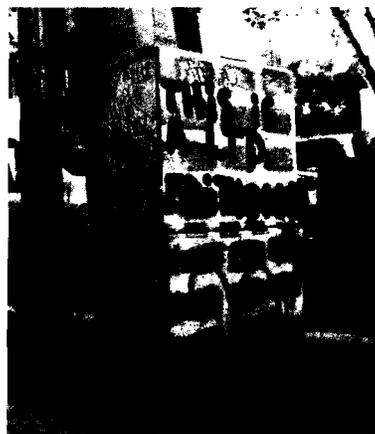
**FIGURE 8**  
**Ennobling Interventions Over Forgotten Urban Artifacts**



**Ami's Sticker, Milan**



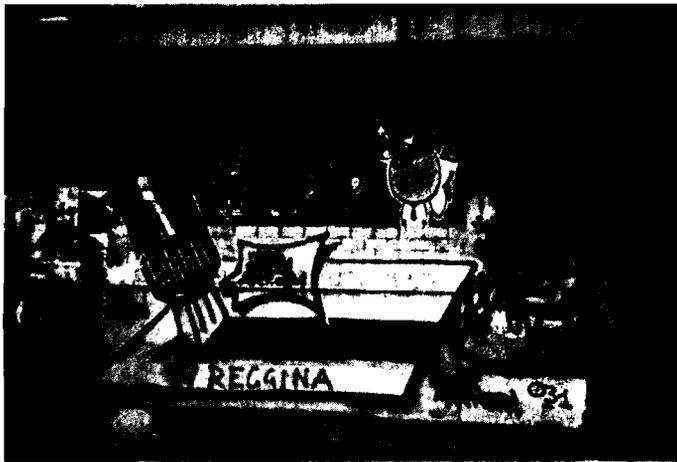
**Asphalt Stencil, Milan**



**Junction Box Graffiti, Berlin**

advertising. We focused on seven rhetorical practices: aesthetization, playfulness and cheerfulness, meaning manipulation, replication, stylistic experimentation, rediscovery, and competitive collusion. These practices underscore the double nature of creativity as product and process. We define the

**FIGURE 9**  
Creative Partnerships



(a) Bros and TV Boy, Milan



(b) Side-by-Side Artworks Restyling a Building in Milan

product dimension as the “vocabulary” and the process sphere as the “grammar” (Visconti 2008). Common (street) culture is the ground that provides a rich vocabulary for advertising: cheerful images, transfigured pop myths and urban objects, or logos. Contextually, manipulation, interplay between the place and the artwork, cartoonification, and other such practices are pressed into service as their grammar.

Our study asserts that, with thoughtfulness in order to avoid plagiarism or naive imitation, the rhetorical practices of street art can be employed to improve the effectiveness, relevance, and social sensitivity of commercial advertising. They suggest ways to multiply the sites of advertising, catalyze innovative and transformative messaging, refresh brands in distinctive fashion, and engage consumers in a process of cocreation. They also stimulate a reconnection with the active contemplation and discussion of images forming the nucleus around which sociality coheres and occurs. The achievement of any of these objectives would reinvigorate commercial advertising to a significant degree.

We have illustrated the potential implications for and contributions to commercial advertising of street art throughout our account, and we conclude by recognizing the core elements of street art that suggest synergies with commercial advertising that might be realized. First, the rhetorical practice of competitive collusion represents a tangle of conflicting and often unarticulated consumer feelings and beliefs. By combining diverse cultural competencies, novel communication and creative practices are stimulated, and may prompt the development of a more viable form of capitalist surrealism.

Second, our informants lament the increasingly melancholic and paradoxical silence of contemporary urban life. Despite an overload of communications and networks, urban spaces are frequently transparent and hold impoverished meaning for

their dwellers. Street art contributes to a transfiguration, aestheticization, and cartoonification of these spaces, and redirects people’s interest to different forms of consuming experience by means of a reappropriation of apparently ordinary and taken-for-granted artifacts.

Third, an appreciation of the rhetorical practices of street art highlights the quest for expressions of communicational democracy. Commercial advertising creativity can infuse the drive for familiar communication codes (borrowed from pop art, streets, consumer communities, etc.), cocreation, and a peer-to-peer approach (avoidance of top-down visions) in meaning transfer.

Finally, our data suggest that advertisers must stretch the boundaries of aesthetics. From more traditional attention devoted to the content of communication, street art has extended its creative realm to the container through which the message is conveyed. Relying on aestheticization and playfulness, street artists are transforming materiel into expressive artifacts. The synergy between container and contained builds new meanings for target audiences.

The current interplay of commercial advertising and street art is fascinating. Street artists’ creativity is steadily stimulated by advertising provocations and proposals. At the same time, street art demonstrates an increasing marketability, which even reinforces its links to the advertising world. The commodification of street art is a vital topic for future investigation.

In an era when people’s symbolic immersion borders on the overwhelming, when creative industries become so interpenetrating that hybrids proliferate more quickly than scholars’ ability to track them, and when the competitive threats to advertising of all kinds grow so pervasive, it is useful for researchers to focus on a discrete arena that hosts a particular form of creative symbiosis. Our choice of street art as a vehicle

for exploring this symbiosis suggests that, no matter the ideological differences in surface structure, the resonant similarities in deep structure between distinctive creative enterprises encourages a symbiotic relationship to flourish as commented upon by one artist informant:

In effect, we have something in common with advertising . . . a deep link. Not only the format: large posters and billboards . . . also the place: on walls, like advertising. The invasive effect is the same, the attack is the same. We don't say, "we're here, if you want, read us"; we say, "come over here and read us." Our message is that advertising is a form of art, say, poetry, because it's a means of linguistic-visual communication, which through linear, intuitive, emotional paths transmits messages that go beyond the literal meaning. Like a poem, when it tells you something, it's telling you something else with regard to the literal meaning, the reverse. . . . So does advertising: it presents ideals, values and, especially of late, emotions. We do the same thing but . . . the nice thing is that we can try . . . really try everything. (Matteo, Eveline group of poetic assault, Milan)

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