

MARK LONG

College of Charleston

Geographies of street art: Shepard Fairey and the trans-scalar imagination

ABSTRACT

Street art is an emerging art form that insists on unmediated access to the urban realm. It seeks to reconnect urban populations with their surroundings by unsettling apparently banal landscapes that serve to reinforce dominant world-views. It operates through our reimagining of the urban environment, with designs on broader rethinking of our ways-of-being. This article charts new geographic imaginings through Shepard Fairey's 'Power & Glory' exhibition in Charleston, South Carolina. 'Power & Glory' posits a trans-scalar geographical imagination, originating in new senses-of-belonging in the city to describe an arc from local to global; to return, finally, to the city as the immediate scale of existence.

KEYWORDS

street art
Shepard Fairey
'Power & Glory'
geopolitics
scale
geographical
imagination
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INTRODUCTION

Late in spring 2014 street artist Shepard Fairey installed five large-scale artworks in Charleston, South Carolina: a storefront installation and four murals. They occupy key points on major thoroughfares in the city (Figure 1), including King Street, which is downtown Charleston's principal shopping district, and Calhoun

1. E-mail correspondence with Halsey director and curator of 'The Insistent Image: Recurrent Motifs in the Art of Shepard Fairey and Jasper Johns', Mark Sloan, July 2014.

2. Information and documentation about the exhibit are available here: <http://halsey.cofc.edu/exhibitions/the-insistent-image-recurrent-motifs-in-the-art-of-shepard-fairey-and-jasper-johns/>.



Figure 1: Power & Glory public artworks. Courtesy of the Halsey Institute.

Street, which is the most heavily travelled east-west axis across the peninsula. A central part of programming to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art (referred to colloquially as the 'Halsey'), at the College of Charleston, the artworks are to remain in place until at least January 2015, when the City of Charleston's Planning, Preservation and Sustainability office may reissue permits extending their life for another year.¹

Born in Charleston in 1970, Shepard Fairey embraced skate and punk-rock subcultures while attending local schools, before moving, via California, north to study art at the Rhode Island School of Design. Arrested multiple times for his street art, he gained national prominence with an iconic image of presidential candidate Barack Obama in 2008. The National Portrait Gallery acquired that image and a retrospective followed at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston. Long since based in Los Angeles, the Charleston exhibition was Fairey's first major show in his hometown.

The outdoor art Fairey created in 2014 was part of an exhibition of his work, along with that of fellow South Carolinian Jasper Johns, at the Halsey called 'The Insistent Image: Recurrent Motifs in the Art of Shepard Fairey and Jasper Johns'. The exhibition, which foregrounded the recycling of images in each artist's personal visual vocabulary, showcased Fairey's new



Figure 2: King Street. Courtesy of BadJon Photography.

body of work – called ‘Power & Glory’.² The murals and installation, then, were paired with Fairey’s 2D paintings, prints and collages, and, in a departure for the artist, bronze sculptures and neon, commissioned specifically for this exhibition.

Fairey proved an excellent choice for the Halsey – his opening and show were the most successful in the institute’s history in terms of audience numbers and national publicity. This echoed his 2010 *May Day* opening in New York, purportedly the most successful commercial gallery opening ever in that city (Deitch n.d.: 14). Demand for tickets for the artist walk-through at the Halsey was so great that the gallery talk was broadcast live via web-based video. Moreover, the artist lecture was relocated off campus to a downtown auditorium for a sellout crowd of 1000. Fairey’s appeal, and that of fellow traveller Banksy in Great Britain, underline broad excitement at street art.

Street art, defined by Banksy (2010) as a hybrid form of graffiti, is a new artistic form, anchored in twentieth-century ideas and movements such as phenomenology and the Situationists. In that light it operates, ideally, by jolting city dwellers into reengaging with everyday places to which they have long since been numbed. This is to be achieved by inserting art into those places, often at legal and physical risk to the artist, which creates the Situation as people get caught up in their surroundings (Figure 2). Street art echoes classic notions in human geography about transforming anonymous spaces into places by imbuing them with meaning. It seeks to take the homogenized, largely characterless urban spaces we move through and turn them into places we pay attention to, can get passionate about, and might learn from. A sense of belonging should result.

This ability to potentially (re)make places and so cajole us into rethinking our place in the world is a central argument in the sections that follow, which are concerned with the politics of Shepard Fairey’s artistic practice. Here, I want to make a case for his art as a catalyst for new geographic imaginings, across scales from the local to the national, international and global. Fairey’s work exercises our trans-scalar imagination to critique politics here, there, everywhere, and to bring us back to Charleston in the end.

3. 'Art, Life & Politics: Shepard Fairey in Conversation with Mark Sloan', 15 May 2014 at the Charleston Music Hall.
4. Insistence on public access to their surroundings by urban explorers is described in terms of 'place hacking' by geographer Bradley Garrett (2013: 6, 19, et seq.). The term hacking is being recycled in various disciplines at this time (see <http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/?showDate=2014-07-11>), but it seems particularly appropriate for street art which sits at the margins between legal and illicit worlds.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF PUBLIC PLACES

Geographers define geopolitics as control over strategically important spaces. Often associated with high politics in that part of the world known as the Middle East/the Gulf, for street artists, however, there is no more strategically significant space than our immediate surroundings. It is in the everyday urban environments that we move through unheedingly that we are conditioned to internalize the trappings of the dominant ideological constructs of our time: capitalism (commerce, advertising, property) and nationalism (flags, colours that do not run, the United States).

Street artists seek to unsettle these banal landscapes. They do this by appropriating the languages of capitalism itself: commandeering space, recurrent motifs and sustained campaigning. Likewise, Fairey's use of the aesthetics of propaganda, of the flag motif, of an alternative colour palette, and of leitmotifs such as 'E Pluribus Venom' (2007) and 'Power & Glory' (2014), poses probing questions about our identity as Americans. It is at the local scale that street art first operates on our geographical imaginations, pushing us to rethink what our surroundings tell us about ourselves.

At its bedrock street art is about rejecting the idea that we have no control over the world we inescapably encounter on the streets. Fairey decries homogenized living spaces, contending that tyranny is the deliberate erasure of nuance.³ Street artists seek to wrest back control, always momentarily, over our visual environment, colonized almost entirely by commercial advertising and government signage. These artists use their moment to create counter hegemonic places, however fleeting, that might enmesh us in dissonant messages about spaces we otherwise take entirely for granted.

Fairey's work is wedded to the practice of democracy, as his grassroots organizing for the Obama presidential campaign in 2008, associated with his celebrated HOPE poster, showed. More immediately, it is concerned with the *where* of democracy, synonymous with public spaces. Street art seeks to resurrect public space. It insists that our surroundings are part of the commons, and inserts itself into spaces reserved for commerce and governance, be they billboards or the backside of municipal signs. It is here that the local politics of street art is most in evidence. It seeks to hack⁴ nondescript urban spaces to transform them into places charged with alternative politics and so awaken us to new ways of being-in-the-world.

Our definition of what we mean by the word public is central to the politics of our time. The nub of this politics is our shifting sense of what 'public' means, the acknowledgement that an acceptable set of 'public' practices is subject to evolving understandings. This conversation, which spans genres and media, anchors the work of scholars, journalists, activists, film-makers and artists from Tony Judt to Paul Krugman to Edward Snowden to Michael Moore to Trevor Paglen, and so on. It is no accident that the Arab Spring revolved around risings within the square, the archetypal public space, or, for that matter, that the Occupy movement lays claim to public spaces first. Arguably, there is no debate more pressing, if not for all of the 99, then certainly for the vast majority. How we reconvene around the word public will determine how long we live, and how well. It will give government leeway to rebuild our fraying infrastructure and sanction more, or less, surveillance over all we do. More immediately, access to meaningful public spaces is associated with physical, mental and developmental health.

Street artists' determination to insert themselves into public spaces, to reclaim those spaces as public places, then, is central to the geopolitics of the art form. Street artists perform places as public and, thus, speak them into being. Their defiant politics echo at least as long as their art remains in place. Places are reimagined as public, even if only long enough such that viewers come to question the public/private dichotomy. Artists like Fairey, however, aspire to broader effects.

OBEY WHAT?

Fairey's signature OBEY campaign, which got its start in 1989, speaks to questions about who controls our surroundings.⁵ OBEY is associated with stickers on the backside of downtown traffic signs, wheat pasted posters on billboards, and, for 'Power & Glory', a 24x18 foot mural on the water tower atop the Francis Marion hotel in downtown Charleston (Figure 3). This hotel is the tallest building along the central spine of the peninsula, and a commanding vantage point from which to dominate the heart of the commercial and university districts of the city. The irony of the giant's stern visage belittling John C. Calhoun on his pedestal at Marion Square, unplanned, was not lost on Fairey.⁶ Always, Fairey targets viewers moving through urban spaces; in this case he did so from a perch now made ominous for the giant.

OBEY continues Fairey's first sticker campaign, that used professional wrestler André the Giant's face along with the ironic yet vaguely disquieting statement 'Andre the Giant has a Posse', and the following statistics: '7'4", 520lbs (Figure 4). Over the 1990s Fairey produced more than a million stickers as the campaign went viral in a still largely analogue world. From an inside joke with friends, the image became iconic even as it morphed into the face on top of the Francis Marion hotel. It is not unusual to encounter the original André the Giant sticker downtown in Charleston still today.

Our response to his street art should be emotional, to the image or the effort involved in placing it; and intellectual, in the sense of our being enticed

5. Intersections between Fairey-the-artist and Fairey-the-entrepreneur are beyond the scope of this article but complexities deriving from his OBEY clothing line have been explored by Banet-Weiser (2011), Banet-Weiser and Sturken (2010) and Droney (2010).
6. Gallery talk with Shepard Fairey, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, Charleston, Saturday, 22 May 2014.



Figure 3: Francis Marion Hotel. Courtesy of the Halsey Institute.



Figure 4: *Beaufain Street (July 2014.)* © The author.

to critically engage our world. Fairey seeks the one-two punch whereby we are lured in by the visual and then suckered to grapple with the consequences of what we are seeing. For Fairey, emotion drives the intellect, and if he can spark the viewer's interest, he believes, she will do the intellectual heavy-lifting herself to justify her response. Street art would have us take stock of the places we encounter everyday and, thus, cause wider questioning. And so from the street artist's ephemeral local control over our urban visual environment might be planted seeds about broader notions of control.

OBEY embodies this logic forcefully. 'Obey what?' is the response Fairey anticipates from people. OBEY is much more than simple reverse psychology – it has broader implications. Fairey hopes that a first instance of questioning might set in motion a domino effect whereby viewers come to ponder their dutiful submission to all manner of questionable truths in their day-to-day lives. Thus, we might be unshackled from lives lived entranced. In this light, then, Fairey has designs on geographical imaginations in our local, lived, urban environment, now jumping scales to question the exercise of power in other places, and at other scales.

THE POPULAR GEOPOLITICS OF 'POWER & GLORY'

The 'Power & Glory' exhibition is anchored very deliberately in street art at cardinal points in the downtown map of Charleston. It continues inside the gallery space at the Halsey, where Fairey suggests new scales for the exercise of our geographical imaginations. Here, he deploys the logics of popular geopolitics, precisely to call into question received truths about life at national and international scales.

Popular geopolitics concerns the use of vehicles from popular culture to reinforce geopolitical narratives about control over specific spaces. An example



Figure 5: *Empire State of Mind*. Courtesy of the Halsey Institute.

would be how the western genre in dime novels and Hollywood films made epic the story of the frontier and Manifest Destiny, and so informed and furthered governmental designs on a continent-sized country. In 'Power & Glory', Fairey avails himself of popular cultural forms in the shape of propaganda posters and pop art, à la Jasper Johns. His use of the Constructivist aesthetic resonates immediately, as does a lexicon drawn from commerce and advertising. This makes his art accessible to broad audiences. Reaching just such audiences is intrinsic to Fairey's purpose in the gallery show: to poke at accepted narratives about the United States of America. He generally rejects the standard red white and blue colour palette, preferring instead blacks, golds and reds, certainly for his flags.

His is a critical popular geopolitics, where, as on the streets outside, Fairey would plug into both our emotions and intellect. Rather than received truths, 'Power & Glory' is about home truths instead. America is 'the land where Gods saves and Satan invests (in assault weapons and high capacity magazines)'. It is where the countdown to, presumably, revolution is slowed only by the sedation of millions. Fairey challenges our 'Empire state of mind' (Figure 5). Skycrapers – quintessentially American urban forms – topped not with communication spires but by flare stacks, billowing smoke or afire – underline the centrality of oil to American industry and power.

Oil and empire: the projection of American might worldwide over the American Century, draws other spaces into 'Power & Glory'. Thus, lurking in

7. Gallery talk with Shepard Fairey, Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, Charleston, Saturday, 22 May 2014.

the background here is the most important space for US exercise of geopolitics, that part of the world administered by CENTCOM, site of practically all US military casualties since the early 1980s. Our fossil fuel dependency makes it so. And so we jump scales again from national to international as geographical imaginations take flight.

If capitalism and nationalism make places, here are alternative visions for the places we inhabit. We should not obey; we should not accept uncritically our power and glory; we should reappraise the banal flagging of our identity. In this way, Fairey's art is counter-propaganda propaganda,⁷ both in substance – it is the stuff of persuasive communication, peddling its own messages about being-in-the-world – and in form.

BEYOND CONTROL? GEOPOLITICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Environmental challenges over the twenty-first century call into question the very logic of control over strategic spaces, absent a global compact that, likely, would arrive too late regardless. In effect, the magnitude of climate change may make nonsense of the whole notion of control. In important ways, 'Power & Glory' is concerned with this most pressing politics, and so our geographical imagination now goes global in scale.

The environment looms large in ocean waves slick with petroleum. Windmills and oil derricks in the same image sit under different skies, warm and ominous, respectively. Such images are not subtle in their messaging but the urgency of our environmental predicament recommends a certain heavy-handedness to Fairey.



Figure 6: *Paradise Turns*. Courtesy of the Halsey Institute.



Figure 7: College Lodge. Courtesy of the Halsey Institute.

Sunbathers right at the water's edge in the shadow of an oil derrick conjure infamous images such as Reggio's (1982) beach idyll in the shadow of nuclear reactors at San Onofre State Beach in California (Figure 6). Here our trans-scalar imagination moves into high gear indeed. This image admonishes that there will be paradise only until the tide turns. And so, the viewer reels away from this beach scene to jump scales to the planetary; and, inevitably, in a city that floods sufficient to see students kayak the downtown, we scramble back to wonder how long our local paradise can endure. Charleston, a peninsular city prone to flooding, built partly on land reclaimed from river and sea, will be a very different place when the tide does turn.

Perhaps the most compelling environmental image in the show, for its size, is the mural at College Lodge, on Calhoun Street (Figure 7). This is also something of a frontispiece for 'Power & Glory'. The mural measures 34x46 feet. Around an enormous plant in flower blooming from a factory's electrical apparatus, we read Green, Energy, Power, Glory. The implication is that we can channel our power and glory in new directions. This is in keeping with the revolutionary impulse that guides Fairey's art. It is ultimately designed around the logic of empowering people to take control of their environments at all scales to effect change.

CONCLUSION

Fairey would engage our trans-scalar imagination and have us rethink our place in the world, locally by making urban spaces public, through a prescient Obey Giant who now embodies the surveillance state; in terms of energy and foreign policies for our apparently inescapable need for fossil fuels; and globally for the nefarious consequences on our ability to be in a world of environmental degradation. His insistence on environmental messages ultimately returns us to the local, since it is here that we are set to experience the consequences of a culture gone awry.

By directing our eyes to overlooked spaces that we move through unseeing every day, Fairey's hope is that we will puzzle over overlooked truths

that entrance and enthrall us to the designs of authority, be it commercial or governmental. He defies authority. He wants us to observe, to see, hence to question. His plan is to reclaim public space to open the floodgates on received truths and so revolutionize our ways-of-being. He would have us be participants in the cities we inhabit, critics of capitalism run amok, hesitant about our power and glory, and better stewards of the environment.

Skirting tautology, this is political art at its most barefaced. It is political in its process – insisting on unmediated access to the public sphere; in its content – grappling with authority, guns, energy and the environment; and in intention – to awaken the population from entrancement to government-led corporate capitalism.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Mark Long, a political geographer, is Associate Professor of Political Science at the College of Charleston. His research is concerned with the intersections between visual culture and place. Professor Long has published journal articles on street art and on editorial cartoons and anti-Americanism; and he has curated shows of landscape photography from Antarctica to Afghanistan to the American West by award-winning American and international artists.

Contact: Department of Political Science, College of Charleston, 66, George Street, Charleston, SC 29424, USA.

E-mail: longm@cofc.edu

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