

A City-wide Art Gallery Project

The Tehran billboards project between Artistic Promotion and Surface Presentation

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Images exposed in urban space can express controversial meanings and power relations by contributing to shape a specific vision of the world (Soderstrom, 2000). Usually, visual materials displayed on city walls represent commercial interests (advertisement) or political propaganda, and reflect the dominant power relations in place. In Tehran, the capital of Iran, billboards have two main functions, namely, commercial and political-religious. In the spring of 2015, however, billboards had a chance to deliver a new message. "A City-wide Art Gallery" was a two-week urban project hosted by the Beautification Department of the Tehran municipality, aimed at turning the city into an outdoor gallery.

It was the first time that the municipality of Tehran allocated billboards to a topic that followed neither economic interests nor ideology. During this time, all commercial ad and political messages were cleared and the billboards were entirely available to the project. Pictures of about 1,600 national and international artworks, including paintings, handicrafts, calligraphy pieces, and sculptures, were displayed. The project has received a vast feedback by social media both in Iran and abroad. However, such extensive urban art activity has not been yet fully investigated as a social event. In this piece, I focus on how the citizens of Tehran reacted to the featured art images.

A short history of billboard images in Tehran

In Iran, city walls are mostly considered public property (Mirshahi, 2003). The simplest interpretation of this idea is that anyone can paste adverts or posters. In the years before the Islamic Revolution, images were mostly commercial – wall paintings, billboards and neon boards on the roof of the shops advertised Pepsi Cola and the like (Sohrabi, 2015). Immediately after the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979) and the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), commercial billboards virtually disappeared and featured images included exclusively slogans related to the revolution, the sacred defense of the homeland, martyrdom, and various Islamic messages (Rahbarnia, 2006).

Commercial advertisements began again in 1989, largely due to the "necessity to reconstruct the country". After the Iran-Iraq war, the government omitted grants to the municipality and therefore, finding revenue sources became critical for cities (Kamran, 2006). Tehran prepared schemes that included land sales and changes in land use to finance city management. Only a small part of the municipal budget came from advertising. Since the 1990s, however, this share increased thanks to the deployment of about 250 new billboards installed in locations highly visible at a distance, such as major street crossings and above the highways (in various formats ranging from 8 to 72-meter long).

Advertisements for food products, bank, and insurance services have since occupied most of the city's visual space. A subsequent generation of billboards were installed directly on city walls. On these

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billboards, small and large banners and posters were glued together, so that underneath any poster or ad, a corner of the previous one was visible. According to the municipality, there are currently about 20,000 square metres of billboards in Tehran, with 5,000 square metres for “cultural” messages and 15,000 square metres for commercial advertising. Cultural billboards include commemoration of national and religious events, such as Nowruz and the beginning of the academic year.

A city-wide art gallery

As hinted above, the purpose of the art project was to enhance the cultural level of citizens from

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different social classes and encourage them to visit national museums.

Indeed, the majority of images were gathered from the treasures of Persian museums, allocating 70% of the contribution to the works of Iranian artists and 30% to foreign artists.

Another bias was of geographic

nature. The city of Tehran is divided between a richer north and a poorer south. According to the map guide to the project, the distribution of the artworks across the city was similarly unbalanced. In fact, due to the extensive economic activity in the northern districts, most billboards are found there. Consequently, in northern Tehran more volume of artwork could be seen and enjoyed.

From our interviews, it was clear that organizers favoured drivers over pedestrians as their target audience. If the project was not intended for pedestrians, however, the drivers’ fruition was also constrained by their very speed. From a technical point of view, billboards had to be designed so that artworks could be seen and captions read while driving on a highway without excessive distraction. Framing pictures of classic artworks within rectangles designed for advertisement was also not easy: in some cases the white background was so large that the represented artwork went almost lost in it, in other cases the white passepartout was so thin that the image merged with the texture of the urban space and it was not readily discernible.

We also prepared a questionnaire for city users, whose main finding was that the project interested mainly young respondents, who however were more critical of the selected images. In gender terms, the project has encouraged men more than women to visit museums and art galleries. There was also a positive significant relationship between educational level and satisfaction about featured artworks. However, people with lower education levels talked about the project with other citizens more than respondents with higher education levels. Finally, respondents who spent time in the public spaces were encouraged to visit museums and art galleries more than respondents who spent lower time.

Conclusions

Despite its shortcomings, we can say that “A City-wide Art Gallery” was a successful urban public project. Most importantly, it gave the citizens of Tehran the chance to enjoy important artworks for free. It enhanced, although temporarily, the urban quality and the familiarity of the community with the artistic treasures of Iran and the world, encouraging people to visit museums and galleries. It also stimulated talk about art and culture in the general public, and temporarily suspended the boring routing of the everyday business and the dominance of commercial messages.

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