

Analysis of Street Art Works in the City of Cork: Relationship with the Urban Context and their Legacy

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The art piece that I will be analysing in this paper is an unconventional one. This work consists of multiple pieces. It is not housed in a gallery but displayed on the streets of Cork, and it is more than an object: it is an act in itself, a demand for reminding. One of the factors that makes this work interesting is the life it has had after it's been put up on walls. I will be reflecting not only on the artwork but also what dictates the fortune of a work in the streets of a city. Following the definition of street art by Ulrich Blanché (2015); “self-authorized pictures, characters, and forms created in or applied to surfaces in the urban space that intentionally seek communication with a larger circle of people”, I would frame “these pieces” in the realm of street art, a very popular movement in urban spaces and by common people. However, they are often not so recognized in the more traditional academies and institutions for its complicated nature, being generally unsolicited. It is thus in conflict with legality and described as vandalism by the optic of law. Furthermore, it is an art that generally refuses the art market by self-exhibiting, and as Blanché (2015) once again points out, escapes and protests against the capitalist understanding of art:

The illegality (in most of the Western world) or the ‘self-authorized nature’ of the act of applying artwork is a commentary on capitalism and consumerism in general in that, initially, it cannot function in terms of sales marketing and is, therefore, autonomous - as opposed to ‘gallery art’, where artists hope for a sale. (Blanché, 2015, pp. 32-39)

Since I had the opportunity to have a conversation with the perpetrator of such pieces, who I will refer to as Finn in this study, his own impressions and intentions suggest that his pieces align more with street art than with activism. Despite activism also following the ideas of acting and interacting with the public (or not so public) space and the people who inhabit these spaces, and the undeniable fact that the works I will be examining have a political connotation as in activism *oeuvres*, the artist did not conceive his art pieces as an instrument of social transformation in the frame of a political agenda.² He wanted his images to serve a good cause, in a way where he could self-exhibit them and

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² “Artists, collectives, works, projects, and currents of thought that seek to interpret artistic practices and the production of knowledge within the framework of a social and political relationship with the contexts in which they develop [in order to] become the platform for a cultural practice that restores aesthetics' political capacity and can turn artistic practices into

also remind people to think about the message within them. At the moment, his motivations seem to follow a logic more closely related to street art than with activism. The latter is often drawn, as Manuel Delgado (2013) suggests, on doctrinal reasons taken from poststructuralist and postmodern thought and its precursors, following the long tradition of artistic avant-gardes that radically critique reality (from Dada to the Situationists or action art). It is important to remark on the variability and flexibility of the boundaries that define these artistic categories, such as street art, graffiti, and activism. They work without following any institutional or academic rule or constraint, and so their artistic expressions are often very hard to inscribe in a narrower conception of artistic categories and movements, due to their independence from them. Their focus is on their own message and its reception by the general public and the mass media, not what the art historians and critics think about it and how they will be classifying them.

Photographs of protest and nature are Finn's main interest in his film photography projects. In March 2025, he started posting images of various protests in Dublin and Cork on the streets, concerning the genocide in Palestine. His aim is to make people start a conversation or be confronted by them in their normal day routes around the city. Finn sticks them to walls in plain daylight because he doesn't believe he is doing anything that should be hidden. Normally, street art, graffiti, and activism tend to be done in moments when there are not many people or when it's dark. He looks for places with big visibility and crowdedness. Unfortunately, most of the images are now gone (Figure 1). The glue applied to stick them to the walls has left a mark that still highlights where the images were posted, almost as a frame without the painting. At the same time, the glue looks like an explosion, like it was thrown at the wall, giving a physically aggressive look to it. In some cases, there is still a bit of paper left that is slowly disintegrating as well (Figure 2). There are only two images that continue to be up in the walls intact, which are posted in a building that collapsed a few months ago. It is a completely abandoned block that is starting to reach a ruined state during a huge housing crisis in the country. To protect the pedestrians from getting hit by a falling piece of wall, as happened in the previous summer, the council fenced the perimeter of the place. By doing that, and without realizing it, they ensured the protection of those images (Figure 3). It is very interesting to think that what protected those photographs is a literal barrier, a physical impediment to reaching them.

instruments of social transformation" Translation from the definition of activism by García Andújar, D. "Reflexiones de cambio desde la práctica artística", in Carrión, J.; Sandoval, L. (Eds.), *Infraestructuras emergentes*, Valencia: Barra Diagonal,(2009) pp. 100-103.



Figure 1: St. Patrick Street in Cork City
Note. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 2: Drawbridge Street in Cork City
Note. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 3: Liberty Street in Cork City
Note. Photograph taken by the author.

The four images that Finn chose to stick around the city are in black and white. They are analog photographs and are not edited, except for one. It was edited to make it black and white as well, since it was shot on a colour film roll. The reason to not use color is to not distract the viewer with color inputs and to focus their gaze on the messages written in the banners held by protesters. Almost all the images have the presence of big placards with blunt messages like "Boycott Israel", "NATO wars millions dead" or "Social rights Ireland". An image is worth a thousand words, but an image with words on it is worth the attention of passersby. The choice to keep the images in black and white is particularly interesting, since the other protagonists of the photographs are flags, mostly Palestinian.

Colours are a huge part of a flag since the structure is normally shared with other flags, but the truth is that the political slogans that accompany the flags make it obvious which country the flag belongs to. The choice of colours does help in highlighting the messages on the banners that are written in white since the rest of the image tends toward grays and black tones that highlight the lighter ones. The images depict banners hanging from fences or concentrations of loads of people in the street holding placards and flags. The focus is not the people, but the protest regardless of the individuals. Finn does not sign the pictures, not to avoid being related to them, but because he believes the importance is in the images, not in himself. In a way, once he sticks them in the strategically chosen spot, they become autonomous works that do their function without needing an external part that connects or explains them to the bystanders. It works very differently than if these works were in an art institution because the experience of viewing is tailored to the public of such institutions, to its principles and values, and to the art professionals and politicians that work, organize, and curate these institutions. In the street anyone can be confronted by the images at any moment of their day, and as Riggle (2010) states, such works effectively collapse the formalist distinction between art and the everyday. The absolute openness of the works to anyone is what matters, without distinction in class and social background that normally dictates the public of a contemporary art museum. Not only is it about the democratization of arts, but also about the way the message of the images is spread around the busy streets of the city in opposition to the genocide of the Palestinian nation or the complicity of the Irish state. It's raising an existing voice to make other people share the same concern and develop a cultural consciousness that lives in the public space and is autonomous of any institution, meaning it doesn't need to answer to their ways of doing or not doing anything. People make art, and art makes people, regardless of museums, galleries, governments or institutions, and images can destabilize the train of thought by interrupting it in the most quotidian places, leaving space to individual conclusions without being guided by a catalog or a museum signpost that offers additional information.

The other side of this argument is that in the same way, because there is not always a conception of art or culture in the receptions of these works that are outside the perimeters and security systems of a museum, the works themselves do also become subject of changes imposed by passersby and other agents, such as the, climate. As Sara Pinto-Bastos (2024) explains, these practices are self-aware of their own impermanence: "Like graffiti, street art has a short life expectancy. It becomes part of the city and is affected by its image in continuous mutation, so one never really knows how long it will last." Sometimes by people who disagree with them and choose the physical act of detachment, tearing them away, or covering them up. All of these are a sort of embodied reactions to art and ideas that prove the strong perceptive and corporal response that an image can create, regardless of this reaction happening while following orders from an authority or by individuals themselves. Other times it is the

rain and the wind, especially in works like the one we are analysing, that helps in the process of vanishing them. We shall not forget that climate, oblivious of any ideological concern, does dictate aspects of any living context, acting as a force above human will, despite our efforts to ignore it. Street art is at peace knowing it won't be there forever and that the weather is another agent in the fortune of a work, but it's interesting to also analyze its effects on the arts of the street, and how it may be getting worse by the climate crises. Nevertheless, in our case, and in many others, there are still reminiscences that there was something there before. Sometimes, while trying to remove works, a trace is left that marks their previous existence in a more permanent way than if it was left untouched, which in our case is shown by glue remains.

There are other examples where the answer of the public is in agreement, and instead of destruction, the strategy to interact with the piece is by addition. Once again, thanks to that collapsing building that has been fenced, not only are Finn's pieces still standing, but someone else felt encouraged by his act to also express their own thoughts through altering the public space (Figure 4 and 5). Just underneath both of the posters by Finn we can read in a bold yellow color, probably from a crayon designed already to tag in the street, "Gardai complicit in Genocide" and "Abolish Frontex". The Gardai and Frontex are both European security forces that had been in the crosshairs of criticism for the over use of unjustified violence, over funding, escalating power and abusive methods, sometimes towards pacifist protesters in opposition to the Palestinian genocide, which is probably why these slogans are written close to Finn's photographs (Fallon, 2022; Santos, 2025). The fact that someone felt the need to comment on those power structures, on the streets in an anonymous way, means that they also want other people to reflect about them and to raise their voice in regard to what is problematic about power and impunity. People make art, and art makes people protest.



Figure 4: Gardai complicit in Genocide -Liberty Street wall
Note. Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 5: Abolish Frontex - Liberty Street wall
Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Finn's images have gained an importance beyond their aesthetic appearance; it's their message and the act itself that makes them relevant to study in the context of how art can affect people even when it's unsolicited. This piece, just as any other street art piece, is subject to what constitutes a city, its people, its institutions, its walls, its architecture, its ideologies, its problems, its museums, and its climate. Analyzing what people put up in the streets means also analysing the political climate of the city, the demands and concerns of citizens that feel unheard and take it upon themselves to raise questions and reflections in the public space, and the answers coming from other citizens.

Street art as interactive, a forum where a conversation between artists and the community unfolds[...] People are involved in street art's discourse through their social-spatial practices, which can be walking, photographing, or touring, and which promote the experience of street art performed inside the sensorial experience of the physical environment. (Pinto-Bastos, 2024, pp. 22-31)

We should never overlook street art because it's a very accurate depiction of what people think, lack, and want. The aesthetic strategies in doing so are so numerous and variable that from an art history point of view, they highlight the visual identity and the aesthetic that the city, its artist, and its people are leaning towards. In any urban context, relations are happening constantly: between art and people, art and protest, museums and walls, the city and its inhabitants, its systems and its anti-systems, the norms and rules and the going against them. To obey and disobey the city is to be part of it.

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