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Produced with the support of Drago Publishing

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The theme of Issue II – ELOQUENT VANDALS – is a provocative link to street art and urban culture’s delinquent roots and the ‘creative joy of destruction’ – evidenced most recently in Banksy and Blu’s high profile acts of auto-iconoclasm, but also present in a plethora of quotidian, human scale, unsanctioned urban interventions. The rise of festival-sponsored neoliberal muralism sits uneasily with these ungovernable forms of urban creativity. Issue II contains contributions that celebrate the work of street art’s eloquent vandals, and papers that critically examine attempts to cultivate, instrumentalise, commodify, and ‘protect’ the art of the streets.

Eloquent vandals are integral to a critical street art. We need to recognise that ‘vandals’ and those associated with acts of creative crime and resistance are also capable of positioning and understanding their work in relation to critical theory/studies/history – and indeed often do so, while also recognising that they needn’t do this to be accepted into the field. The theme of this issue also raises critical questions about the use and mastering of specific forms of language to justify/block entry into the field of contemporary/public/fine art discourse.

In this issue, we also explore the importance of storytelling and its relationship to the city, of narratives with the power to turn a single space into a multitude of places with different meanings to different people, stories that transcend ‘history’ and bring in herstory, yourstory, ourstory and theirstory – whilst freeing us from narratives we no longer need. Italo Calvino’s 1972 novel Invisible Cities is a literary masterpiece that explores the imaginable possibilities of the city. The book is framed as a conversation between Marco Polo, a 13th Century explorer and Venetian merchant and the emperor Kublai Khan. The majority of the book consists of short stories describing 55 fictitious cities that Polo has visited as part of Khan’s expanding empire, these are narrated by Polo to Khan himself. Towards the end, Khan prods Polo to tell him of the one city he has never mentioned directly – his hometown Venice. Polo's response: ‘Every time I describe a city I am describing Venice’. In effect, Polo has been going home each time and imagining the possibilities of what a city might be.

Many of Polo’s descriptions can be read as eloquent meditations on the city, culture, language, time, memory, or the general nature of human experience in relation to place. What can we collectively imagine? Perhaps the imaginable is not so ridiculous and fanciful as it sometimes sounds, maybe we already have the resources we need to shape and create the environments we want to pass through and live in.

The lead visual article for this issue, Jeff Ferrell’s ‘Sometimes the City’, offers a further meditation on collective imagination and the city, through his photo essay which features long lost photographs, scrounged from the rubbish bins of a large American city. Ferrell presents these tattered, stained, yet startlingly evocative photographs as ‘a secret archive’ of urban life, ‘a disorienting dérive through other lives, other times, and other places… another city within the city’. Ferrell’s quietly powerful visual essay is a deft blend of scholarship and art.

Our lead academic article for this issue, Alison Young’s ‘Art and Belonging: On Place, Displacement and Placelessness’, explores some provocative questions about the way that street art relates to place, and its power to both foster and dismantle spaces of connection and disconnection. Young explores the uneasy relationship between street art and gentrification, before turning to critically consider the work of artists who focus squarely on the radically unsettling experience of displacement,
dislocation, and dispossession. This is a traditional academic paper with a critical yet empathic edge. Young poses – and responds to – the kinds of ‘difficult questions’ that are necessary for a truly critical street art practice.

Indeed, this second peer reviewed issue of Nuart Journal marks another step towards realising a more critical street art. The journal is a forum for critical discourse and commentary on urban art cultures and street art practice. We aim to publish traditional academic articles as well as making space for more experimental and visual essays. We have an open call policy (subject to peer review) and we particularly welcome submissions that break the mould and challenge conventional modes of scholarly and artistic communication.

We want to engage people who would not usually read academic journal articles. And we want academics to be exposed to the cutting edge work of independent scholars, artists, and curators. We believe there is an untapped synergy we can activate by bringing these divergent players together, in one volume.

The journal is divided into three main sections:

Original articles
Experimental and visual essays
Interviews, book reviews, and talks

In Section I, our academic articles deal with some key practical, political, and conceptual issues currently facing critical street art practice. This includes Young’s critical consideration of art’s relationship with place, displacement and placelessness. Reuben Woods builds on Young’s focus on displacement, to consider the work of ‘secondary vandals’, in the uncommissioned urban art that flourished in post-earthquake Christchurch. In a more theoretical paper, Mancini considers the conceptual emergence of street art, considered against the productive notion of the ‘gift’; while Enrico Bonadio provides a thoughtful consideration of the implications of preserving street art for the ‘authenticity’ of the works ‘protected’.

In Section II, our visual essays offer an alternative to the more traditional papers of Section I. Articles in this section push the boundaries of conventional modes of scholarly and artistic thought. These include Ferrell’s meditation on lost photographs found; Oskolki’s striking black bombing project, which radically expands the limits of our understanding of bombing as it converges with text-based interventions; Italian artist Vlady’s Art Underground project, an experimental diagram mapping the overlapping connections and unexpected influences of contemporary Italian urban artists; and Jens Besser’s photo essay on his PADIGLIONE IN MOVIMENTO project, an unauthorised ‘Vandals Pavilion’ held during the Venice Biennale in 2017. Georgios Stampoulidis picks up a thread raised in Young and Wood’s academic articles, with his photo essay on urban creativity in abandoned places, with a focus on the failed Xenia Hotels Project, in Greece. Daniël de Jongh considers the role of text based street art in our cities, while Jaime Rojo of Brooklyn Street art presents a striking photo essay on the eloquent vandals of New York, and other places.

Section III contains interviews and talks from leading artists, curators, and academics. Curator Christian Omodeo discusses the role of the ‘Vandal Curator’ and suggests some critical strategies for art historians and curators to ‘escape from the system’ in order to find new ways of working with art institutions. Vittorio Parisi reviews Urban Art: Creating the Urban with Art (Edited by Ulrich Blanché and Ilaria Hoppe), a book that positions ‘urban art as not simply about making use of the urban space… [but rather] art as an active, bottom-up process by which communities shape and reshape the urban environment they inhabit, through a multitude of actions’. To round off this section, artist Faith XLVII discusses her critically acclaimed new book, Ex Animo, and Argentinian artist Milu presents her provocative ‘Anti-Ted Talk’ talk about street art.

If you’d like to contribute to a future issue, please see the back cover for the call for papers.
Articles
Street art is often talked about as contributing to a sense of place. Mural projects, festivals, and street artworks are said to foster feelings of belonging, recognition, and connection to a place. More than this, street art is increasingly used in place-branding and in commercial transactions. This article poses some questions about the implications of the way that street art relates to place and both makes and unmakes spaces of connection and disconnection. It will begin with the use of street artwork to sell property development, identifying this as a contemporary characteristic of the now well-known relationship between art and gentrification. As a counterpoint to the commercialisation of the sense of place generated by street art, it examines the work of artists such as Ian Strange, Francis Alÿs, and Stanislava Pinchuk, who make art located in displacement, dislocation, and dispossession.
INTRODUCTION

Where does street art take place? Found in train tunnels, abandoned buildings, warehouses, train carriages in railyards, alleyways, and on rooftops, street art has never been found only in the street. The qualifying adjective in the art form’s name provides an indication of simply one possible location for this cultural form rather than determining the type of site that it must take place within. Beyond its lack of confinement to the physical space of the urban street, the place of street art is always expanding, multiplying, proliferating.

This article focuses primarily on street art rather than graffiti.1 The common characteristic found in both art forms (the application of paint to surfaces, generally without permission) allows us to raise questions about, firstly, the impact of the illicit application of paint to surfaces; secondly, the ways in which cultural practice has been taken up in the context of commercial property development; and, finally, the potential for art to locate itself in places of displacement and dispossession.

As a cultural form, street art has always been interested both in the nature of place and in expanding the network of available locations in which to make art. Such an interest in proliferation has meant that street art, like graffiti before it, has travelled. Graffiti initially travelled from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and city to city by means of metropolitan and national train systems (Austin, 2001; Ferrell, 1998; Gastman and Neelon, 2010); after it began to be photographed and documented, images of graffiti could be acquired in zines and books. Street art, becoming popular and prevalent during the time of the rise of internet platforms, was very quickly available to consumer and viewers through their computer screens and then smart phones (MacDowell and De Souza, 2018)

Very quickly, street art was in many places at once. As it travelled, street art seemed to bring qualities of creativity, ‘edginess’, cool – and money. Often identified as a key marker of the ‘creative city’ or ‘cultural precinct’, the presence of street art was used by city authorities for place branding to potential tourists and to encourage the clustering of ‘creative industries’ such as fashion, advertising, and architecture in areas where street art could be found, in initiatives that drew from the ideas of Richard Florida’s ‘creative class’ (2005). In search of urban creativity, street art’s lack of confinement to the physical space of the urban form allows us to raise questions about, firstly, the impact of the illicit application of paint to surfaces; secondly, the ways in which cultural practice has been taken up in the context of commercial property development; and, finally, the potential for art to locate itself in places of displacement and dispossession.

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THE PLACE OF HOME

As a graffiti writer, Ian Strange wrote as Kid Zoom. He left his home city of Perth, Australia, and went first to Sydney and then to New York City, where he acquired a reputation as an emerging star in the street art scene (Young, 2016). However, Strange instead chose to develop an art practice that centred on large-scale sculpture combined with painting and documentary video. He created a to-scale model of the house he grew up in, and exhibited it with a wall removed, showing the hollowed-out interior rooms, a skull painted on its front façade, and with three burned out family cars outside. Although described by Strange as a ‘homecoming’, it was clear conventional ideas of the family home, for Strange, had been called into question, and shown to be on the verge of destruction or deterioration.

In his next series of works, Suburban, Strange rendered the position of the family home even more precarious. Suburban exhibited a range of pieces, using various media: a number of large photographs, a short documentary film, some large painted pieces of wood, and a video installation. The works focus on seven houses in various American states, all already unoccupied before Strange began working on them, but stripped of habitation and re-presented by him as ideas of suburban houses. Such a process involved a restoration of the houses’ façades: Strange added various kinds of domestic accoutrements to the houses depending upon their state of disrepair and according to his desired image for them. At the same time as he strived to make these uninhabited houses conform to an image of typical habitation, Strange reworked the outer façades to mark the houses out as abnormal: one was painted entirely red; on another a gigantic skull adorned a wall, another was painted with a slashing red cross; another painted entirely black except for a perfect central circle. Some of them were then burned down (by local fire-fighters) and filmed by Strange as they blazed (Figures 3 and 4. Ian Strange, Suburban. Photographs ©Ian Strange).

Strange has stated: ‘the documentation process gives the work its final form’ (Strange, 2017). His art is thus not so much an act of creation (although it is profoundly creative), rather, it records aspects of what already exists. His work performs an act of witnessing of the destruction that is already intrinsic to these places. This thematic became even more pronounced in his subsequent works, which continued to investigate the conjunction between suburbia and destruction.

In Landed, he created another model of his family home, this time a near-full size replica, which he painted black and installed as if it was sinking into the ground. The
idea, said Strange, was that the house had fallen out of the sky, as in The Wizard of Oz – a neatly humorous reference to Australia (Young, 2016). For Strange, the work allowed him to ask larger questions about belonging, evoking the relationship between the early British colonisers and the place in which they had landed. The half-sunken house showed something of the cataclysmic impact that Northern European cultures had had upon the land and its peoples. It delivers, said Strange, ‘a physical sense of whether this house belongs here. And from that you can ask, “Do we belong here?... Does the city belong here?”’ (Young, 2016).

For a subsequent series, Final Act, Strange worked in an active disaster zone, in Christchurch, New Zealand. Two big earthquakes occurred there, in September 2010 and February 2011. In the second earthquake 185 people died. Over the course of both, much of the city’s central business district was destroyed. In addition, many of the city’s suburbs were rendered uninhabitable. These suburbs are in the ‘red zone’, with homes on land so badly damaged they will wait years for rebuilding (more than 8000 houses in Christchurch lie within the zone) (Johnston, 2013). Four red zone houses were made available to Strange by the New Zealand government’s Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority. Strange cut into the houses, and, as he puts it, ‘after each cut was made, the interiors were pointed entirely white... [The resulting images] highlighted the negative space of the cuts in the houses, with light beam-ing out.’ (Strange, no date)

His intention was ‘to open up the homes, expose their vulnerability and loss of function’ (Figure 5. Ian Strange, Final Act. Photograph ©Ian Strange). This strategy was partly inspired by the works of Gordon Matta-Clark and Richard Wilson, and partly cognizant of the ways in which homes in the entire earthquake affected region were ‘split open, sunk on an angle or left with gaping holes’. The artworks were archived and acquired by the museum’s permanent collection as a record of these homes and all the other homes which have been demolished’ (Strange, no date).

More recently, Island, made during 2015-2017, focuses on ‘interventions directly undertaken on foreclosed homes through Ohio’s “rust-belt” region as well as research and work created in Detroit and New York between 2015 and 2017’ (Strange, 2017):

*Island* aims to create a poetic connection between the specificity of each GFC affected home and the larger themes they have come to represent. Looking at the icon of the house as a deeply vulnerable object and personal vessel for memory, identity and aspiration. Using ‘the metaphor of the desert island’, the home is presented as ‘a place of simultaneous refuge and entrapment. Beyond the context of economic foreclosures, the works touch on a wider idea of suburban isolation and angst. (Strange, 2017)

The works show, once again, ‘the house as psychological symbol and the false sense of permanence it seems to represent’ (Strange, no date), and ‘direct markings on or cuts made into the homes, in an attempt to place the psychological interior of the houses onto their exteriors’ (Figure 6. Ian Strange, Island. Photograph ©Ian Strange).

For Strange, the houses ‘are dwellings of projected memories from the viewer; of their childhood, of family, belonging and isolation’ (Strange, 2017). In all his works, the idea of a particular space – the home – is given physical location in a type of building that many of us would immediately find recognisable, only to realise that Strange has alienated us from our memory of what a home might look like, offering instead a series of images of the isolation and precarious-ness of the suburban family home.

### Strangers in a Familiar Place

In the intervention, *Fitzyroy Square*, part of his *Railings* series, the Belgium-born, Mexico-based artist Francis Alÿs walked around and around a square in London. As he walked, he dragged a stick along the metal fence poles that he walked past, eliciting a repetitive noise. He did this for a number of hours and was filmed while walking; the film is edited into a 5-minute video that can be viewed online (see further Edensor 2010 on this and other artworks about walking). As with much of Alÿs’s work, *Fitzyroy Square* is far more complex than is initially apparent. The video records the randomness of the event, including people who have walked through the scene, just as Alÿs is doing – the camera stays for a while with an elderly, hunched woman who progresses slowly through the square. The sound made by the stick appears random, but it seems likely that Alÿs selected a stick that would make a melodious, musical sound – he ‘plays’ the fence, beating a rhythm as he walks. He could have used a metal rod to achieve a clanging, discordant sound, or a larger stick, to produce a crashing and oppressive sound. Instead we are given a bell-like, modest sound, that can be heard faintly as Alÿs walks away from the camera and with more clarity when he is filmed closer to the camera. The work is of course full of choices made by Alÿs, although we are encouraged to receive the work as if it is a found event, a recording of something that any person could have made rather than an event staged by the artist to produce particular sounds in a particular place.

What is this place anyway? The place chosen by Alÿs is not random, in that he is circling one of London’s private gardens, located within its urban squares. These private gardens are locked, accessible only to those who live on the square itself and who are therefore in possession of a key. Paying attention to the work’s location renders Alÿs’s actions less random and less melodiously musical – the stick rapping on the fenceposts draws our attention to the stranger at the gate of the garden, the literal outsider, unable to enter the private garden, but repeatedly circling, circling, circling. How would the square’s residents have viewed Alÿs, as he walked round and round their private place? Were the individuals who traversed through the square rendered uneasy by his presence? In the minimalist, almost-nothing that is *Fitzyroy Square*, Alÿs shows us that the unquestioned acceptance of the private spaces within public space is worth our attention, is worth circling around and around, asking: who controls this fence? Who is given passage into the garden, and who is locked outside it?

### Displaced in Place

Stanislava Pinchuk is a Ukrainian-born Australian artist who, under the name Miso, was a well-regarded figure within Melbourne’s street art scene in the 2000s, creating elaborate, stylised hand-drawn paste-ups, often depicting women, that were installed in laneways in Melbourne over a period of years (Figure 7. Street artwork by Miso. Photograph ©Alison Young). But this artist has in recent years been making very different artworks under
her own name. The works represent obliterating and destruction of various kinds; they map sites of erasure and annihilation. As such they counter the tendency towards forgetting effected by the passage of time and the disappearance of traces of violence into the landscape.

To that extent, although the transformation from ‘Miso’, street artist, to ‘Stanislava Pinchuk’, fine artist, might seem familiar, the shift in name is not matched by a shift in aesthetic topic. As Miso, the artist made ephemeral artworks that paid tribute to otherwise anonymous figures from her memories, relocating them from the Ukraine to the streets of Melbourne. As Pinchuk, she makes art depicting what ephemerality produces – diminishment and disappearance. Her artworks examine spaces after the displacement of their inhabitants, or spaces that individuals rendered placeless are displaced into, especially after disaster and diaspora.

When Pinchuk turned her attention away from making art for the streets, the streets initially came with her into her artworks. She began tracing maps on paper, conceptual maps that responded to the idea of walking through city streets, in Melbourne and in Tokyo, where she was living. Then in 2014, Russia began bombing the Ukraine, and Pinchuk found herself monitoring the news to try to learn where bombs were being dropped. She channelled this experience of distant but intense grief and distress into a series of artworks called Surface to Air. The name of the series held a double meaning, referencing a technology of war, the surface-to-air missile, but also naming the drive to recover from submergence in trauma, to regain access to air after being buried in the deep earth of grief. The artworks mapped explosion sites; Pinchuk created almost-invisible images by using tiny hammers to make rippling shatter marks on paper, framed under sheets of glass. By forcing the spectator to look hard at the surface, to look obliquely and make the shatter marks catch the light, Pinchuk makes us replicate her efforts in making these maps of destruction. These central devices – data-mapping, depictions that are almost imperceptible, easy to overlook, and a distancing from literal rendition of destruction – have become the drivers of Pinchuk’s practice, and have provided structure to her subsequent series of works.

Fallout arose out of the ‘triple disaster’ of March 2011, when the Fukushima reactor in northern Japan went into meltdown after an earthquake and a tsunami. Pinchuk had been living in Tokyo at the time. Years afterwards, she travelled to Fukushima to record the landscape in the disaster’s aftermath. Here she photographed locations, identifying small signatures or apparently insignificant places that would hold a key to the artworks she would later make. In Fukushima, two things became significant for her. First, the nuclear clean-up involved digging up the radioactive earth, bagging it, and removing it for burial: she saw trucks filled with bags of radioactive earth, some of it spilling out, revealing the potential futility of the exercise. At the same time, she repeatedly encountered fishermen’s nets spread across the ground; some had been stranded there in the disaster, others were in use by those who had crept back into the Grey Zone of the clean-up and who had returned to their pre-disaster livelihood despite the potential risks. Pinchuk mapped sites of soil removal, radioactivity readings and landscape, generating a data map of a blighted landscape. Instead of hammering, she transferred the data onto paper using a needle to create tiny pinpricks that, once
again, were almost invisible until caught by the light. The result was a map of twisted topography, enigmatic folds and creases that destabilise our sense of what we are looking at. The twisted mesh of the artwork also evokes the fishing nets stretched across the poisoned soil (Figure 9. Stanislava Pinchuk, Fallout. Photograph ©Stanislava Pinchuk).

After visiting Fukushima in 2015 and 2016, Pinchuk decided to go back to her place of birth, the Ukraine, in order to understand the impact on the region of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. In 2017, the result was Sarcophagus, a more than 6 metre long scroll of pin-pricked paper. The work’s name references the so-called sarcophagus, or Object Shelter, built in haste to contain the Chernobyl reactor after the disaster. And the work’s delicacy and fragility draws attention to the fact that the sarcophagus at Chernobyl has been due for many years to be rebuilt, but delays have stymied the project. Pinchuk’s work followed the same process as used for Fallout: site visits, photodocumentation, walking, field notes, and data mapping. The resulting work is displayed in a glass case, requiring the spectator to lean over, lean in close, shift the gaze from side to side to try to see what is depicted – almost impossible to take in its totality, and meaningless when viewed as single marks or in sections.

Having thus made two series of artworks that responded to places from which people had been displaced, in 2017 and 2018, Pinchuk began making art about a location at which displaced people had found themselves – the refugee camp known as ‘the Jungle’ in Calais, which was first established in 1994, when the Eurotunnel opened, and endured till October 2016. Displaced people had created an enormous encampment, with some of them living at this location for many months. In October 2016, the French authorities evicted 6,400 people and bulldozed the encampment, further displacing the already displaced. Pinchuk went there to see the place that so many had hoped would be but a stopping-off point during their journey to places of safety, but which became a place of detention or suspension. There she both documented the process of clearing the site and collected the numerous remnants of people’s lives in the camp, such as SIM cards, shaving cream containers, and tubes of toothpaste. These were transported back to her studio in Australia (Figure 10. Stanislava Pinchuk, context photo for Borders (The Magnetic Fields). Photograph ©Stanislava Pinchuk).

Once again, she sought to create artworks that allude to the violence of displacement but which refuse to represent it directly, and in which the process of their making somehow enacts violence on the materials themselves. In Surface To Air Pinchuk hammered paper till it bloomed into shatters; in Fallout and Sarcophagus she pierced paper with needles, all processes that took months to enact. For this new series, to be called Borders (The Magnetic Fields), Pinchuk learned a new skill: the making of terrazzo. She combined the materials that she had collected from the Jungle, and ground them into fragments; the resulting material was then sculpted into small, regular, precise shapes, box-like, tile-like. The fragments glint within the objects, displaced from their owners, ripped from the place they were last possessed, held, or used (Figure 11. Stanislava Pinchuk, Borders (The Magnetic Fields). Photograph ©Stanislava Pinchuk).
HOW TO BE RADICALLY CONNECTED TO SPACE BY BEING OUT OF PLACE

Just as Ian Strange’s works in Landed, Suburban, Shadow, and Island render unfamiliar and ominous the very idea of the home, or haven, so Pinchuk’s Borders series is intensely destabilising. It represents the end point of a process in which the artist both replicates the process of displacement – these fragments have been transported so far away from their owners and their last place of use – and simultaneously calls it into question in the strangeness of the transformation of everyday objects into terrazzo. The tiny boxes and tiles, in which plastic shards mimic jewelled inlays, are in themselves displaced, out of place, and when looked at invite the spectator to experience something of the destabilising force of displacement (Figure 12. Stanislava Pinchuk, Borders (The Magnetic Fields), partial view. Photograph ©Stanislava Pinchuk).

Looking at them is therefore an uncanny experience, and uncanniness is an affect dimension achieved by the artworks of all three artists discussed here. To be uncanny, as we know from Freud, is to be unheimlich, unhomely, to have no place in which to belong, no home. In this essay, I have sought to pose questions about the ways in which street art has been made to be too much ‘at home’ in the contemporary city: it is now so easy on the eyes of the spectator that it has been reduced to a mode of urban embellishment or beautification. In its early years, street art emerged as an art form with an uncanny affect – an encounter with an uncommissioned artwork generated a moment of surprise, or shock or enchantment for the urban spectator (Young, 2014). This uncanny affectiveness, which derived from the street artwork’s radical connection to space, has been diminished, just as street art’s sense of political connectedness to public is increasingly diminished and at times seems to have been lost.

Faced with street art as a decorative addition to property developments in cities around the world, where can we find traces of the radical connection to place and space that was so important in animating street art as an international movement as well as conversations about the role of art in everyday life the contemporary city? Although fine artworks are far from immunised against the imprecations and encroachments of the market, my suggestion in this essay is that the artists considered here offer ways of looking both obliquely and critically at the degradations inflicted by city-branding and property development upon the practices of street art.

It is therefore worth following the paths traced by artists like Ian Strange and Stanislava Pinchuk out of the street art scene, as a means of considering the role of art both in the dislocation from a sense of place, through the displacing effects of the gentrification process, and also in being able to represent loss of the conversation with and in space through the trauma and rupture of displacement and placelessness. In Ian Strange’s work, the home itself becomes a vacant site of trauma and loss; in Alys’s work the mundane acts of urban life such as walking, freighted with uncertainty of meaning, show how we require fences and borders for meaning and order; and in Pinchuk’s work, we see how the places that we take for granted are always about to be overwhelmed by a wave or to collapse into an earthquake or to be destroyed by war or radiation – the things we hold on to are always about to be lost. Despite what developers seek to communicate to us about art in urban space as a guarantor of the value of property, these artworks of displacement tell us that in every place we are on the verge of placelessness; in each of our possessions lies the moment of our future dispossession.
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References


Strange, Ian (no date) ‘Making Final Act’, online at http://francisalys.com/fitzroy-square/.


1 It is important to acknowledge that street art and graffiti are related but distinctive practices with intersecting and sometimes antagonistic histories.

2 The name given to the conversion of ephemeral, freely accessible artworks placed in the street into markers of value is the Banksy effect, coined in 2007 by the Wooster Collective in New York City, online at http://www.woostercollective.com/post/the-banksy-effect; see also Young (2014).

3 Details of the exhibition can be viewed online at https://www.r-o-n-e.com/empty-project. Empty condensed and intensified ideas that had appeared in some Rone’s previous work, including the painting of images directly onto large walls in temporary spaces, and the painting of a mural of a woman’s face on the entire façade of a building awaiting demolition and redevelopment, both in the centre of Melbourne.


5 The artwork can be viewed on Alÿs’s website of http://francisalys.com/fitzroy-square/.
SECONDARY VANDALS:

THE PERFORMANCES OF UNCOMMISSIONED URBAN ART IN POST-EARTHQUAKE CHRISTCHURCH

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This paper positions urban art as a response to the social, political and physical landscapes in which it is created. In Christchurch, New Zealand, a city with a conservative, colonial identity, urban art interventions served to respond to the prevailing environment in the wake of the devastating cluster of earthquakes that struck the city in 2010 and 2011. The earthquakes, themselves the primary vandals, provide a distinct context for uncommissioned performances of urban art – rather than fractures of order, they served as activations, as acts of beautification, transformation, and communication – from gestures of care to critiques of the recovery process.
SECONDARY VANDALS

INTRODUCTION
Urban art is a response. In their increasingly diverse incarnations, graffiti and street art remain reactions to the social, political, economic, or physical manoeuvres that surround us and impact us individually and collectively.\(^1\) It is no surprise that scholars and historians have connected the flourishing of graffiti and street art with the urban conditions in which they have emerged, perhaps most explicitly in the state of New York as graffiti writing exploded on the city’s subway trains (Castleman, 1982; Silver & Chalfant, 1984; Austin, 2001; Stewart, 2009; Chalfant & Jenkins, 2014). As Jeffrey Deitch has suggested, graffiti’s emergence occurred within a period of political and economic problems, rather than prosperity and expansion (Deitch with Gastman & Rose, 2011: 10–15). With the city bankrupt and feeling a sense of abandonment, the pervasive environment was an apt setting for the appearance of graffiti writing. Indeed, Carlo McCormick has even ruminated that the bold and brash graffiti writing might be viewed as a ‘reflexive beautification’ of New York’s bleak physical infrastructure (McCormick in Deitch with Gastman & Rose, 2011: 19–25).

In Christchurch, the largest city in New Zealand’s South Island, the earthquakes that struck the city in 2010 and 2011 have provided a distinct lens through which to consider urban art as a response. The earthquakes served as the primary vandals of the city and the urban art that followed, as secondary acts that responded to the physical, social, and political impacts, both in the immediate wake of the quakes and throughout the protracted and complicated recovery process.\(^2\) With the damage to and loss of homes, work places and community spaces, either by nature’s force or by a drawn-out political process, the altered places and spaces left behind, as well as the abundant and often frustrating presence of post-quake symbols such as hurricane fencing and ordinance signs, provided a fascinating landscape for artists to explore.\(^3\) Taking up numerous guises, a reflection of contemporary urban art’s global evolution, examples of graffiti, street art, and what might be considered independent public art (a term adapted from Rafael Schacter, who in turn acknowledges a debt to cultural theorist Javier Abarca (Schacter, 2013: 9)), alongside other institutional public art projects, appeared throughout the complex and changing post-disaster terrain, providing acts of activation, transformation, exploration, population, and critique.\(^4\) Uncommissioned urban art avoids the organisational and logistical difficulties apparent in the production of public art, requirements often exacerbated by the post-disaster setting, providing more direct and immediate interventions (Seno et al, 2010). While the more official additions of large-scale murals and cultural events have garnered celebratory headlines, the practices of guerrilla urban artists have highlighted the complicated nature of a ruptured landscape, where the earthquakes can be considered the more violent antagonists.

URBAN ART AND NATURAL DISASTERS: CREATING CONTEXT

The Christchurch earthquakes have provided an understandably rich source of discussion and analysis, from scientific and seismic research and social issues, including the impact on animals (Sessions & Bullock, 2013; Potts & Gadenne, 2014), to celebrations of the city’s lost and damaged architecture (Ansley, 2011; Parr, 2015), photographic surveys of the post-quake city (Howey, 2015), the comprehensive documentation of varied post-quake projects (Bennett, Boidi & Boles, eds., 2012), and more analytical discussion of the complex process of rebuilding a city (Bennett, Johnson, Donn, & Reynolds, eds., 2013). The presence and roles of art have been part of these discussions, including urban art (Bennett, Boidi & Boles, eds., 2012; Macfie in Bennett, Donn, Johnson & Reynolds, eds., 2014). However, in most cases it has lacked in-depth analysis and a contextualisation within the narratives and histories of graffiti and street art as developed artistic cultures.

Research for this article was primarily conducted through first-hand experience within the post-quake city, reflecting a real-world reading of the various interventions considered. However, it is also important to acknowledge the writing that has influenced the conceptualisation of this work. Twenty-five years ago, graffiti and street art may not have been considered as a meaningful part of a post-disaster discourse. Indeed, locally, the Napier earthquake of 1931 unsurprisingly revealed little research and documentation of the reimagining of the post-disaster landscape by intrepid artists.\(^5\) However, by the later Twentieth Century and first decades of the new millennium, the ubiquity of urban art across the globe has ensured it is a fitting field of enquiry, and the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and the Haitian earthquake of 2010 provided useful, if inconsistent, insights into the performances of urban art in these varied post-disaster landscapes.

While authors have often discussed graffiti and street art within generic urban frameworks (Lewisohn, 2008; Waclawek, 2011), others have located their investigations within more specific settings of time and place. Despite graffiti and street art’s global commonalities, such localised studies have revealed the unique variants evident in specific environments, from the amalgamation with local cultural histories, to sociopolitical and economic influences.

By locating these studies in specific locations and time periods, authors have been able to illuminate the unique nuances of various settings, at times identifying historical, physical, and cultural influences (Manco, Lost Art & Neelon, 2005; Gastman & Teri, 2007; O’Donnell, 2007; Gry, 2008; Gröndahl, 2009; Parry, 2010; Smallman & Nyman, 2011, Munro, 2012).\(^6\) While such works explore the cumulative physical, technological, social, cultural, and economic elements that have facilitated distinct regional qualities and histories, they often focus on the more insular narratives of these cultures and artists, rather than the influence of specific sociohistorical events.\(^7\) While some have connected the appearance of urban art to events such as the War on Terror (Tapiés & Mathieson, 2007), an investigation of urban art’s roles in post-quake Christchurch affords the consideration of a broader spectrum of performance. According to cultural geographer Luke Dickens, as urban manifestations of place, graffiti, and street art engage with issues of identity politics, territoriality, urban decline, transgression, resistance of authority, and suggestions of possible ways of reading, writing, and reimagining cities (Dickens, 2008). Within the context of a natural disaster in an urban setting and the necessary task of recovery, urban art reveals a range of performances and potential readings, both specific and universal.

URBAN ART IN A COLONIAL CITY

Ōtautahi Christchurch has historically lacked a strong sense of public space cultures, often stuck with a conservative reputation sprung from its colonial transplant identity, and evident in its neo-Gothic architecture and statues of colonial
forebears (Rice, GW. 2008). Yet Christchurch's post-quake creative landscape has been strongly entwined with the city's streets and public spaces, including the previously peripheral, marginalised, and often vilified presence of graffiti and street art. While reaching new levels of prominence, these forms were also imbued with various meanings over the drawn-out recovery, forming an evolving and interesting aspect of the post-disaster environment. Vera May, writing about Australian artist Shaun Gladwell's 2013 work Inflected Forms, produced for the Christchurch public art event SCAPE, noted that: ‘It can be argued that the first to reclaim a city after experiences of radical material transformation are neither urban planners, bureaucrats or politicians (those officially tasked to make decisions around urban revival), but rather those who actively write the city beyond the confines of grids, paths, and signs of urban decorum and regulation’ (May in French, ed., 2013: 53). While May was referring to the skateboarders that influenced Gladwell's sculptures, graffiti and street artists can also be viewed in this regard, exploring the various spaces of the post-quake city and adorning the spaces in ways that suggest renegotiation. In the immediate and prolonged wake of the quakes, urban artists, uninvited in the normal sense, were compelled to explore and transform the city in more prominent ways than the pre-quake city had afforded. In doing so, their acts of guerrilla urbanism served as reactivations and reimaginings of place, and considerations of the earthquakes' prolonged impact, distinct from the structured, planned, and organised rebuild process, inviting different responses and providing alternative readings of the city, its histories, and potential future (Hou, 2010).

There is little formally recorded and documented history of Christchurch's pre-quake graffiti or street art cultures; stored instead in personal photo collections or recounted verbally between artists. In addition, the city has often been overlooked in favour of Auckland and Wellington (New Zealand's other significant urban centres, where graffiti emerged earlier than Christchurch), even as documentation and discussion of the New Zealand urban art scenes have grown in the new millennium (O'Donnell, 2007; Munro, 2012; Merkins & Sheridan, 2012; Liew, 2013/2014). There had long been graffiti in Christchurch in the form of parietal writing, prominent Christchurch writer Lurq recounted the early Christchurch graffiti scene as ‘...really just political slogans and gang emblems and a giant Ghostbusters symbol’ (O'Donnell, 2007: 111). By the early to mid-nineties, tags and outlines, representative of signature-based hip hop graffiti, emerged, most commonly occurring in the peripheral spaces of train tracks and alleyways. While a small community, street art, or post-graffiti, was less prominent in Christchurch, with a small selection of stencils, paste-ups, stickers, and other forms of urban pointing appearing in the new millennium, often in more populated spaces than graffiti. Although there was some sense of social overlap between graffiti and street artists, existing distinctions between the two remained and street artists shared a less defined sense of community. By the time the earthquakes struck in 2010, urban art, while an entrenched presence with its own sense of history, was not considered a defining visual element of the Christchurch's physical spaces or creative identity.

THE CHRISTCHURCH EARTHQUAKES: THE PRIMARY VANDALS

For many Christchurch residents the earthquakes provide a demarcation, rendering the city definitively ‘before’ and ‘after’. For those forcefully stirred from their sleep early on the morning of September 4, 2010, the violent shaking was an abrupt, unexpected and confusing, almost surreal experience. Striking at 4:35am and measuring magnitude 7.1, the September quake lasted less than one minute, but it would form the opening chapter of a much larger narrative. Importantly, primarily due to the early morning timing, no-one perished as a direct result of the quake, and, as the editors of Once in a Lifetime acknowledged, ‘it felt like a bullet had been dodged’ (Bennett, Dann, Johnson & Reynolds, eds., 2014: 18). Over the following days, weeks, and months, aftershocks and a stream of news reports began to create a greater sense of the realities of life in an active quake zone. Visible signs of physical damage were evident across the city, from cracked suburban homes, to the crumbled brick work of inner-city buildings. While there was a lingering psychological impact in jittery responses to aftershocks, within a week many infrastructural services had returned, allowing some level of normality to resume, suggesting that the city was now better prepared for future quakes (The Press, 2010).

On February 22, 2011, that sense of relative fortune was eroded, and the notion of preparedness tested, in another seismic burst. At 12:51pm, a 6.3 magnitude quake shook the city, from a shallow depth under the nearby Port Hills. The February quake resulted in even more severe damage to the already affected natural surroundings and built environment, from the subterranean infrastructure to the high-rise buildings that were left notably askew. This time lives were lost. Deaths occurred at points across the city, with a final toll of one hundred and eighty-five people. One hundred and sixty-nine of those perished within the central city. Confidence in the built environment, already shaken, was eroded even further.

The city was transformed, and ultimately would undergo a lengthy period of demolition and slow rebuilding. Spaces and places people knew intimately, from the suburbs to the central city, were now either vanished or severely altered. In the suburbs, the residential red zone sprawled eastward from the central city, whole neighbourhoods and thousands of houses affected, in many places returned to swathes of grasslands (Gates, in Gorman, ed., 2012: 45–61). Following land damage in September, February proved a death knell, houses were vacated, most demolished, some lifted and transported to new, distant settings, leaving only outlines of past occupancy (Figure 1. An abandoned house in the suburban red zone, Bexley, Christchurch, 2012. Photograph ©Reuben Woods).

While the impact in the suburbs, the dominant residential areas of the city, was significant, the central city perhaps became the most discussed site of the quakes' ferocious legacy. A tightly defined gridded network of streets and squares, the inner city was rendered almost unrecognisable. George Parker and Barnaby Bennett asserted that the scale of change rendered post-quake central Christchurch ‘deeply disorientating’ (Bennett, Boidi & Boles, eds., 2012: 4). Accompanying the damaged architecture and newly vacant lots left behind by demolition, the central city was framed by a mutating cordon, abundant road cones and shipping containers, and unavoidable ordinance signs. The inner city became difficult to navigate, not only due to the one-way passages and no-entry zones, but also because the familiar markers had disappeared.
Parker and Bennett ruminated that if you are, or were, familiar with the city, you may recognise the street names and intersections, but the places are completely changed. You stand there, staring, struggling desperate to remember, struggling to articulate meaning out of the uncanny familiarity (Bennett, Boidi & Boles, eds., 2012: 4) (Figure 2. Damaged central city building, Christchurch, 2013. Photograph © Reuben Woods).

Furthermore, the process of change, in the suburbs and inner city, was both immediate and prolonged, creating various incarnations of the city, almost day by day. In his 2014 essay *Desire for the gap*, Ryan Reynolds acknowledged that defining the present state was a complex task, and notably so in the urban centre:

> It is a *post* city, the remains of the complicated, contradictory, post-colonial place it once was, with a centre that is 70 per cent destroyed and sparsely populated. It is also, now, a *pre* city, with three years’ worth of plans, consultation, ideas, and designs that exist mainly as a massive set of aspirations yet to be enacted. (Reynolds in Bennett, Dann, Johnson & Reynolds, eds., 2014: 167–176)

This transitional setting required constant reconciliation, loaded with suggestions of the past, immediate points of interest, and almost unlimited potential, not only for shiny new buildings but also for smaller individual expressions that attempt to respond to the quakes’ impact. Once largely peripheral, urban art became a visible addition to this terrain, responding to the surroundings both explicitly and inherently. In doing so, these acts of vandalism were lessened in comparison to the destructive impact of the quakes and the complicated issues of the recovery, often serving as eloquent reflections of the experience of the post-disaster city. While these guerrilla creations dissipated the benefits of scale, protection and exposure afforded sanctioned projects, the subversive quality of unpermitted action also ensured these examples could be read in a variety of ways not available to commissioned counterparts. As often smaller and more mysterious, these interventions were intimate and open-ended, and when surrounded by signs of destruction and bureaucracy, they could be considered an alternative part of the city’s rebuild.

**SECONDARY VANDALS IN THE POST-QUAKE LANDSCAPE: HEALING, REFLECTIONS, POPULATION, EXPLORATION, AND CRITIQUE**

Across the city, guerrilla interventions, ignoring explicit permission or eschewing commission, previously viewed by some as an annoying nuisance or aggressive disruption, performed a multitude of roles, drawing on global performative traits in response to the specific setting. Many artists bypassed the need for permission to make more pressing expressions. In the post-quake landscape, the concept of permission was less coherent, normal channels of enquiry were ruptured, and altered spaces appeared less controlled. The addition of paint, paper, or sculptural elements to someone else’s broken building, a stretch of hurricane fencing, or a vacant lot, paled in comparison to the violent vandalism of the quakes and the frustration of the recovery process. In doing so, guerrilla urban artists were able to more urgently and more personally reflect the experience of the city than more official projects granted institutional support.
Some artists considered the city as a victim of the earthquakes. This approach was exemplified by the oversized sticking plasters by the duo known as the Band-Aid Bandits, Dr Suits and Jen, that adorned an array of damaged buildings across the central city, personifying the built environment as a body in need of care. The paste-ups were created following a significant aftershock in June 2011 (Dr Suits, 2015) (Figure 3. Band-Aid by The Band-Aid Bandits, central Christchurch, 2011. Photograph ©Reuben Woods).

The large paper plasters, thickly outlined, were an attempt to light-heartedly suggest the overwhelming task of healing faced by the city, despite fears that they might be perceived as insensitive (Dr Suits, 2015). The plasters also provided an offer of comfort in accompanying speech-bubbled declarations such as ‘I’ll kiss it better’, echoing the caring words of a parent to a child. Local art writer Justin Paton noted the symbolic resonance of the gesture of applying a sticking plaster to a child’s injury, more about reassurance than healing, it was both tender and ironic:

On one hand, it feels like an expression of genuine care, with the artist as a kind of urban physician, doctoring to the city’s wounded spaces. But you can also see it as an expression of anxiety and frustration, as if the artist is wondering, in the face of all this damage, what anyone can actually do. Are all our symbolic expressions of care and concern just Band-Aids on an unhealable wound? (Paton in Bulletin, B.167: 19)

The gesture of care represented by the plasters may have been futile, but it did extend a playful, touching sense of humanity and expressed the importance of the recovery of the built environment for the city’s collective well-being.

In Lyttelton, a portside village on the fringe of the city, and the closest residential area to the February quake’s epicentre, another guerrilla artist reflected on the built environment as a victim, buildings as lost members of a community. In May 2011, Delta placed a number of small crosses created from salvaged material from Lyttelton’s numerous demolition sites as memorials on the newly vacant lots along the village’s main street, both a farewell and an act of remembrance. The title of the project, Crux, evoked the cross forms, but also suggested both the important and unresolved nature of the village’s recovery. Each cross was numbered in reference to its location and included an acknowledgement of the date of the February earthquake: 22–2–11, read as the death date of the buildings, echoing the small crosses that dot roadsides memorialising crash victims. Although they lasted only three weeks, the crosses subtly highlighted the now empty spaces along the formerly picturesque main street (Bennett, Boidi & Boles, eds., 2012: 256). The artist described the project as one of remembrance and vision, ‘acknowledging what had been lost in the heart of the township and looking to the future’ (Bennett, Boidi & Boles, eds., 2012: 256). Crux acknowledged the role of the missing buildings in the village’s history and the lives of the Lyttelton community, thus positioning them as a part of the community. The crosses were not grandiose markers of place in the manner of official memorials, but were ephemeral, guerrilla additions. The use of materials salvaged from demolition sites directly connected the crosses to the buildings that had been lost, while also subverting the vandalism of the quakes themselves.

Much like Delta’s crosses, another intervention, this time in the inner city, explored the emotional connection to buildings, while also performing a type of memorialisation. However, rather than serving as an explicit memorial, Mike Hewson’s Homage to Lost Spaces explicitly played on the quakes’ impact on the memory of place. Ruminating on the impact of the city’s fallen buildings and the loss of so many ‘aides memoires’, Christchurch poet Jeffrey Paparoa Holman suggested: ‘...these structures were not only our external memory banks, they were also an internal geography, our shapes, and roadmaps within. We would never be the same without them, but we could be healed if we saluted them and grieved for them’ (Holman, 2012: 50). Hewson’s intervention was a public expression of the personal experience of losing meaningful places. In April 2012, the boarded windows of the vacated neo-Gothic Old Normal School building in Cranmer Square were adorned with enlarged colour photographs of various figures; in a shattered doorway a figure in a hard hat and hi-visibility neon vest was busy talking on a mobile phone, in another window a figure leapt over a desk (Figure 4. Detail from Mike Hewson’s Homage to Lost Spaces, central Christchurch, 2012. Photograph ©Reuben Woods).
The images, installed without permission, brought the doomed building to life, as if passers-by could see inside the building and witness new, final activity within its walls. The photographs, from Hewson’s personal collection, documented his time in another building altogether, the Government Life Building situated in Cathedral Square, which at the time of the February quake, was serving as a studio space for a collection of artists. As such the images served as personal memories of a cherished time for the artist, a time abruptly interrupted by the earthquakes that damaged the Government Life Building and led to its eventual demolition. Yet, the lack of knowledge about the (initially) unsigned and unexplained images, and the unexpected nature of their appearance, meant for many they were evocative of some memory of the building itself, despite depicting an entirely different setting. While celebrating a particular and significant aspect of Hewson’s own experience, the placement of the works on the exterior of a building with a sense of civic significance and varied use, both briefly rejuvenated the Old Normal School before its eventual demolition, and also allowed the audience to draw their personal associations with the site through the reactivation.

While these interventions were imbued with relatively tender reflections of the quakes’ impact on the surrounding environment, the traditional performances of graffiti writing offered a more challenging reading of the city’s transformation. Graffiti appeared across the newly vacated areas and buildings. The proliferation of graffiti writing in the suburban red zone signified a returning presence in a forcibly vacated area, replacing departed residents and communities. Families who had nestled into suburban homes over many years were replaced by opportunistic artists, explorers and vandals. Entire houses were overrun with layered collections of hieroglyphic tags and larger scale pieces covering entire walls, often visible from distance and providing an unexpected addition of colour and form. The graffiti writing found in the red zone did not refer to loss, change, or personal attachment in any explicit or even intended content, there were not heart-felt farewells like the messages left by departing families (Figure 5. Graffiti on an abandoned home in the suburban red zone, Christ-church, 2013. Photograph ©Reuben Woods). While symptomatic of graffiti writers’ use of vacated spaces, by commandeering these once private settings, the overrun homes became symbolic of the fall of these neighbourhoods, houses that were once functional sites of domestic activity turned into blank canvasses to be adorned.

Graffiti writing was also a prominent and obvious sign of presence across the central city, most notably in the larger buildings left vacated by inactive or absent owners. Signature-based graffiti has always been related to the declaration of presence, as Anna Waclawek notes, an assertion of the writer’s identity, and much like the residential red zone, Christchurch’s central city has proven attractive and opportune site for graffiti writers to explore and leave their trace on the exposed walls and empty buildings (Waclawek, 2011: 13). Indeed, it was possible to consider the hieroglyphic graffiti that emerged in the damaged central city as a contrast to the fluorescent markings of the rescue crews on doors and windows of cleared buildings, the last official presence before the central city red zone cordon was erected. The names written across Christchurch’s central city provided an ongoing urban discussion between uninvited and official forces, a conversation that, when juxtaposed with the bustling activity of the rebuild, was distinct from the more isolated experience of the suburban red zone graffiti (Figure 6. Graffiti-covered building in Christchurch’s central city, 2017. Photograph ©Reuben Woods).

The combined effects of the cordon, the newly unfamiliar surroundings, the signs of the earthquakes’ ferocity, lingering fear or distrust of the built environment, and the perceived lack of functionality, left the central city sparsely populated in the wake of February 2011. Even as the cordon was reduced and access became greater, an overwhelming sense of emptiness outside of pockets of the revamped urban core remained. While the re-emergence of a commercial presence was a key part of the central city’s recovery and repopulation, a spectrum of arts and cultural events and attractions also played significant roles in enticing people back to the still unsettling surroundings of the central business district. The Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu’s Populate! Programme was positioned as an attempt to return a presence to the central city through the addition of faces and figures, in the form of
both new works and reproductions of portraits from the Gallery’s then inaccessible collection. While this ‘population’ of the central city landscape was relatively high profile, graffiti and street art had filled the inner city with figures, names, and messages long before, symbols of an alternative to the official presence of art as a form of reactivation. The expressions, poses, and movements of these various characters engaged the unsuspecting audience, encouraging them to construct the stories and reasons for the appearance of these actors in the broken inner city. Personalities and activities ranged from menacing to mysterious, joyous to disinterested and stone-faced. While some were preoccupied with the surrounding sights, others apparently sought the attention of passers-by. A tiny stencil of a giraffe grazing on a sprouting weed against a concrete wall on St Asaph Street was seemingly oblivious to the surrounding activity (Figure 7. Anonymous giraffe stencil in Christchurch’s central city, 2012. Photograph ©Reuben Woods), while a tiny door crafted from modelling clay (Figure 8. Door crafted from modelling clay, central city, Christchurch, 2015. Photograph ©Reuben Woods), suggesting some fantastical domicile within the urban setting of Cathedral Square, provided examples of the varied occupation of the inner city. The changing appearance of the roving figure of Dr Suits (not a self-portrait but a character sharing the name of the artist), his attire and facial hair varied in each appearance, matching the changing state of the city, has provided a recurring presence, something of a modern day flâneur observing the city (Figure 9. Dr Suits character paste-up, by Dr Suits, central city, Christchurch, 2012. Photograph ©Nathan Ingram).

His sartorial elegance (rarely seen without a bow-tie and dress suit), intended to represent the creative people of Christchurch and their contributions to the recovery, a stark contrast to the city’s unofficial scruffy uniform of fluorescent vests, work boots and hard hats (Dr Suits, 2015). If the hundreds of characters and creatures provided a figurative population of the central city, the suggestion of presence was also evident in the visible text of notes, messages, jokes, and questions plastered across the city. Written phrases, declarations, and observations asserted that graffiti and street art practices demonstrate the official presence in a different manner from the arguably more self-absorbed nature of graffiti, or the official and instructive civic management signs. These text-based interventions created open, unofficial, and informal conversations between the artist/author and the largely unsuspecting audience, who are often engaged in the exchange in an unexpected moment. Contrasting with the official flow of information encountered in urban spaces, these snippets of dialogue did not intend to control, but rather to reflect and combat the feelings of alienation often associated with the congestion of modern cities, a feeling still present in post-quake Christchurch despite the relative emptiness. Such phrases, often in small forms, noticed at closer range than many of the other examples of official communication visible in urban landscapes, presented ruminations that incited a moment of consideration, sometimes posing questions, other times making declarations. On the fringe of the central city, anonymously stencilled in white paint on a buckled footpath, a piece of prose referenced the impact of this change upon the central city and its residents (Figure 10. Anonymous stencil, central city footpath, Christchurch, 2012. Photograph ©Reuben Woods).

The unexpected phrase provided the viewer with a surprising intervention, while connecting the experience of the inner city’s changing physical landscape with a social and psychological impact:

On Peterborough Street the houses are wonky. The ground has been pulled out from underneath them. The trick worked and the houses stayed up, but they are wonky. If you lived in them you might become wonky too.

In a landscape dominated by signs of authority and control, such unexpected conversations provided an alternative to the official flow of information, while also initiating an engagement between people who may never meet.

Intimately tied to the population of the post-quake city was the ability to explore and navigate a newly unfamiliar setting. The trace of the presence that smaller interventions represent also suggested possible paths of movement in a city where previous markers of place had vanished. At times, the exploration of the central city by urban artists was explicitly exemplified by surrogate figures. The running characters attributed to Drypnz, or the incarnations of Dr Suits that appeared throughout the central city’s changing physical make-up, suggested the ability to explore new paths, and due to their own guerrilla appearance, to ignore the directions proscribed by ‘No Entry’ signs and hurricane fencing (Figure 11. Painted character, attributed to Drypnz, central city, Christchurch, 2013. Photograph ©Reuben Woods). The willingness to explore the more liminal spaces in the post-quake city was also evident in the insides of empty buildings, which, level by level, were turned into secluded galleries by urban artists and graffiti writers. The transformation of these buildings remained largely obscured, save for the paint applied to windows or when the interior was revealed through partial demolition. Despite obvious dangers, such spaces (colloquially referred to as ‘bandos’, short for abandoned) provide sites where artists can spend more time, commandeering floors of buildings. Waclawek asserts that graffiti and street art practices demonstrate a willingness to utilise underused parts of the urban landscape:

No matter how controlled city spaces are, they are also open to subversion. Not every area is monitored, commercialized, depersonalized, or functionialized. Some spaces are unrestricted, unobstructed, exposed, empty, isolated, forgotten, unmanaged, and bleak. Even within the capitalist economy of space, there are gaps or marginal spaces that, while often neglected, are necessary for the conceptualization of the city as a complex arena. (Waclawek, 2011: 114)

In post-quake Christchurch such spaces were abundant and encouraged exploration in the search for freedom amidst the city. The appearance of urban painting in and on buildings that served no other purpose and were essentially on borrowed time, suggested a willingness to explore and reclaim a city that had been altered and recast, making use of spaces that lingered as a direct result of the impact of the quakes.
While these preceding examples highlight the consideration of the city as a site of attachment and functionality, they also inherently suggest a challenge to official order in a highly controlled setting. But the combination of urban art’s resistant and contestant roots and the potential for a disaster to reveal the power relations at play in a city, ensured that urban artists were also explicit in their public critique of the recovery process. Rebecca Solnit has argued that authority will often fear the potential of disasters to undermine their control, that a power struggle can occur, and real social and political change can come (Solnit, 2010: 21). Indeed, the deconstructed city, both physically and ideologically, has allowed the revelation of the underlying social structures and processes evident but often hidden within a city’s existence. George Parker and Barnaby Bennett have noted how the pervasive damage of the post-quake environment has revealed both physical and social aspects: ‘You see things that were once hidden: empty sites and broken foundations, flows of material, networks of support, threads of power’ (Bennett, Boidi, & Boles, eds., 2012: 4). Artists responded by subverting official visual information, from a yield sign reading ‘Wake Up’ in a vacant lot, to a makeshift directional sign where every arrow pointed to a carpark, a commentary on the proliferation of such spaces in the post-quake inner city (Figure 12. Seek’s Cardensity installation, central city, Christchurch, 2012. Photograph ©Reuben Woods).

Due to the complicated task of rebuilding, it was unsurprising that political bodies and politicians would become the target of urban artists. In July 2012, street artist Cubey pasted and stuck reproductions of a drawing of Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) head Roger Sutton, Central City Development Unit (CCDU) director Warwick Isaacs and Earthquake Recovery Minister Gerry Brownlee, three of the most influential men in post-quake Christchurch, across the city (Figure 13. Cubey’s Three Wise Men stickers, central city, Christchurch, 2012. Photograph ©Reuben Woods).

The images identified the men as ‘Roga, Waza and Geza’, with Sutton’s mouth covered by a sticking plaster, Isaac’s hearing blocked by construction-site ear muffs, and Brownlee’s vision obscured by a blindfold, rendering the ‘Three Wise Men’ as seeing, hearing, and speaking no truth (Bennett, Boidi & Boles, eds., 2012: 254). Such additions, laced with humour, recognised the politicised environment of the post-quake city and were afforded their voice by their unpermissioned creation, bypassing the censorship of official projects.

CONCLUSION

Post-earthquake Christchurch has been celebrated for the explosion of urban art, most notably the large-scale murals that have transformed the walls of the recovering cityscape. However, the shattered post-quake landscape was also ripe for the diverse performances of uncommissioned interventions. The violent legacy of the quakes, the primary vandals, and the frustrating process of rebuilding a city, ensured that the intrusion of uninvited urban art was viewed with less derision, instead revealing a number of potential readings not necessarily available to sanctioned projects. Guerrilla artists produced works that acknowledged the quakes’ impact on the built environment and the social relationship with vanished places; works that served to repopulate and renegotiate the altered city; and works that critiqued the power structures at play in the transitional cityscape. In doing so, guerrilla artists revealed the ability of universal tropes of urban art to be applied in the unique setting that post-quake Christchurch provided. Inflicting further damage upon an already complicated landscape, these unpermissioned additions were as much reflections upon another, initial act of vandalism as vandalism themselves.

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1. The diversity of urban art, and indeed the term as an umbrella concept for a wide variety of styles, outcomes, media, and techniques was the focus of the 2016 International Urban Art Conference at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

2. While the major quakes of September 2010 and February 2011 have been the focus of much coverage, thousands of aftershocks and smaller quakes have rattled the landscape. As such, the effect of the earthquakes on the city’s physical state was drawn out over a lengthy period.

3. Abandoned or peripheral spaces have always been attractive to both graffiti and street artists. Often such spots, lacking public attention or perceived utilitarian value, became valued locations for urban art communities (RomanyWG, 2008; Workhorse & Pac, 2012). In post-quake Christchurch, the abundance of such spaces, and the central locality of such spaces was a fascinating development and created a selling rage for exploration and decoration, while retaining elements of the seclusion that is attractive to urban artists. In utilising these spaces, urban artists are less concerned with city building in a civic sense, and more so with the creation of spaces for marginal communities to exist.

4. Schacter’s use of the term might be most suitably considered as a description of an approach to making art, rather than as a term to define artists.

5. It is important to acknowledge that although urban art provides a helpful umbrella term, indeed expansive enough to include practices such as skateboarding and parkour, or free-running, as well, it is important to emphasise the key distinctions that remain between graffiti and street art, not only aesthetically, but also in self-identification by practitioners (a graffiti writer would likely take offense of any description as a street artist) and outwardly in perception. Graffiti remains less socially accepted, while street art is increasingly viewed as a regenerative tool, even in its more rebellious states, often protected while graffiti is actively eradicated (Malufilo, 2012).

6. The 1935 earthquake in the Hawkes Bay area in the North Island was the most significant urban seismic event in New Zealand’s history until the Christchurch quakes, and immediately drew comparison.

7. Gröndahl’s work is admittedly concerned with graffiti in a broader, historical sense, but the influence of signature graffiti and street art practices is evident, a reflection of the global migration of these forms and their merging with local traditions.

8. Both New Orleans and San Francisco are featured in Gmastan and Neelen’s survey, but in both cases the influence of the respective 1989 earthquake in San Francisco and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans were minimal, a further highlight of the unique nature of this work.

9. Ōtahuhu is the Maori name for the area on which Christchurch (the major city in the Canterbury province) was founded. The city was intended as an English transplant, with a notable sense of physical order to represent the desired social order of the colony’s founders.

10. Contributing to Christchurch’s post-earthquake landscape ranged from traditional graffiti writers and street artists active pre-quake, to those categorised by this new environment to act with little experience. While some avoided categorisation, at least partially through anonymity, others, such as Cubey or Delta, embraced the term ‘street artist’ as a way to signify an independent practice distinct from public art, despite a lack of historical presence in the city’s urban art scenes. These titles have also evolved as the career trajectories of artists have developed post-quake, for instance Mike Hewson has undertaken a number of commissioned projects in Christchurch and overseas, effectively transitioning into the role of a public artist. Similarly, other figures continue to shift between commissioned projects and illegal works, highlighting the evolving position and possibilities available to urban artists.

11. Christchurch graffiti writers were utilising these various techniques too, a reflection of the speedy and less risky tactics offered by stickers and stencils.

References


Dr Suits (2015) Interview with Author, Christchurch.


Vasilevski, B.167


The Weekend Press


Thursday, February 23, 2012, p. 4.

Thursday, February 23, 2012, p. 4.
GRAFFITI AS GIFT:

STREET ART’S CONCEPTUAL EMERGENCE

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Drawing primarily on contemporary public discourse, this article aims to identify a divergence between graffiti and street art, and to establish street art as an independent art movement, the examples of which can be identified by an artist’s desire to create a work that offers value – a metric each viewer is invited to assess for themselves. While graffiti and street art are by no means mutually exclusive, street art fuses graffiti’s subversive reclamation of space with populist political leanings and the art historically-informed theoretical frameworks established by the Situationists and Dadaism. Based on two founding principles: community and ephemerality, street art is an attempt to create a space for visual expression outside of existing power structures, weaving it into the fabric of people’s daily lives.
AN INTRODUCTION (AND DISCLAIMER)

Attempting to define any aspect of street art or graffiti may seem an exercise in futility – for, as is the case with most contemporary cultural contexts, how can we assess something that is happening contemporaneously and constantly evolving? – but the imperative to understand what is arguably the most pervasive art movement of the twenty-first century outweighs the pitfalls of writing something in perpetual danger of becoming outdated. If anything, this text serves as documentation of a moment in time: a moment in which I believe street art can be extrapolated from and understood apart from the art movement from which it emerged: graffiti.

Because street art history is still being written everyday – and because the question of whether the movement even belongs within the canon of contemporary art remains open – comprehensive coverage can be found online. Of course, numerous print materials – books, zines, and academic texts – tackle the movement as well, but I base my argument largely on online sources for two reasons: first, because like street art itself, the internet is (for the most part) universally accessible and coverage of street art is published there to reach the greatest number of people. Secondly, because the internet itself has played and continues to play a dramatic role both in street art’s wide cultural reach and in the blending and mixing of styles across the globe (Courier, 2015).

Put simply, street art and the internet are inextricably linked, and it is the constant revision of both that offers ample resources in the reframing and dissolution of rigid and binary constructs. Through an examination of primarily digital contemporary literature, both academic and journalistic, I present an argument that defines street art as a movement under constant negotiation, one that can be viewed through a specific lens and with specific goals in mind. Of course, not all street artists operate in the same way or for the same reasons. But by analysing how some of the most prominent street artists – predominately Banksy, Swoon, and Shepard Fairey – describe their motivations, and by surveying the ways in which their work has been received and understood, a handful of commonalities come into focus. Most notably, I assert that street art functions as a gift: where graffiti was a reclamation of space for what is ‘mine’, street art is an acknowledgement of the ‘us’. As with any art movement there are exceptions to every rule, and personal ego certainly plays a role in a movement centred around grabbing people’s attention. With what I present here, I aim to prove that street art should be defined by its sense of duty: vandalism with purpose, whether political, aesthetic, or otherwise.

THOUGHTS AND REFERENCES ON THE HISTORY OF GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

Graffiti – a traditionally assertive marking of a name, alias, or identifying design in public space – has existed for millennia, with evidence surviving as far back as ancient Greece. In the preserved city of Pompeii, subversive mark-making was already moving beyond simple signatures to biling political caricatures – illustrations that would have been viewed as ‘profane’ in public conversation. Throughout history, however, much of graffiti remained documentary, and existed as more of a historical record of someone making was already moving beyond simple signatures to biling political caricatures – illustrations that would have been viewed as ‘profane’ in public conversation. Throughout history, however, much of graffiti remained documentary, and existed as more of a historical record of someone having been there (McCormick, 2011: 20). Unsurprisingly, most of these markings were made by those in military service: Viking warriors left their names scrawled into the Hagia Sophia in Turkey; Napoleon’s troops have been described as defacing the Sphinx in the eighteenth century; and during World War II, cartoons featuring a long-nosed character alongside the words ‘Kilroy was here’, began appearing wherever U.S. servicemen were stationed (Ross, 2016: 480). In the eighteenth century, English poet Lord Byron engraved his name into the ancient Greek temple to Poseidon on Cape Sounion – a mark now described as ‘a cherished part of modern Greek heritage’ (Agence France-Presse, 2008). In contemporary literature on the emergence of modern street art, the above are typically the examples listed when laying out historical precedent for the graffiti movement that emerged in the 1960s. What is not often considered, however, is the way in which this form of territorial mark-making contributed to the creation of a more aesthetically-oriented art movement, street art: artworks similarly disseminated through public space that go beyond a means of expressing I was here.

Twentieth-century examples include fascist stencils, first employed in Italy and later throughout Europe, and used as a means of speaking directly to the masses (Martin, 2010). Mussolini’s face became a stencil icon, and Blek le Rat – considered by some as the father of modern street art – has cited early memories of these fascist stencils as a major influence on his work (Bernard, 2007). From 1918 to 1933, Constructivist posters were deployed during the Bolshevik Revolution to declare the needs of the people and dismantle the Tsarist autocracy in Russia (Clemans, 2016). In the 1960s and ‘70s, black communities in Chicago and Los Angeles were self-financing community murals in support of the Civil Rights movement, drawing upon the inclusion of Mexican and Latin American artists made possible by the WPA murals of the 1930s (Cockcroft, 1977: 11). More recently, street art has played a role in some of the most significant political events of the past half-century. Community members and artists alike used the Berlin Wall as a canvas for dissent against the divide (Jones, 2014), and stencils deriding Hosni Mubarak helped spread the fever of the Arab Spring in 2011 (Rashed, 2013).

Many contemporary street artists are aware of their medium historically existing as both a form of graffiti’s territorial mark-making and a means of community activism, but I assert that it was not until graffiti became an aggressive target of law enforcement in the 1980s that street art emerged as a substantively new entity, and began to develop on its own aesthetic and historically-informed trajectory. When a 1982 Atlantic Monthly article introduced the ‘broken windows theory’ which specifically called out graffiti as part of the plight of urban ruin (Kelling), parts of the movement evolved into something more appropriately named ‘street art’, drawing more upon its roots in community activism to unmistakably prove itself an asset to the people who live alongside it, rather than a plague to be wiped out. This shift is often cited as the medium moving from ‘graffiti’ to ‘post graffiti’ (Waclawek, 2010: 60), but I argue that this was actually the birth of contemporary street art, as tags became more elaborate and illustrative designs quickly began to appear beside more unreadable scrawls. Street art emerged as a coexisting art movement – graffiti as a gift – part of an evolutionary framework that didn’t replace but instead added on to the traditions graffiti began. It is dedicated to proving that visual expression, whether textual or illustrative, sanctioned or illegal, can be an asset not an injury. Banksy’s 2005 book Wall and Piece dedicates an entire page to the broken windows theory, describing its origins before recounting a letter the artist received from...
a man in London who complains that Banksy’s work is driving up the real estate prices in his neighbourhood. ‘Your graffiti is undoubtedly part of what makes these wankers think our area is cool’, he writes, ‘You’re obviously not from round here and after you’ve driven up the house prices you’ll probably just move on’ (2005: 130). When an art form moves from depressing real estate value to drastically improving it (Senison, 2018), it has arguably become something different entirely; street art emerges from graffiti while continuing to exist alongside it.

STREET ART’S POPULIST POLITICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In the eighties Keith Haring became a household name when his murals and subway drawings – technically completed illegally yet not plagued by the stigma of vandalism – catapulted him to international fame. Spreading messages of love (Dancing Heart, 1988) and fighting widespread epidemics (Crack is Wack, 1986), Haring created public work that was accessible, positive, and community-oriented even if it was illegal. This understandably left viewers with the assumption that his work was supposed to be there and many spoke up in protest when it was removed (Keith Haring Foundation, 2016). In 1981, French street artist Blek le Rat was revolutionising the medium by deploying the first street art stencils, combining the authenticity of spray paint with the foresight of an existing and deliberate, often politically critical design. As his name implies, he began by stenciling rats around his home city of Paris – something the artist describes as an apolitical act, just a way to separate himself from the masses of the city (Neu, 2017). But in the ’90s and 2000s, Blek le Rat began to use his work to speak for the voiceless, addressing poverty and homelessness in his stencils (Courbat, 2016). By the turn of the twenty-first century, street art had arguably found a directive distinct from that of graffiti: speaking to and for the community within which it exists, in messages that are both overtly critical of existing repressive power structures and encouraging and representative of the communities they represent.

This populist prerogative extends politically; much street art is created in response to the damaging symptoms of the larger economic trend of global wealth inequality. It is for this reason that many street artists consider themselves socialists, or at the very least anti-capitalists (as is also the case with social practice artists and others). As public space came to be commodified by advertising throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, everyday people were barraged more and more with forceful messages from companies trying everything possible to convert them into customers. Cuban street artist Jorge Rodriguez Gerada began with ‘culture-jamming’ in the 1990s with the collective Artflux, illegally altering billboards to undermine the advertisement of harmful products like alcohol and cigarettes in poor areas (Bello, 2011). In 2002, he began creating multi-story charcoal portraits featuring local community members as a means of questioning ‘who chooses our cultural icons and role models, our values and aesthetics’ (Blockshaw, 2008: 48). Graffiti initiated a reclamation of public space, and street art continues the tradition by offering an alternative to the hyper-consumerist visual messages infiltrating our streets and airspace. Banksy cheekily acknowledged the street artist’s fight against capitalism when he wrote, ‘We can’t do anything to change the world until capitalism crumbles. In the meantime, we should all go shopping to console ourselves’ (2005: 204).

INCORPORATING CONTEMPORARY ART HISTORY

Expanding definitions of art within the contemporary movement has created space for both process-based works and immersive installations. Street art exists between these two – it is immersive, experiential, and incorporates the totality of its environment as part of the work, which includes all surrounding viewers and activity. Street artists choose their locations carefully, and everything in view of a work is an integral element of the piece itself. ‘It takes me a while to pick my spots’, Lmnopi said, ‘I watch them for a little while first’ (Stavsky, 2017). Just as the Situationists began walking around the city to create an artwork of their experience in the 1920s, so does street art involve a viewer’s complete experience. And just as site-specific work incorporates the entirety of its surroundings, so does a street artwork, as Richard Serra said of Tilted Arc, ‘to remove the work is to destroy the work’ (Michalos, 2007: 179).

It has often been said that street art is what you encounter on the way to a gallery, and because you’re not yet mentally primed for an art experience, the work is more likely to affect you, merely through the serendipitous nature of the encounter (Ruiz, 2011: 4). Public art functions similarly, but because commissioned work is typically more constrained in its site of installation, this serendipity is not as pervasive as that experienced with street art – an art form not limited by content, form or location. In this way, street art borrows again from the art historical canon in that it is interventional. Just as Dadaists called some objects art while Dadaism worked to prove its insignificance, or at least, its potential for insignificance (Richter, 1965). While Dada was ‘born out of negative reaction to the horrors of the First World War’ (Budd, 2004), street art emerged after nearly an entire century of relative peace, as a means of bridging the art world and the communities with which it had lost touch.

DEFINING NON-BINARY DISTINCTIONS

As evidenced by the easy exchange of the terms ‘street art’ and ‘graffiti’ by the artists quoted above, it is clear the two are not mutually exclusive. Many examples can be understood as both, and there is little value in parsing semantics when a distinction between the two is not universally available, accepted, or understood. At an elemental level, the distinction has been understood as related to the origins of the word ‘graffiti’, which comes from the Italian graffare, meaning to scratch (DeNotto, 2014). Many interpret this as delimiting graffiti to text or symbolic mark-making, while any design that exists as a more complex composition might be considered street art (Lu, 2015). In her 2010 book Graffiti and Street Art, Anna Waclawek presents the notion that the difference lies in the
work’s physicality: media such as wheatpaste and stencils that can be used to quickly replicate a design is indicative of a street artwork, while freehand spray paint done on-the-spot entails the level of risk and spontaneity associated with graffiti (2010: 29). While useful, this definition is simplistic and treats the two movements as binary. Instead, I believe the distinction lies in the motivations of the artist. This is not the first time this idea has been proposed (DeNotto, 2014), but the ambiguity of art’s interpretation itself has as of yet kept the surrounding communities from putting it into practice. Jill Weisberg has argued that the difference lies in who the artist is attempting to reach: graffiti writers speak to one another through coded visual language, while street art attempts to speak to the masses, creating images anyone can understand (Weisberg, 2012). While graffiti writers have been known to alter the style of their tags according to the intended audience – thereby complicating Weisberg’s argument – there are still many stunning, detailed graffiti tags that viewers can appreciate as art without belonging to the specific group the graffiti writer was attempting to reach. As contemporary artist Glenn Ligon explains, ‘Like any artwork, things become richer if you know more about them but I don’t think that’s crucial’ (Sollins, 2014). Just because a graffiti artist does not intend for their tag to be read by the layman doesn’t mean the average viewer cannot appreciate it as art. Indeed, many contemporary artworks in museum galleries are equally incomprehensible without a curatorial filter in the form of wall text or audio guide (Kuntzman, 2016).

Artists’ intentions have been debated for years, but there is a specific intention that I would argue is pivotal to the work of the street artist, and the beauty of the movement lies in the fact that each viewer is given permission to decide for themselves. I would argue that a work of street art is one created when the artist’s motivations are simply to create something constructive, something that adds value. Unfortunately ‘value’ is a fairly relative and subjective term, but it is something that I believe can be assessed through the visible amount of effort put forth by the artist during the work’s creation. At a fundamental level, I assert that any artwork completed in the public space that involved an evident amount of time and effort on behalf of an artist – and that was created with the intention of being seen and appreciated by a general public – is street art. That which solely attempts to signify I was here or I made this is graffiti. Indeed, many public artworks – whether illegal, sanctioned, or commissioned – are both. And an argument can be made that every artwork is an attempt to establish I was here. But it is the conceptual underpinnings of street art that make the movement fascinating and different from the art movements that preceded it. While still following the linear progression of art history and emerging organically from graffiti’s territorial reclamation of space, street art exists as an intermingling of political critique, twelfth century art history, the contemporary art world, and pop culture, as necessitated by an interconnected world and globalised economy.

**STREET ART THEORY**

Because street art emerged from graffiti, many of street art’s founding principles originated as graffiti’s unwritten rules. However, establishing ‘street art theory’ is as much a paradox as ‘street art exhibitions’, and there’s a reason graffiti’s rules are described as ‘unwritten’ (James, 2012). Street art exhibitions have been long derided by proponents of a movement which they believe is necessitated by its existing in its natural environment: outdoors. In 2010 Banksy told *Time Out London*, ‘I don’t know if street art ever really works indoors. If you domesticate an animal, it goes from being wild and free to sterile, fat and sleepy’ (Ward, 2010). As an art movement that originated on the street, as much in opposition to existing power structures as to the pedantic academia of the institutionalised art world (Gleaton, 2012: 10), in many ways street art should exist only in visual form with no accompanying text or description required. ‘It is first of all about liberating Art from its usual alienators that museums or institutions can be’, Invader explains of his work (2016). Because of this, there are limited statements directly from street artists about their practices, and this section of my argument will in some ways work directly against the wishes of these street artists whose work I am attempting to illuminate. Although many street artists disavow labels (even and especially the label of ‘street artist’) and the notion of certain guiding principles, street art theory is certainly something that exists, and something these artists are aware of when they create work, regardless of the extent to which they’re willing to discuss it publicly. In fact, in the preface to his 2015 book *Covert to Overt*, Shepard Fairey writes, ‘I find it humorous that fans of street art, a culture that is supposedly about rule breaking, have established so many rules for it’ (13). And while many rules do exist in one form or another for the artists themselves (Graffiti vs. Street Art Discourse Groups, 2012), we as spectators and scholars of street art must come to understand street art theory within its societal, political, and art historical precedent in order to establish its origins and existence as a valid, independent art form. I assert street art is based on two founding principles: community and ephemerality.

The founding principle of existing for the community it is created within is, to a certain extent, assumed within street art theory. As a reaction to the broken windows theory, street art evolved from graffiti to become a gift to the community, rather than a blemish. Furthermore, street art’s existence within public spaces and its literal removal of the walls that keep many – whether for financial or social reasons – out of museums, implies a populism that includes all members of the public, rather than speaking to and for collectors with the means to understand complex, art historical facts. Patrick Lydon, founder and director of a socially-engaged network of creatives called SocieCity, writes, ‘The positive examples of street art bring notions of community and economy closer together, instead of continuing a dangerous global trend of pushing the two farther apart’ (*The Nature of Cities*, 2016). Especially given the ongoing trend of gentrification in America’s largest cities, a street art aesthetic has often been employed by commercial enterprises as a means of making areas and projects feel more ‘hip’. While some street artists have cooperated with and profiled from these projects, many more have used their work to fight gentrification, moving their art to more ignored areas of a city to increase property value there instead. ‘It’s up to us as artists to decide if our work serves the community’s interest or the profit motive’, Brooklyn-based street artist Lmnopi told *Street Art NYC*. ‘I try to approach my work with the community in mind. When painting a mural on someone’s block, I take into consideration who lives there and how can I reflect their reality in my work’ (Stavsky, 2017).

A secondary component of street art existing for a community is a dismissal of the notion of ownership – or rather, an expansion of ownership to include the community as a whole. When an artist creates a work for free, or even
when commissioned, the work in many ways functions as a gift to the community itself, belonging to all those who see and engage with it regularly, with its stewardship entrusted to the building’s owner. Scholar Andrés Di Masso describes public space as the ‘natural arena of citizenship’, and it follows that the art within public spaces is on some level a visual expression of citizenship (2012). Thus, its physical iteration – at least psychologically – belongs to those community members who subscribe to the citizenship ideas that the work expresses. ‘Citizenship status is defined as a practical achievement that involves geographical commotions’, he writes, ‘the right to the city is the right to be in and to produce city spaces in order to make them public’ (emphasis in original). The distrust of police and civic authority caused by a myriad of societal and political factors extends to the authorised public art installed and promoted by those in power. By creating work in public spaces, street artists are extending the psychological boundaries of belonging by providing a perceived ‘unofficial’ means through which community members can identify with their surroundings. Los Angeles street artist Stecyk said, ‘I think the most important thing about the street is that it really is commonly accessible space. The public has a right to be able to speak.’ Now-renowned artist Swoon said that when she first began wheatpasting illegally, ‘It was the first time I ever became aware of really intense discussions over the nature of public space and whose spaces those were’ (Deitch, 2011: 132). This fidelity to community also fosters a sense of respect and collaboration between street artists themselves. One of graffiti’s unwritten rules states that you can only paint over another artist’s work if you are able to create something better, and that idea has carried over into street art, as artists often work collaboratively on a single wall or alleyway (Langley, 2017). The definition of ‘better’, however, is often contested, which has resulted in disputes between street artists as they continually repaint a single wall, each attempting to reclaim the space as their own (Walker, 2014). Street art’s emphasis on constant, consistent improvement leads to the emergence of new media and styles. French street artist Miss Van says her characteristic dolls began as self-portraits, used as a visual representation for her name like an illustrated graffiti tag. ‘Graffiti has a very megalomaniac side; instead of writing my name, I chose to represent myself through dolls’, she said (Blackshaw, 2008: 111). This idea can be traced back to the work of Keith Haring, who in his autobiography shares that he first began using his Radiant Baby icon as a tag to sign the work he was creating in public spaces (Gruen, 1992). In the same way art history is a chronicling of artistic ‘genius’, the streets choose their own geniuses – an artist crosses this threshold when they create something the community would rather preserve than erase. And as street art became just as illustrative as it was textual, each street artist was pushed to develop individualised styles and images, ones that could be seen and recognised from afar and call viewers to come closer.

What I assert as street art theory’s second guiding principle, ephemerality, also coincides with the place in which a work is created. Urban landscapes are constantly changing, renovating, and updating, and a medium that began illegally was self-aware and never expected to remain for more than a few days or weeks. New York wheatpaste artist Michael De Feo calls street art’s ephemeral nature one of its most important aspects: ‘The very idea that no one can own it and it’s there for a limited time is essential to its very meaning. … [When] you recognise that you’re seeing something that won’t last, it creates a magical experience’ (Blackshaw, 2008: 22). Swoon writes that when she first started creating street art, ‘I loved that everything I made got eaten away’ (Deitch, 2011: 132). And Chicago street artist Ron English told Widewalls, ‘as long as walls keep changing, the society, or societal consciousness, keeps living’ (Kostov, 2016). Even commissioned murals from street artists are lost when a building is torn down – although in these circumstances the artist does have more legal authority to protect their work. Simply just by painting outdoors, even when done legally, the piece itself assumes a certain level of risk, because a weather event or a bucket of paint could wipe the wall away in an instant. It is this notion of ephemerality that contains within it the ghosts of the rules of graffiti: risk and spontaneity. A street artwork and its environment are inseparable – the piece is at the mercy of its surroundings, just as it imposes the artist’s will on the space.

Both of these founding principles of street art theory – community and ephemerality – emerged through the work of contemporary street artists, many of whom were studying or aware of the 1960s conceptual art movement, interventional art of the 1980s and ‘90s, and the site-specific, immersive installations of recent generations that incorporate the viewer as part of the piece. Well-known examples include Swoon (Pratt Institute), Shepard Fairey (Rhode Island School of Design), and Patrick Miller of the street art duo Faile (Minneapolis College of Art and Design), all of whom began experimenting with street art during their undergraduate studies (Miranda, 2008). I assert street art as a merging of these art forms with the subversive, critical, and politically engaged medium of graffiti. A ‘politically engaged’ medium that began by declaring territory physically has evolved to declare territory conceptually, for the people, to bring what existed inside museums and galleries into the fabric of their daily lives.

CONCLUSION
Excessive capitalism, limited public funding for the arts, and an insulated art world made street art’s existence necessary in continuing the legacy of art as one of free expression. Street artists have taken the parts of art history and the art world that speak and appeal to them, and turned the systems inside out, drawing upon graffiti’s rich history to bring art back to a public excluded by admission prices and a post-post conceptual art world. Even defining street art as I have done here may be a paradox as street art requires no explanation. But the evidence remains that the street art movement is not only intertwined with but also emerged from graffiti – drawing on the history of site-specific art, the Situationists, and Dadaism, and driven by a desire to fight exploitative power structures in both the art world and the world at large. Whether it is a variation of this definition or something wholly different, the academic community surrounding street art has a responsibility to understand its conceptual basis and art historical influences fully, and disseminate that information to the public so that we can all come to better know and appreciate the street art of our shared spaces. The term ‘graffiti’ carries the weight of the Twentieth century with it, it is either seen as a point of pride by those who practice it, or it is a word associated with vandalism, defacement, and crime. When the commercial and academic worlds ignore the difference between street art and graffiti, a tremendous disservice is done to the former – an art movement based on building up communities that has been developing independently for decades.
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References


DOES PRESERVING STREET ART DESTROY ITS ‘AUTHENTICITY’?

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This note briefly comments on various ways street and graffiti artworks could and should be preserved. Indeed, the recent boom of these forms of art – especially street art – has enriched the discussion regarding its conservation. Local councils, property owners, and other entities increasingly preserve murals (especially those created by famous artists), either by covering them with perspex sheets, or even detaching and bringing them into indoor locations. In situ and ex situ methods of preservation, together with photographic documentation (another way of conserving street and graffiti art for posterity) have been thoroughly commented on by scholars and commentators. This author will highlight such comments in this note and make the point that in case the decision to preserve these forms of art is taken, we should choose a method of conservation which is the least disruptive to their authenticity as possible.

Indeed, attempts to preserve street art are often criticised. It is not only anti-graffiti organisations that do not like the idea. Street art insiders also frequently disapprove of such plans as they fear that these moves risk damaging the authenticity of these forms of art. Indeed, as is the case with (more traditional) types of visual art, the concept of authenticity is not just related to attribution, but is also dependent on the appropriate conservation and display of the work (Phillips, 1997). An overall ‘authentic’ experience surrounding a piece may be difficult to achieve when the object is encountered in a different situation or context from that which the artist meant, despite the efforts the conservator may have put in trying to present the work in its original condition. Also, debates around the preservation of authenticity have often neglected the role of the audience in creating and remodelling the context of the art, for example where the public chosen to experience the ‘conserved’ art mainly consists of tourists who do not have enough knowledge and understanding of the work they are experiencing (Dutton, 2003). Such a scenario may sometimes occur in the street art world, especially where pieces created in the public environment are preserved for the sole purposes of exhibiting them to non-local audiences and art tourists.
SPECIFIC CRITICISMS OF CONSERVATION PROJECTS

Several commentators stress that graffiti and street art are ‘participatory’, which means that anyone could point over the art, destroy it, add something to it, or complement it (Blanché, 2014; Chatzidakis, 2016). Altering street art can thus be considered as part of a ‘design dialogue’ (Merrill, 2015) or ‘democratic multiparty conversation’ (Hansen, 2015a) within the urban environment. Artworks placed in the street – the argument goes – cannot be properly understood as ‘finished’ works created by just one person, but they instead require constant exposure to change to remain authentic (Mulcahy and Flessas, 2016; Minty, 2006), with damages to the art even being considered as ‘acts of engagement or ‘co-authorship’ rather than vandalism’ (Mulcahy and Flessas, 2016).

The participatory nature of these forms of art means their preservation would often undermine their authenticity by freezing the artworks and the dialogue they spur in time and space (Merrill, 2015: 383): using Alison Young’s words, ‘conservation is not conversation’ (Young, 2016, 182). For example, using perspex sheets to protect a street artwork – which may be considered as a form of in situ conservation – would effectively terminate the communication between artists and turn the piece into a ‘civic amenity or, worse, a cultural commodity’ (Young 2016: 182), in addition to increasing the risk of its removal and commercialisation (Hansen 2015a). Susan Hansen also argues that ‘street art’s invitation to engage in the city’s ephemeral dialogue is antithetical to traditional heritage frameworks’ (Hansen, 2017). These words are echoed by Laima Nomeikaité: ‘[framing] street artworks deprives citizens of the right to experience them (in the public space and ephemerality) in daily life and the broader right to engage with the city’ (Nomeikaité, 2017). Similarly, it has been noted by heritage-focused scholars that the target of any conservation decision must be the protection of the ‘significance’ of the place (De La Torre, 2014); and that we should abandon the focus on the concept of material authenticity and the ‘preservationist desire to freeze the moment of heritage and to conserve heritage as an unchanging monument to the past’ (Smith, 2006: 6).

Ex situ preservation would be even more damaging to the authenticity of street art and graffiti, as it completely removes the work from its often crucial urban context (removals and relocations of street artworks have recently occurred many times, with several Banksy murals receiving such treatment). Indeed, the very meaning of most street artworks is often dependent on their in situ nature and the on-going dynamic relationship within the community in which they exist (Young, 2013). Street and graffiti artists do not simply treat the city as a canvas; they also use the streetscape as a structural element of their artworks. Anything around the actual piece is part of the artistic experience, including – it has been suggested – the taste of pollution, the smell of dog’s excrement or take away food, the noise of traffic and people’s conversation (Mulcahy and Flessas, 2016) as well as ‘collapsed walls as a creative background’ (Chatzidakis, 2016: 10) and ‘the genius loci, i.e. the atmosphere, the smell, the noises, the tactile experience’ (Blanché, 2018). Removal of street art pieces that aim at extracting profits and increasing economic interest in the ‘preserved’ artwork would be even less acceptable from a heritage perspective: indeed, economic value is not recognised as a legitimate heritage value by many values-based management practitioners (De La Torre, 2014).

THE ROLE OF PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

It has also been argued that, if conservation tools are to be relevant and useful to these forms of art, they would probably have to move from a methodology that dictates the fixing of a stable and unchangeable narrative pertaining to the past towards a discipline that tolerates alteration and erasure (Mulcahy and Flessas, 2016). A form of preservation that meets these standards seems to be photographic documentation (Merrill, 2015; Garcia, 2017). Analogical and digital pictures have for decades enabled the documentation and ‘conservation’ of street and graffiti art, and continuously make these forms of art accessible to large audiences all over the world. The same can be said of videos, especially those created by or on behalf of artists to highlight their pieces and the way they are created. Many of these pictures and videos can be easily found in specialised magazines and websites, as well as in social media networks, such as Instagram, Flickr and Facebook, where they are widely shared and commented on even by people outside the street art and graffiti scenes.2 Interesting attempts to document (and conserve) these forms of art by using such methodology are (i) the ‘100 Days of Leake Street’, a photographic project by architectural historian Sabina Andron. The project shows the changes on ten different walls in the famous London Graffiti Tunnel in the South London area of Waterloo over 100 consecutive days; and (ii) the longitudinal photo-documentation used by Susan Hansen as a methodological approach to the study of street and graffiti art, based on data collection which allows these forms of art to be analysed as visual dialogue (Hansen, 2015b).

Photographs and videos therefore play an important role in disseminating and raising awareness about these art forms, while also preserving the intangible heritage of artworks that are often doomed to fade quickly. Even New York’s Judge Block, in his 2013 decision refusing to enjoin the demolition of the famous 5Pointz site, stressed the importance of photographic documentation for conservation purposes. He noted that ‘the plaintiffs’ works can live on in other media. The ... works have been photographed, and the court, during the hearing, exhorted the plaintiffs to photograph all those which they might wish to preserve.’ 4 In the subsequent decision of 2018, the same judge famously sided with 5Pointz artists awarding them US$6.7m in damages, as the owner of the site had whitewashed illegally their paintings.5

Photographs of graffiti, especially illegal graffiti (which is more likely to be removed quickly), are increasingly being shown in galleries and museums. Examples include photographer Henry Chalfant’s curated exhibition of photographs of New York subway graffiti pieces from the ‘70s and ’80s.6 Exhibitions of graffiti pictures aim not only to document the art, but also to preserve its subversiveness. For example, an exhibition in Modena, Italy, in 2016 named ‘1984 – Evoluzione e rigenerazione del writing?’ displayed photographs of illegal graffiti created by writers predominantly from the gallery’s urban area. The aim was to allow viewers to juxtapose the artworks in both the street – where they are created and are usually perceived as vandalism by the general public – and in a gallery space.8 The exhibition’s organisers tried ‘to counteract the elitist nature of modern artistic institutions; by creating ‘a continuity between the inside and the outside’ of the gallery and ‘literally turned inside out the boundaries of the white cube’ (Baldini, 2018: 27–32).9 In this case, as has been noted, pictures of graffiti constitute the works themselves (Rivosi, 2018),10 and the...
reproductions do not lack any of the main features that are relevant to the appreciation of graffiti (Baldini, 2018). Even some graffiti artists support the idea of having photographs of their works in a gallery. Italian writer Fra 32 confirmed that coming across pictures of his own pieces in the 1984 exhibition in Modena was ‘an experience that [felt] authentic’ (Baldini, 2018: 29).

Contrary opinions have also been voiced, however. It has been noted that intangible conservation of street and graffiti art through photographic and video documentation is not enough to preserve it. Some argue that pictures actually decontextualise the art, as in a photo ‘there is an obvious limitation of the impression that can be perceived in the street’ (Nogueira Alves, 2017). Despite efforts to imbue the indoor environment hosting the picture with an urban look and feel, photographs will never be able to entirely recreate the real street atmosphere. In this way, it is difficult to keep the image of the street artwork authentic, with the piece always subject to the interpretation of those in charge of transferring the idea (García, 2017; Blanché, 2014).

**SHOULD WE CHOOSE THE PRESERVATION METHOD WHICH IS LESS DISRUPTIVE TO AUTHENTICITY?**

There is no doubt that any kind of preservation – be it in situ, ex situ, or via photographic or film documentation – affects the authenticity of street and graffiti art. Putting perspex sheets over the work, removing and relocating the piece, or introducing pictures of graffiti into galleries will never create an experience exactly the same as directly viewing it in its original street context. Therefore, if a decision is made to conserve a street artwork for posterity, one may need to choose the option that is least disruptive to the authentic artistic message.

The in situ method of preservation might sometimes respond to this objective, especially if the artwork has been commissioned or authorised. Perspex or other protective barriers, despite preventing or limiting the dialogue between urban artists and the streets, nevertheless have some merit: they make it possible for the aficionados of these forms of art to continue to enjoy the art in the same environment in which it was originally created. The selected method of in situ conservation should endeavour to both protect the integrity of the artwork as much as possible, and minimise the impact of screens or barriers on its message and visual aesthetics (for example, in terms of light reflection). Due consideration should also be given to the rights of the property owner: while their consent should arguably be sought and obtained where possible, in exceptional cases of outstanding art, in situ preservation plans should proceed even without their authorisation. In such cases, properly owners could possibly be compensated if the conservation of the artwork negatively affects their ability to fully enjoy their space. Also, the decision to conserve the piece should be approved by as many stakeholders as possible, not only the owner of the property (if different from the person who wants to conserve the art), but also the artist herself and the local community which hosts the work. This is in line with findings of certain heritage studies that have considered heritage experts as merely an equally interested party in heritage ‘with equal and valid views, but no more’, with a view to rebalancing ‘the input and negotiating power of all interested parties’ (Smith and Waterton, 2009: 153-171). Some commentators have advocated fine-tuning heritisation procedures to make them more ‘participatory’ and respectful of the rights of others. Alberto Frigerio and Elvira Khakimova, for example, have suggested a system where local communities would be encouraged to propose selected pieces to be inserted in national lists of outstanding street artworks, by requiring a minimum amount of signatures. They also recommend local councils assess the conformity of the recommended art with pre-identified parameters (Frigerio and Khakimova, 2013). For instance, they should not carry any discriminatory or offensive messages or be dangerous for the public or the surrounding environment, and any artworks incorporated into private properties would require the consent of the building’s owner. These are sensible requirements and should be coupled with a consideration of the main precondition for listing a street and graffiti artwork: its artistic merit. People who have extensive knowledge and understanding of these artistic movements, be they artists, agents or curators, should be involved when making the final decision. Leaving the final say to assessors who are experts in traditional fine arts with no awareness of the creative processes and outputs of the street and graffiti art communities would be a mistake, as it may increase the risk of an underestimation of the value of the art and its consequential destruction.

As mentioned, in situ preservation projects make more sense for street artworks that are commissioned, or authorised. Take the mural entitled ‘Tuttomondo’ commissioned to, and painted by, Keith Haring in June 1989 in the Tuscan town of Pisa. It has been restored and preserved via perspex sheets with the support of the local municipality, and in 2013 was also listed by the Italian Ministry of Culture as an ‘artistic-historical product of particular importance’. The protective glasses are minimal, being just 2.20 metres high (while the entire mural’s height doesn’t exceed 10 metres), and aren’t too close to the painting so that it can breathe. Glasses thus don’t spoil the view people have of the mural. Also, and perhaps more importantly, straight after painting the mural, Keith Haring himself agreed with possible conservation plans (the artist would die just a few months after) and even expressed his desire for the mural to last for many years and stressed the need to repaint it should the need to preserve it arise (Dickens et al., 2016). In situ preservation plans may not work for street artworks that are created illegally, though. When it comes to such works, I share the concerns of the commentators that stress the participatory nature of street art and the inadequacy of conservation projects: works produced illegally may indeed attract more ‘dialogue’ than commissioned or authorised pieces do, with fellow artists being more prone to leave their sign close to or upon the unauthorised work. As ex situ conservation is even less acceptable for the reasons highlighted above (especially if the art is site-specific and the relocation limits the free enjoyment of the detached piece), the main tool to conserve illegal street art appears to be photographic documentation.

Of course, there have been attempts to protect in situ illegally produced street artworks. An example is the artwork by French artist Blek Le Rat entitled ‘Woman with Child’, stencilled in 1991 in the German town of Leipzig, which is now on Saxony’s state list of historical monuments, and is protected by glass. The artist seemed even delighted by this move, as the piece is important to him. He had indeed painted it for a beloved woman – Sybille – who would actually later become his wife. The investor and the town authorities also spent €9,000 Euros to preserve the mural, and even sightseeing buses stop by it and let people admire the piece. Although the preservation has been approved
by the artist and the property owner and – it seems – supported by the local community, it cannot be denied that the artwork looks less authentic than it was before. While someone may accept such loss of authenticity for the sake of preserving the art for posterity, street art ‘purists’ would understandably stress that such interventions run against the very essence of this form of art. It’s also for these reasons that – I believe – in situ preservation of street art should be limited to exceptional cases.

CONCLUSION

The decision as to whether street and graffiti art should be preserved raises delicate issues. One of these is how to keep the message delivered by the ‘conserved’ artwork as authentic as possible, especially taking into account the original intention of the artist. We have seen that preserving a piece, either in situ with protective glass or ex situ (for example, via a surgical removal of the mural from the wall), or even through photographs, has always a negative impact on its authenticity (albeit, with different degrees of intensity). I recognise and accept that these options often are not optimal solutions. As mentioned, a decision to conserve in situ an artwork placed in the street should be made only in exceptional circumstances, particularly where the art is of value to the local community which hosts it and should obviously also take into account the artists’ wishes and the interests of owners of the property upon which the work is placed. Where this path cannot be pursued, the only acceptable option remains well-executed photographs and their dissemination in relevant circles.

1 See also Ed Bartlett, Street Art (Lonely Planet 2017: 150) reporting the opinion of the Portuguese artist Vhils: ‘The context of the environment is vital, as the work needs to communicate and co-create a story with the existing history of a place. I don’t want to make works that ‘take over’ an area, but rather are a part of the fabric of that space’.
2 Photographic documentation is relevant to muralism as well (Cockcroft, Weber, Cockcroft 1997).
3 See Dr Sabina Andron ‘100 Days of Leake Street’ <https://sabinaandron.com/leake-street>.
6 An exhibition of pictures of ‘old school’ graffiti was organised in New York in November 2014 at the Eric Firestone Gallery <https://www.ericfirestonegallery.com/exhibitions/henrychalfant_1980>. Henry Chalfant is an American photographer and videographer well-known for his work on graffiti and hip-hop culture. His pictures are in the collection of several prestigious museums.
7 In English ‘1984 – Evolution and Regeneration of Graffiti Writing’.
8 Interview with Pietro Rivasi, curator of the exhibition (September 2017).
9 Baddini also stresses that graffiti ‘need not change to enter the “temples” of contemporary art: they are those institutions that need to change to make room’ (Baddini, 2014).
10 In the interview with Pietro Rivasi, the latter added that graffiti writers themselves consider pictures as alternative to the original pieces, and that therefore showing pictures of graffiti in a museum or gallery matches writers’ practice of showing and disseminating their artistic outputs within the subculture.
12 Yet, the ability to continue the ‘conversation in the street’ is not totally affected by glasses or other barriers. Other artists and taggers could still leave their sign or mark close to the artwork, and in particular in areas of the same wall which are not protected.
13 That is, converting the street into a type of museum (and thereby, by implication robbing it of its true street integrity). That in situ preservation carries the risk of ‘museumising the street’ is a point made by art historian Christian Omodea in a conversation the author had with him in London in March 2018 during the Art on the Streets – Art as Intervention conference at the Institute of Contemporary Art.
14 It has been argued for example that low-quality perspex glasses do not let the wall breathe, which may damage the painting.
15 Decreto 335/2013. The mural was inserted in the list of ‘beni tutelati’.
16 Jan Schilling, Preserving art that was never meant to last, (May 7, 2012) <http://www.dw.com/en/preserving-art-that-was-never-meant-to-last/a-15933463>.
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Visual
We inscribe urban art on walls, etch it on windows, perform it in public space, hide it in alleyways and underpasses, glimpse it on passing freight trains. We also discard it in waste bins and trash bags. Digging through these bins and bags unearths cardboard boxes, food, clothes – the detritus of everyday urban life. It also reveals a distinctive sort of urban art: the photographic evidence of this everyday urban life past and present. Parents die, couples split, attics and basements get cluttered and then cleaned, memories get digitised – and as part of these processes, old photographs come loose from their origins and find their way into the waste stream. The intended subject of these photos is often a parent or a child, a holiday or a birthday; but the background subject is often the city itself, the particular urban milieu in which such photographic moments unfold. Other times the subject is overtly the city, or some other city, worth noting visually when animated by an unusual event, visited for the first time, or encountered as a long-imagined destination. Scattered around the city, secreted away in its refuse, are images of the city. Lost, they wait to be found.

Everyday urban life in turn works on these photographs, marks them, wears on them. The physicality of the photographic print makes it available for written reminders and descriptions – sometimes names or arrows drawn directly on the photograph itself, other times names, dates, or locations inscribed on the photograph's flip side, or back-of-the-photograph notations recording something of the technical process by which the photograph was developed. The photograph's fragile physicality also leaves it susceptible to subsequent deteriorations; lost photographs often feature stains, tears, and distortions, some acquired prior to the trash bin, others while in it. The city illustrated becomes the city annotated.

Taken together, such photographs construct a secret archive of city life defined as much by what it omits as by what it includes. The photographs shown here were scrounged and collected from the trash bins of ‘nicer’ neighbourhoods in a large Texas city, for example, and so they suggest the inequitable intersections of race and class that situate certain groups in such areas and systematically exclude others from them. But if such photographs archive particular patterns of urban life, they unravel others. Collectively, they produce a dislocated urban history of visible ghosts and invisible intentions, a disorienting dérive through other lives, other times, and other places. They build yet another city within the city, this one pieced together from image, loss, memory, and imagination.
SOMETIMES THE CITY
SOMETIMES THE CITY

January 30, 1954

Lynden, Carol Lynn, and Becky Ann Foster.
We had just gotten off the train - the day we arrived in San Antonio.
SOMETIMES THE CITY
[Handwritten note on the back of a photo:

Tribune Tower, Chicago, taken from tower of Wrigley Building, across Michigan Blvd.
]

[Photograph of a cityscape with skyscrapers]

[Photograph of a market scene with people and goods]
The Black Bombing project started in the summer of 2015 and finished in the spring of 2017. There were 120 separate words/combinations. Every new word made an idea for the next.

Oskolki / Осколки / Ockolki is a graffiti artist/crew from Saint-Petersburg and Moscow, Russia. Active on the streets everyday/night since 2013.

Locations of activity: Saint-Petersburg, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Crimea, Riga, Bishkek, Berlin, Rotterdam.

Art is an idea.
The essence of our activity consists in the idea itself.
The base of an idea is language.
The word.

Type is the form that makes up words and is the base of graffiti. Bombing is a format of action. Every word (or word combination) in Black Bombing characterises an author, lyrical hero, or is connected to a site of action.

Black Bombing is a revision of graffiti in that it:

• Radically rejects colour, outlines, background, and other classical elements of graffiti;

• Spreads different words and messages, and not only one’s name. Russian language and Cyrillic letters are used. The words used are understandable to the public.

But every black word is still an act of graffiti — in its original sense.
Activist
Art critic.
Lazy radical
Never work
Abstract average man
Activist absurdist
Clubber
PADiGLiONE iN MOViMENTO

Jens Besser

A Vandals’ Pavilion during the 2017 Venice Biennale

On 12 May 2017, at 5pm, in parallel to the inauguration of the 2017 Venice Biennale, the unauthorised project PADiGLiONE iN MOViMENTO was officially opened by a paid porter at Venice Santa Lucía Railway Station. Simultaneously, three painted trains entered the outer tracks of platforms 17 to 21, used for commuter trains of the Veneto Region. These works set the starting point for the first unofficial pavilion project realised during the Venice Biennale. Works by Alex from Spain, Fino from Germany, Slomo from Israel, Lyra & Lyro from Denmark, and Vandal from Poland appeared for a short time in the central point of Venice’s rail-based public transport system.

FIRST IMPACT

Months earlier, these artists commenced their unofficial participation in the 57th Venice Biennale. Slomo visited the train yards in the Veneto Region to study schedules of workers and trains. He analysed the train types running in this region. A schedule of yard bombing was set up. Official invitation cards and labels were designed with reference to the corporate identity of Italian train company Trenitalia. Invitation cards were sent to international curators and press representatives. Finally, the artists arrived in Venice to paint trains intensively in different yards in the Veneto Region.

From 8 to 12 May, the artist group visited the yards of Bassano del Grappa, Vicenza, and Rovigo to paint the commuter trains which arrived on the outer tracks of Venice’s Santa Lucía Station. Each painted piece was provided with a label placed next to it. The labels identified the pieces as official works of PADiGLiONE iN MOViMENTO. On each label the official logos of the Venice Biennale and Trenitalia, the artists’ name and origin, the technique used, and the year of production were visible.

The pieces were executed with spray paint and facade paint on the trains of the regional metropolitan railway system. The type of train that received most paint jobs was the TAF (Ale 426/506) designed by Pininfarina, after the Stadler FLIRT (ETR 340).

SECOND ROUND

After the opening of PADiGLiONE iN MOViMENTO, three more artists made their way to a yard in the Veneto region. Flux from Great Britain, Mr. Trainwash from the United States, and Joao Pocolo from Brazil painted a commuter train which arrived on October 15 in Venezia’s Santa Lucía Station. All artists used special techniques. Flux used oil sticks to draw on the train, Mr. Trainwash pasted prepared papers, and Joao Pocolo used found objects and his hand as a stencil on the train. All pieces were executed on TAF train number 94.

CLOSING OF PAVILION

During the last week of the Biennale, from 26 to 28 November, another group of train painters arrived. NEXR from Denmark, Layer 1 from Switzerland, and Applpier from Ireland did a series of works on TAF trains running from Venice Santa Lucía Station to Vicenza and Rovigo. For their interventions, different techniques were used. Nexr and Applpier used spray paint on the train. Layer 1 realised two works with direct screen printing on the train’s surface. In a final collaborative work on an old model of Trenitalia a mix of posters, spray paint and screen printing were employed.
Figure 1. Detail of the collaboration between Slomo & Nexr on train type ALe642.

Figure 2. Collaboration between Slomo & Nexr using PiM posters, handouts of different Biennale pavilions, silkscreen printing, and spray paint on train type ALe642 as well as the platform of a train station.

Figure 3. PiM labelling posters used to advertise the opening of PiM, pasted illegally over official posters in the historic centre of Venice during the 57th Venice Biennale.
Figure 4. Work by Lyra & Lyro made with rolled facade paint and spray paint on train type FLIRT / ETR 340 seen at Venezia Santa Lucia Station.

Figure 5. Fino’s Metrosnail sprayed on train type FLIRT / ETR 349.

Figure 6. Inside out view of Fino’s Egyptmetro on train type TAF / ALe 426/506 seen at Venezia Santa Lucia station.
Figure 7. Two colored silk screen prints by Layer 1 on train type TAF / ALe 426/506.

Figure 8. Passengers at Venezia Santa Lucia station take a closer look at a single coloured silk screen print work by Layer 1 on train type TAF / ALe 426/506.

Figure 9. Detail of single coloured silk screen print work by Layer 1 and PiM label poster on train type TAF / ALe 426/506.
Jens Besser is an urban art artist and curator with a large international network. He graduated from the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts in 2008. Large-format murals and unauthorised hand-drawn interventions in public spaces characterise his artistic work. His artistic activity led him to Chile, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia. In addition to his own artistic career, he curates urban art projects. Among these are the mural projects ‘Lak Aan Braak’ (2011) in Heerlen, ‘RAUM – City Bilder’ (2011/2012) and ‘Leuben Murals’ (2017) in Dresden and the exhibitions ‘Muralismo Morte’ (2009), ‘Conceptual Vandalism’ (2012/2013) and ‘FreightTrainWorks’ (2017) in Dresden. Besser is also part of the organising team of the ‘LackStreicheKleber – Urban Art Festival Dresden’. In addition to his curatorial work, Besser regularly publishes texts and publications. He is the author of Muralismo Morte – The Rebirth Of Muralism In Contemporary Urban Art (2010) and co-author of Time For Murals (2014), and FreightTrainWorks (2018).

jensbesser.de  anartchy.com/urbanscript  lackstreichekleber.de
Urban Creativity in Abandoned Places

Urban creativity is an umbrella term for a range of activities within, or in direct relation to, the city. An important characteristic of situated urban creative practices is that they push legal, moral and cultural boundaries by intervening and exploring alternative ways of using, producing, experiencing, and understanding the city.¹

In thinking about urban creativity, Greek street art has undeniably opened new ways of understanding and experiencing the urban fabric of everyday life, considering the economic and sociopolitical circumstances within which they are placed. Street art (of resistance) as Elias (2014) describes it, has the unique ability to fuse aesthetics and politics, offering a new form of situated participation in urban space and fostering the emergence of a prolific culture. Artists, as he argues, use playful and self-reflective sets of semiotic strategies to engage their audience.

In short, street art practitioners and activists claim their right to participate in the visual construction and reproduction of the Greek ‘publicly accessible space’ (Bengtsen, 2018). The visual environment is ever changing, considering the ephemeral and dynamic nature of street art as well as the economic, political and cultural contexts of these situated practices. Thus, it may elucidate many occurring sociopolitical and cultural displacements. Street art is broader in scope than graffiti, and includes a wider array of techniques, and aesthetic and expressive media. To a large extent, it is an intentional spatiotemporally oriented, ephemeral, entertaining (playful), and cross-cultural, but also socioculturally conventionalized, phenomenon.² Relevantly, street art is typically built on the interplay between two universal and interacting semiotic systems – language and depiction – and is thus a form of polysemiotic communication (Stampoulidis et al., in press).

This photo essay focuses on a specific kind of street art practice in Greece, namely a number of visual interventions in abandoned buildings, and especially the Xenia Hotels Project initiated by the artist Anna Dimitriou, as communication tools for addressing sociopolitical issues in interaction with the spatiotemporal contextual surroundings (Avramidis and Tsiimpoundi, 2017; Chaffee, 1993). In other words, the present enquiry considers social, cultural, and political activist aspects of Greek street art, problematising the relationship between both cultural and creative activities in abandoned urban space.

Anna Dimitriou, an Athens-based activist, street artist, and urban practitioner only recently started painting walls in abandoned buildings and on the streets of Athens using the typical decorative technique of decalcomania, which is a fusion of different materials including paint-filled engravings and prints. As she has argued in a recent interview conducted by Stampoulidis in September 2018:

It is a good thing our city is full of empty walls that anyone can express him/herself on. Greece is like a notice board that anyone could post their ideas on […] All this began a year and a half ago, when we found out that my father is sick. I started looking at old photos of him, you know the pink ’80s vintage kind, trying to recover him from the summers of my youth. Those lovely Greek summers that just do not exist anymore. Somehow, like all those abandoned buildings […] It felt like my father was a part of this demolished, lost world and I somehow tried to recover them both. I began the Xenia Hotels Project, in order to give them back life. To make a fuss in order for people to remember them.

Xenia Hotels was part of a state programme which aimed to develop tourism throughout Greece from the 1950s to the 1970s as one of the main priorities for the recovery of the Greek economy after World War II. However, in the late 1990s, Xenia Hotels were abandoned. Despite this, for many Greeks they (still) carry a significant emotional load. Although abandoned, they remain architectural masterpieces of the historical past of Greece, built on the most spectacular places around the country.²
Figure 1. The Spheres of the Christian Angelic Hierarchy. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

Figure 2. Anna Dimitriou paints in abandoned places. This is her escape from reality and normality. She breathes new life into something that is decaying. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

Figure 3. The lady and the cat. Are those broken windows from weathering storms, or from careless and thoughtless human beings? I see you, dear house. You are empty, but not forgotten. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

Figure 4. Abandoned places: the worlds we have left behind. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou
Figure 5. Sadness and sorrow. Unfortunately, the plan was left to its own devices, and after a while, most of the hotels closed permanently and the buildings were abandoned and ruined by the forces of nature and man. Anna Dimitriou decided to leave her art on their walls as a tribute, to rot with them or to be brought back to life. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

XENIA HOTEL, KALABAKA
METEORA, MAY 2017

Figure 6. It is art that makes life. That is how we carry on. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

Figure 7. Anna Dimitriou believes that what is meant to be will always find a way. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

XENIA HOTEL
ANDROS, JUNE 2017

Figure 8. Sadness and sorrow. As the post-apocalyptic aesthetic becomes more present in our DSLR viewfinders and Instagram feeds, heritage sights and cities recovering from abandonment are having to make decisions on whether to restore or embrace the ruin. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou
Figure 9. You may think that you have been forgotten. As the people moved away from your halls, shuttered your windows, I am sure you thought you were alone. But I still see you.
Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

Figure 10. Sadness and sorrow for what is left behind.
Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

Figure 11. The old world that was demolished in order to build the current one.
Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou

Figure 12. Those lovely Greek summers that just do not exist anymore. Somehow, like all those abandoned buildings. Photograph ©Anna Dimitriou
Anna Dimitriou strongly believes that Xenia Hotels may be transformed into cultural beehives by hosting cultural activities and other similar services and institutions:

I put a mirror on their faces. I make these forms that I call ghosts. Because they are forms from an old world that no longer exists, since we have demolished it. However, I recreate it. Ghosts of people who passed through these hotels. On the other hand, the angels in the Xenia Hotels are the guards, who potentially take action to rejuvenate. They are modern angels, detached from angel hierarchies and divisions. They do not have sex, as you know. They are angels who protect these buildings until they give back the life they have promised. In most of my frescoes I meet the head of Piero Fornasetti’s muse from those ornamental dishes. The Xenia Hotels Project highlights the problem of cultural heritage management in Greece [...] Architecture is a kind of cultural heritage and social memory (Interview by Stampoulidis with Anna Dimitriou, September 2018).

Georgios Stampoulidis is a PhD candidate in Cognitive Semiotics at Lund University. His research interests are in the fields of semiotics, pictoriality, figuration, polysemiotic communication, and urban creativity. His work focuses on street art as a site of cultural production and political intervention. His most recent publications are ‘The black-and-white mural in Polytechnio: meaning-making, materiality, and heritagization of contemporary street art in Athens’ (Street Art and Urban Creativity Scientific Journal, 2018) and ‘A cognitive semiotics approach to the analysis of street art. The case of Athens’ (International Association for Semiotic Studies, 2018). Georgios Stampoulidis is co-editor of the Public Journal of Semiotics (PJOS) and research fellow at the Pufendorf Institute for Advanced Studies, Lund University (Urban Creativity).

References
Streets are home not only to all sorts of signs and a great deal of advertising, they also function as a medium for yet another form of communication. One that defies the prevailing linguistic code of the city as it doesn’t urge us to abide by the law, or lure us into irrationally purchasing things we don’t need. Instead, it encourages us to think critically and challenge the status quo, arouses our curiosity and – if we’re lucky – even makes us smile. I’m talking about word-based messages that are illicitly sprayed on, or attached to, walls, drainspouts, lampposts, and traffic lights.

Like image-based street art, text-based street art demonstrates that there is more to the cityscape than standardised architecture, chain stores, and omnipresent corporate logos would suggest at first sight. Read between the official lines of the urban fabric and you will discover plenty of grassroots efforts to reappropriate and reinterpret the streets by according new meaning to specific objects. Put more dramatically, every single dissident message in this category can be considered a battle cry in the struggle over public space, as it relentlessly ends up in private hands.

Shepard Fairey once called these messages ‘secret subcultural handshakes’, implying that they may easily be overlooked by those not directly involved in the street art scene. Do such small acts of subversion catch the eye of ordinary passers-by (not glued to their smartphone)? Could it be that an overexposure to adverts outdoors has numbed people’s senses, rendering many unsusceptible to images outside commercial parameters? Whatever the case, in most cities, a sticker, tag, or tile containing a message that makes daily life a little less monotonous and a little more bearable, is never far away.

Light-hearted, scriptural interventions are rarely as conspicuous as paste ups or stencils, let alone murals, but once encountered (at close range), they too make us more aware of our urban surroundings, and that, arguably, makes our relationship to the city more exciting. This photo essay presents a selection of street messages that I’ve spotted in cities in various countries. It goes without saying, however, that flicking through images online or on paper, naturally doesn’t trigger the same sentiments that are likely to occur in the open-air gallery. Or, as one artist from Amsterdam asserted on a parking meter; ‘the emotions of the street are something museums can’t buy’.

1 NIGHT OF GLAMOUR

Daniël de Jongh is a translator and investigative journalist from the Netherlands.
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5 DAYS OF WORK FOR 1 NIGHT OF GLAMOUR

FitLike (main) & Mood of Collapse (mirror). Aberdeen, Scotland. Photograph ©Daniël de Jongh

I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST A GAME.

Artist unknown. Stockholm, Sweden. Photograph ©Daniël de Jongh
'More Kandinsky, less Kardashian.' Artist unknown. Oslo, Norway. Photograph ©Daniël de Jongh

'Art is dead, consume its corpse.' Artists unknown. Arles, France. Photograph ©Daniël de Jongh
5 DAYS OF WORK FOR 1 NIGHT OF GLAMOUR

Artist unknown. Stavanger, Norway. Photograph ©Daniël de Jongh

Lot Madeleine. Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Photograph ©Daniël de Jongh

Artist unknown. Stockholm, Sweden. Photograph ©Daniël de Jongh
As I travel the world taking photographs, I experience a myriad of techniques and styles on walls, rooftops, sidewalks, billboards, public furniture, subways etc., but very often my attention goes to the small, unsanctioned, and illegally placed pieces crafted around the written word.

Even in today's ingrained cynicism, or maybe because of it, words matter. At the end of the day – and regardless of wealth, or social position, or power – what we have to back us up, as individuals, is our word. The word that we gave as collateral for the bargain we were negotiating and hoping to win. The word that we used to present ourselves in those circles we were hoping to impress. The word that we gave as trust to those around us.

Words matter. So, it comes as no surprise that many artists use words to disseminate a message on the streets. They tackle a plethora of topics, many times with great humor and gravitas. Always on point.

Here's a photo essay of some of my discoveries on the streets. Besides words, the other major thing in common those pictures share is the fact that all of them were illegally placed on the streets, with the exception of the piece by RERO. They are indeed Eloquent Vandals. Let the words speak for themselves.

Of course, the irony here goes to the heart of the matter for many: What's more powerful, images or words? In this case it's both. I think.

Jaime Rojo

Jaime Rojo is best known as co-founder and Editor of Photography at the influential blog BrooklynStreetArt.com where he has played an important role in the development of a vocabulary of street photography by providing a platform of exposure for hundreds of artists since co-founding the site in 2008. Rojo's photographic coverage of the streets of New York and the world is known daily to almost a million friends, fans, and followers on BSA's social media platforms. His photos have been published in two books authored with Steven P. Harrington, Brooklyn Street Art and Street Art New York (Prestel/Random House) as well as in numerous articles, magazines, and books. His work has been shown at the art of photographers in galleries in New York City and Los Angeles and at the Steinberg Museum in Long Island.
The Boring NY Co. Manhattan, NYC. Photograph ©Jaime Rojo
IN A SOCIETY THAT PROFITS FROM YOUR SELF DOUBT, LIKING YOURSELF IS A REBELLIOUS ACT

C. R. O. A. R. E. O. Miami, FL. Photograph ©Jaime Rojo
Pork, Brooklyn, NY.
Photograph ©Jaime Rojo

Artist unknown, Lisbon, Portugal.
Photograph ©Jaime Rojo
Dede and Nitzan Mintz. Brooklyn, NY. Photograph ©Jaime Rojo

WORDS MATTER
Artist unknown. Brooklyn, NY.
Photograph ©Jaime Rojo

Street Art Council. Manhattan, NYC.
Photograph ©Jaime Rojo
‘Art Underground’ is an unconventional diagram aiming to highlight the connections between and the background of 28 top Italian street artists. The diagram has the appearance of an underground system map that is a nod to the so-called ‘underground’ of the Italian contemporary panorama.

I asked the 28 street artists to answer the following question: ‘Name three contemporary national artists who have had a lot of influence on your own career path, or are still relevant to you today. You can also indicate up to three foreign artists, if you so wish.’ The artists mentioned (Italians, foreigners, deceased, or alive) form a list of 136 names. Despite their heterogeneity and transversality, some very interesting convergences emerge that help to understand the past, the present, and the collective imaginary of the Italian urban scene.

Both the pivotal artists of modern art history (Burri, Balla, Kandinsky, LeWitt, and – top of the artists’ preferences – Munari) as well as the representatives of the graffiti scene (Mode 2), and the world’s most important street artists (Os Gemeos, Erosie, Momo) were called to mind. No less important, so were many of the very artists that were interviewed (108 stands out among them). Banksy, due to a number of factors, represents the greatest noticeable absence. The interviewees come from a classical graffiti background, rather than having an activist history/path. Moreover, ‘stencilism’ has never been well represented in Italy, so Banksy appears to be not directly influential.

Possible interpretations? Street art is a fickle phenomenon, difficult to define and almost intangible – a scene that has neither leadership nor a unitary identity. However, from the answers given, we can trace some very precise foundations and branches, as well as a dense network of interchanges and relationships. Although it is questionable to call it a ‘movement’ (or even an ‘artistic current’), there is however a movement of artists in continuous mutual contact that keeps this environment alive. This network of private and stylistic interconnections has never really been investigated. This is what I wanted to explore in a creative, rather than a scientific way.

Notes: The project lasted for about nine months in 2017. Few artists ignored the call or declined to take part in the survey. The interviewed artists were selected personally following criteria that included genre, popularity, and endurance. The privileged genre was painting, as per most post-graffiti artists.

How to read the diagram: Each interviewed artist has their own ‘line’ (in colour) and a station bearing their name (a circular symbol). Along their lines are their preferences (following the direction arrows). Example: Basik cited the artists → 108, Aruzzo, Samorì, Ochoa, Aryz, and Void. The last three fall into zone ‘2’ (non-Italian artists). In turn, Basik was chosen by Corne (and not vice versa – note the direction arrows), with which he generates an exchange connection. The exchange also takes place with 108, but since he has been multi-nominated by his colleagues, he ended up having a very crowded interchange station in the centre of the diagram.

Vlady

Vlady (aka Vladyart) is a prolific multidisciplinary artist known for his minimal, spontaneous, and sociopolitical street-based works. His witty and critical approach towards society and environments makes him one of the few Italian names active in this specific branch of public art (unsanctioned interventions). Born in Catania in the mid-1970s, Vlady attended the State Institute of Art and then Brera’s Art Academy in Milan. With the complicity of the economic crisis, in one of the most deprived areas in Italy’s south, Vlady went on to challenge his own society with an unprecedented, sarcastic, sharp, guerrilla activism. More recently, Vlady’s approach has turned more conceptual, open to new media and to various forms of communication. Vlady has gained a national and international reputation in urban/public art, resulting in publications, articles, interviews, exhibitions, and invitations throughout Europe and Russia. Today he lives in Stockholm, Sweden.
Talks
Books

Interviews
Christian Omodeo: Vandal Curator?

Christian, you suggested that we should talk about ‘vandal curators’ in this interview. We’re curious to hear your thoughts on this... Christian Omodeo: It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately. The French graffiti writer Nasty belongs to the AEC crew (Artistes en cavale / Artists running from the law). I think art historians and curators should also find new ways of working with institutions so they don’t get captured and absorbed by the system.

There are curators like Martyn Reed, David Demougeot or Monica Campana, who work primarily in public space and who critically engage with cultural institutions. Some of their curatorial decisions have been radical and have set the bar for new ways we can work in public space. But these approaches do not always translate to closed exhibition space. We need to design new rules for bringing urban art into museum space.

What does it mean to be a ‘vandal curator’? For me, being a vandal is not just about rule breaking. It’s about changing the rules of museum policies. If you consider that street art is a game changer phenomenon, you cannot use old algorithms. You have to find new rules for working with museums.

You’ve suggested that ‘institutions search for curators who do not curate in a vandal way.’ How does your own approach diverge from what institutions want? There are two kinds of street art exhibitions: shows featuring artists coming from the streets who are considered assimilable by the art system, and whose work is then mixed with other contemporary artists, and exhibitions that put together dozens of artists with a street background in a kind of maelstrom show. The last type of project is often highly appreciated by a mainstream audience. But let’s be serious, there is no curation in such projects, it’s just about organisation.

Standard shows like these just do not interest me. I’ve said no to some exhibition projects that would have made sense in terms of my career and my profile, but are we sure that this is what the street scene needs right now? We need to think about the direction all this is taking, the rules we want to play by – and the future role of museums in urban art.

So, we need to bring in some of street art’s sub-cultural rules about what is, and is not, acceptable practice? We need to educate the art institutions about our rules and not just play by their rules. Banksy & Co in Bologna was a turning point. That experience showed that we must attempt to have total control and that we cannot accept or endure compromises.

You recently revisited the Banksy & Co vs. Blu controversy in The Man Who Stole Banksy. Actually, the Bologna exhibition in 2016 has been, in my own experience, a spin-off of the movie I was working on since 2012, during which I stumbled upon the restorers who had just peeled off the Blu walls. They were attempting to save them from destruction and trying to offer them to the city. At that time, I was going deep into a post-colonial lecture on Banksy’s intervention in Palestine and this gave me a totally different perspective. What I saw in Bologna was the birth of a powerful narrative of street art that was arising from nowhere, without a real debate. I felt that the situation was perfect for discussing not only the narrative...
Christian Omodeo, Evan Prisco and Carlo McCormick discussing Banksy & Co. at Nuart Plus, Stavanger, 2016. Photograph ©Kristina Borhes

behind a single show, but the whole idea of what an urban art museum should be. Most people have focused on Blu’s self-destruction of his walls, thinking of the whole game as a fight between ephemeral art and preservation. Only a few have understood that the exhibition was also proposing to destroy the ‘critical’ approaches towards street art of the past, before starting to build new ones. That was the point behind such rooms as Cuoghi & Corsello’s ‘Destroy Everything’, which was stencilled between tags and stickers peeled off by Arek, a Parisian writer, and the peeled wallpaper tagged by many writers from Bologna. As much as writers destroy cities with their tags, my idea was to vandalize art history, to cover it with tags and throw-ups. Many people have been shocked by this, but what should I do? I was like ‘Hey guys, seriously, do you want me to put on a tie to talk about vandalism?’

Is there a lesson for the ways we should work with museums here?
Yes. There are two key points:

1. We have to find new ways of bringing street art into exhibition spaces.

2. There is a real demand from audiences to be educated about street art.

Mainstream audiences do not have the historical knowledge that subcultural audiences do. They know maybe Shepard Fairey, Banksy or Futura. They don’t know all the artists we are familiar with – but they want to know more. They want to understand the new language that we are speaking.

Do not forget that street art museum shows are not just important for artists and for cultural insiders. They are also important for everyday audiences. It is fundamental that we create educational spaces that are audience-oriented, and not only about the egos of the artists and curators.

Do street art shows have the capacity to bring in new audiences? To engage people who would not usually go to a museum?
Of course. This is the power of street art in the museum. People who do not come to see contemporary art will come to a street art show. They will learn more about the story and the scene, but museums can also be used as a tool to teach people new ways of looking at their cities and to consider the role of art in their everyday lives.

So, the aim is to make the museum as democratic as the wall?
Museums need people to have specialist knowledge to understand what is on show. This discourages ordinary people from coming to museums. By being pop, street art reaches out to people, like a popular movie or pop music. This doesn’t mean that it is less intelligent than contemporary art. It’s just using a different register.

When we discuss the history of music, or the history of cinema, mainstream and popular works are always central (e.g. Star Wars). But this does not yet seem to be the case for visual art. It is the world’s most popular artform, but yet, where do you find it mentioned? In the lifestyle section or maybe the cultural or human interest section – not the art section.

Why is this?
It’s also our own fault. Most of the big street art museum shows have been a celebration of the freedom of the scene. But this is very much a surface mode of exhibition. We select the top 40 or 50 artists, put their work on the walls – sometimes there is a video or some photographs – but none of this seems very considered. Then we have a big party, and the artists, curators and collectors have fun. It’s difficult to remain engaged with this.

They’re like a music festival – fun, friends, beer – but it’s mostly surface. I do not think that I’m the only one seeing something much more powerful in the work of the artists that I know, follow and admire. What are we waiting to focus on this?

But is there a problem with shows being fun? Could this mode of celebration not be a revolutionary act? Does art have to be quiet and serious?
Fun is fundamental, but it’s also the most serious topic on earth. Think about Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens or Roger Caillois’ Man, Play and Games. Who says that fun cannot be smart? Street Art museum shows should not just be fun celebrations for insiders. We cannot be fun, but exclusive.

Beyond artworks, what role should photography, videos and other forms of documentation take in museum shows? Are these forms of documentation forms of art (as Pietro Rivasi and Andrea Baldini argued in the last issue of Nuart Journal)?
The role of documentation as art – as suggested by Pietro and Andrea – works very well for them as they deal essentially with graffiti writers. In that case, it is entirely appropriate to include photographs and videos of writers’ work – as art – in museums. However, for a street artist, this approach would not be appropriate – as it would exclude that artist’s studio-based practice and would focus only on the documentation of their work on the street. It would probably also be received as disrespectful, as if any attempt of translating the core of their streetness into an artwork would fail. Instead of this, I prefer to look at the entire production, to consider which parts are valuable and which are not, and to include a selection in any exhibition.

The ways that museums display urban art has been dismissed by critics like Nick Riggle as being ‘inauthentic’ – and as falling short of capturing the ‘streetness’ of street art.
I have a problem with the notion of street art as something ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’, especially when it comes from someone who is not an artist. It’s like saying to a musician: I liked your live show very much, but you cannot go into a studio and make a record, because it would be ‘inauthentic’. Also, I see street art as something far from pure – if it’s a wonderful community of bastards that often do exactly the opposite of what you are expecting. Am I wrong?

What’s next for you? Will you be putting all this into practice soon?
In 2018, I had the bad idea of opening a bookstore devoted to street cultures. Helping people to find good books is simply another way of curating. It’s like educating people without having to be the one talking under the spotlight. The next big step is the opening of a new bigger bookstore in the centre of Paris in May 2019. This will be a space where the walls that now exist between subcultures – like street art, graffiti, and skateboarding – will come down. I have many ideas for future exhibitions. Just be patient.
From its very title, this book seems to suggest a different, almost counterintuitive understanding of what we commonly call ‘urban art’, among other main designations which Ulrich Blanché, who edited the book together with Ilaria Hoppe, enumerates in his introduction – namely ‘street art’, ‘graffiti’ and ‘public art’. Thus, urban art is not simply about making use of the urban space, be it in a material or conceptual manner, in order to create art. The book – a collection of 16 papers delivered on July 15–16, 2016, during the namesake international conference held at Berlin’s Humboldt University – aims to see things the other way around: art as an active, bottom-up process by which communities shape and reshape the urban environment they inhabit, through a multitude of actions ranging from different domains and standpoints.

The choice of speaking about ‘the urban’ as a concept and in an abstract fashion, and not simply in relation to cities or urban environments, is to be found in the authors’ focus on ‘the urban’ as a process, rather than a physical place. As a matter of fact, any reader will immediately notice that thinking about the urban in terms of one specific physical place would not be an accurate option, and that at least four different kinds of place, linked to the idea of the urban, seem to emerge after a complete reading of the book. We could categorise such places as follows:

1. The city, understood as the physical place inhabited by individuals and, above all, communities, as stressed by Minna Valjakka (37–47), Johanna Elizabeth Sluiter (129–143), Pamela C. Scorzin (144–154), and Renée Tribble (155–163) in their papers;

2. The urban understood as a place sculpted by political conflict. Meltem Şentürk Asıldeveci, Elisabeth Friedman/Ali Rayyan and Jovanka Popova’s articles offer the reader three crucial case studies: respectively the role of social media during the 2013 Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul, the participatory urban art interventions in occupied East Jerusalem in 2015–16, and the so-called ‘Colourful Revolution’ in Skopje that was brought about by rebellious movements in 2016;

3. A third kind of place, represented by the virtual or digital city, which has come about thanks to the possibilities opened up over the last decade by the internet and ICT. For instance, QR codes or augmented reality, which street and public artists have recently experimented with: in this regard, Frank Eckardt and Katja Glaser’s contributions investigate respectively the practice of ‘urban hacking’ (13–17) and ‘digital archiving’ (56–62), and find a common concern: how power shapes, at its own benefit, both public and digital space;

4. The last kind of place regards the presence of nature in the urban environment, and how we relate to it. Zones of spontaneous vegetation resisting the dictatorship of concrete are, for instance, at the centre of Isaac Cordal’s artistic interventions, which Peter Bengtsen analyses in his paper Street Art and the Nature of the City (102–110).
The diversity of interpretations that we can derive from such a conception of the urban makes it easier for us to understand cities as ongoing metamorphoses in themselves, rather than stationary places: the same thing can be said, in most cases, for the art that has been observed by authors in their contributions to this volume. In the first place, the concept itself of urban art (or street art, or public art, or graffiti) is constantly used according to each author’s epistemological standpoint and to their own understanding and experience of it. An interesting account of how terminology works and changes during time and according to different cultural contexts is proposed by Pedro Soares Neves, in an article focused on the case of Lisbon’s urban art events between 2008 and 2014 (29–36). More generally, as pointed out by Blanché (6–7) and further developed by Johannes Stahl (19–28), we can speak of urban art in terms that include vandalism and illegality, but also institutional acceptance and recuperation. We can speak in terms of visual styles or periods, and we can of course categorise art by the media used by artists: from painting to installation, from stickers to photography, from virtual interventions to wall-painted animation and so on. The use that some artists make of video is, for instance, at the centre of Susan Hansen’s contribution, articulated in four case studies (MOMO’s Manhattan Tag, 2005; BLU’s Muto, 2008; NUG’s Territorial Pissings, 2009 and MOBSTR’s Progressions, 2016): here video is considered as something that allows to document, show, and hence restore the performative character of graffiti and street art pieces in a non-urban scenario, like the white cube, where usually only the decontextualised surface of the artwork can be shown.

Eventually, the idea of art that we can derive from this book meets that of a ‘contemporary urban, understood as a process’, as Hoppe states in her introduction. This encounter finds its perfect conclusion in the last of five sections in which the book is divided: 1) Public or Urban Art? On Terminology, 2) Digital Media & the Urban (Art); 3) Affect & Performance; 4) Territories and 5) Urban Imaginary & The City. The latter (129–163) has the particular merit of putting this book into dialogue with theorists such as the American architect and urbanist Shadrach Woods (a pivotal figure in Sluiter’s paper, that we have already cited) and the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (quoted in Tribble’s article), who are respectively at the origin of a ‘pedestrian’ conception of urbanism (Woods, 1964) and of the idea of the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1968). Both Woods’ and Lefebvre’s theories find new life throughout the entire book, and particularly in the idea that the production of space should ignite from the fight of communities against urban normativity and the monopoly of capital and neoliberalism: a sought paradigm shift in which art, of course, still plays a crucial role.

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This interview was conducted at the launch of Faith XLVII’s new book, *Ex Animo* (Drago Publishing) as part of the Nuart X Moniker talks at Moniker International Art Fair, London. Faith XLVII is an internationally acclaimed visual artist from South Africa who is currently based in Los Angeles. She has spent close to two decades interacting with urban environments and is one of the world’s most renowned and prolific contemporary muralists. *Ex Animo* surveys a seven year period of Faith’s work.

**Ex Animo:**
**The work of Faith XLVII**

Faith, you’ve worked with an impressive team in producing this book. What was it like working with people like Carlo McCormick and Roger Gastman? Faith XLVII: This book has been a massive labour of love. All the people involved are people that I admire. Carlo is a sage. He seems to know fascinating details about absolutely everything, and is a force to be reckoned with, so it was a great privilege to have him write the foreword. Roger is also a giant. He put together the *Beyond the Streets* exhibition recently and he’s incredibly knowledgeable about the history of street art. Both Roger and Paulo von Vacano from Drago are acutely aware of the importance of archiving artistic history and narrative, and Kristin Farr from Juxtapoz magazine was instrumental in helping us with the text for the book.

The literal translation of the title *Ex Animo*, means ‘to give or bring light, or inspire’. We are curious about what *Ex Animo* means to you. The title *Ex Animo* is basically what you sign at the end of the letter, traditionally. It’s like, ‘Sincerely Yours’. The direct translation is from the heart’. The use of Latin is something that I have frequently embedded into the textual elements of my work. I thought it was quite an apt title, as the work comes from that space of communicating from the heart, to the heart.

*Ex Animo* surveys your work from 2010–2017 – does this book mark a chapter in your life? I’ve been working hard since the age of 16, and it’s been a very long journey – it felt necessary to archive this chapter, at this moment in time.

My first book was with On the Run and it was a graffiti book – that was my early years. For me to see that book now feels nostalgic and even a lot of the works in *Ex Animo* now feel old to me, because I’m onto new things, but it’s important that they are archived and solidified in time – they are chapters.

The book begins with some of your earlier work from South Africa, with your series *The Long Wait*. Can you tell us about this work?

Yes, the book starts locally, within a South African context, and then it moves into broader themes, and specific projects. *The Long Wait* was a poster series we installed on the streets all around Johannesburg. It was a reference to the men who wait for hours and hours and hours in line for work. So, there’s this concept of waiting for jobs, waiting for government, waiting for things to change, politically and economically. That was a whole street series, linked to my first exhibition, *Fragments of a Burned History*. This was a series inspired by the photographs of esteemed South African photographer Alexia Webster.

You often engage with the marginalised, the dispossessed and the disenfranchised. Has this been a constant theme in your work? From the youngest age, I grew up catching trains. I was very much in the mix of things. South Africa is a hard country. You see suffering, you see economic and racial issues, you see a lot of complex problems and suffering on a daily level.

I’ve always felt a weight of empathy, and I’ve felt conflicted about my position within society – I’ve constantly analysed that. It all comes out in the work. It’s been my way of processing the environment that I grew up in. So, in my graffiti work, even though I started off doing traditional graffiti, at the same time, I was doing it in townships and in areas that white people would not ordinarily go into – so that I could experience different environments within my country. So, the whole process has been quite experiential and explorative.

This is the Warwick Triangle, another of your South Africa-based works. In the book, you discuss the market’s troubled history. What was it like working in this kind of space? (Figure 1: The Warwick Triangle. Durban, South Africa. Ex Animo. ©Drago Publishing) This is one of my favorite projects. Because – well, Durban is pretty crazy. It’s wild, the market is layered taxi ranks, and bridges – in the Multi market you can get crocodile parts, dead swans, and all kinds of things – it’s surreal.

If you go to Durban and you stay in a hotel, they’ll give you a map with some areas that are crossed out as ‘don’t go’ zones. The Warwick Triangle is one of these areas. We saw vigilante justice more than once, right while we were painting. It can be hardcore. But it’s also so vibrant and full of life and culture, and it’s an everyday existence for everyday people, at the same time.

The scale of these works seems monumental, but you describe the site specificity of this work as connecting with the market and the people who work at the market.

The contentious issue is with the government trying to move out informal trading, so they can build a shopping centre, but this is a historical market. I was commissioned by the
city to paint the bridges there, and I painted portraits of some of the traders. I wanted to celebrate their position, and to give an ode to the man on the street, the everyday person. It was a strong project, we wanted to represent the traders, and I felt like the murals helped to give ownership of the space. It also encouraged people to go to the space that wouldn’t normally go there. A lot of people contact me even now, to say that they went to go and see the murals, and that they explored the market and were amazed with their experience there.

The book is divided thematically. One of the themes that you speak to is ‘Beasts.’ What’s the significance of beasts and nature and animals in your work?

I have quite deep pagan roots, our connection to nature is of vital importance, and seeing ourselves as part of nature is important. One of the biggest issues that humanity faces right now is the fact that we are not living sustainably on the planet. It is connected to understanding our place in the whole ecosystem. I have a great love for nature, and I work in cities, where people are disconnected from this, so I enjoy the process of bringing archetypal creatures into urban space, reconnecting us in a sense. This piece is about migration – it’s in Harlem, New York (Figure 2: Faith XLVII. Estamos Todos Los Que Cabemos. Harlem, NY. Ex Animo. ©Drago Publishing). It’s exploring the idea that animals are constantly migrating, and that humans too have a natural flow of movement. Thinking that people should stick to one area of the world, despite whatever political or environmental things are happening there, is unrealistic and inhumane. This work makes that connection between ourselves and migrating birds and other creatures.

One of the other key thematics within the book is ‘Femme’. How does this theme inform your work? Here, I’m not talking about male and female, but about the masculine energy and feminine energy that’s in each one of us. We are totally out of sync at the moment. Women should be allowed to be more masculine and to explore that part of themselves, and men should be able to be way more in contact with their femininity. Because we are both wholes made from these two different things.

The feminine perspective has not been as revered or explored as it should be, and I think it has a lot to offer the world. Intuition and the kind of insight that women naturally have – the feminine scope – is part of the thinking that gave rise to these murals.

Your mural based work is monumental in scale, but some of your work has a more human scale. What informs your decision to work big or small on the streets?

I’ve always loved working with textures and environments. And I do actually in some ways really prefer working with abandoned spaces, and smaller works.

It’s not about size. Obviously, there’s something incredibly wonderful about creating a big mural, but some of my favorite works are some of the more hidden, smaller, textural pieces. This work is called Le Petite Morte (Figure 3: Faith XLVII. Le Petite Morte. Goa, India. Ex Animo. ©Drago Publishing).

It means ‘the little death’. The story behind it is that I was invited to India – it was just after Miami Basel and I was so exhausted! They wanted me to paint a huge mural. I love painting big walls, but actually sometimes I just really want to paint street pieces that are part of the environment. So, when I got there, I thought, ‘I am not painting a mural’. I did a series of smaller street level lotus flowers, which are a symbol of enlightenment. These works refer to the deep symbolism of the lotus flower, its ability to rise as clear perfection out of the mud of existence.

You have an installation here at Moniker. What’s the difference in terms of process between your street-based work and your more recent studio work with other media?

Well, I started painting on the streets very organically, just through my life trajectory. I definitely feel a great need to express myself in other ways. And I wasn’t formally trained, so it’s all been happening just in its own time. So, more recently I’ve really allowed myself a lot of freedom to explore new mediums. This installation is part of that journey.

With The Disintegration of Self (Figure 4: Faith XLVII. The Disintegration of Self. Installation. Moniker London. Photograph ©Susan Hansen) the beauty for me is in the fabric. It’s all about that worn curtain material. I was travelling in Vietnam, and I was inspired by seeing these threadbare curtains, used outdoors for shade, but they would be there for 10 years or more, and were beautifully tattered. The installation focuses on the idea of worn-torn found objects and the beauty of explosions. I’m interested in our ability to make these ultimately destructive yet incredibly beautiful atom bombs, and in the contrast of our humanness – our capacity for beauty and for destruction.

I’m interested in works in gallery and museum environments when you can go into a space and be immersed in a work. I think that comes from painting on the street. The problem with galleries is that, when you’re looking at paintings, but everyone is drinking wine and chatting, then no one is really looking at the work anymore. I think the ability of immersive works is that they force you to sit down and be in a space. Because you want people to be able to contemplate – and to feel something. That’s why video interests me.

Do you feel your book marks the end of a chapter, and do you have plans to change your practice – has it triggered something new?

Yes, it feels very much like the end of a chapter. There’s been so much happening in my life that feels like a new beginning of sorts. I will always have a mural and gallery practice with painting, but I am exploring new fields of work. My favourite one so far is a collaboration with Lyall Sprong. It’s a hologram of the moon in the forests of Sweden. We took small groups of people into the forest at night time, with very little light. They’re in the deep forest and out of nowhere appears this levitating moon mystically and silently rotating for three minutes. It was very experiential.

I’ve had a few different video explorations. One that’s been shown a few times is Upper Atmospheric Lightning, a montage of short black and white video art house pieces, in a grid of screens, all playing at the same time. AURUM is a performance piece that we created for the Urban Nation Museum launch, in Berlin, and which we recently performed at the Artscape Theatre during Design Indaba Conference in South Africa. It’s thematically political, based on immigration issues, linking to the migration of animals. It’s quite a beautiful, powerful piece.

Ex Animo: The work of Faith XLVII is published by Drago (dragopublisher.com)
Voracious capitalism devours everything. Where there seems to be resistance, capitalism sees merchandise. What the system inflicts on us is a wide frustration, which impels us to rebel. And that’s when the system uses its most ingenious trick: with a slight hand movement, it turns the rebellion into something to take advantage of. Many people do not understand the root of their frustration, so their rebellion has no fixed direction. They know they want to rebel, but they don’t know ‘what they want to rebel against’. Fortunately, the system is able to fill that void by providing them with a long list of stereotyped standard claims against what to rebel – an ‘activist kit’ (Kaczynski, 2012).

Today, capitalism consists of hyperconsumption, which has reduced all of us to consumers, especially in the territory we could call the First World’s Shopping Centre – at the expense of the peripheries. Far from denying its economic disasters around the world, it spectacularises them. It incites (and excites) us to fix our eyes on images where, in monetary terms, a productive use is made out of the very misery that capitalism brings forth (Gonzalez, 2016). A dark desire to consume what is oppressed. The value of products by the green industry or by manufacturers that claim to have a certain morality in their production chain, are increased by the guiltless consumption of the privileged. Capitalism’s disasters are normalised through spectacular images, and therefore it is no coincidence that, in general, behind each product that has this type of added value, there is somehow or other also a cause of misery. In reality, the added value is more like a placebo to counteract the guilt rather than a real solution to the problems to which it refers. For instance, Starbucks, in theory, ‘reduces’ environmental impact by offering alternative disposable cups, instead of stopping the use of disposable cups.

In this spectacular scenario, art, the favourite vedette of the System, far from being outside, creates a concept of rancid marketing – artivism, activist art, or political art. That which we call ‘political art’ operates as an act of bourgeois consolation. The dematerialisation of guilt. Anti-political civility. Politics as Magritte’s pipe. Sacrificial pseudo-commitment. Political art, or the virtue of big money to designate a show of the false conscience. The implacable logic of the charity lady (de Lobxs, 2018). Poverty in the Third World, and the plight of refugees, are now among the most sought after objects of art by the artists of the First White World in offering post-political messages in pursuit of ‘humanity’.

In September 2018, at Nuart Plus in Stavanger, Argentinian artist Milu Correch presented an ‘Anti-Ted Talk’ talk about street art. This was billed as:

A deconstructive point of view on some street art truths that should be avoided in order to reach wall painting’s decolonised potential. The capitalisation of poverty, the new virtual wall, individualist consumption, virtue signalling/merchandising, colonisation processes, hegemonic industry, and other light subjects.

Decolonising Artivism
Milu Correch

Voracious capitalism devours everything. Where there seems to be resistance, capitalism sees merchandise. What the system inflicts on us is a wide frustration, which impels us to rebel. And that’s when the system uses its most ingenious trick: with a slight hand movement, it turns the rebellion into something to take advantage of. Many people do not understand the root of their frustration, so their rebellion has no fixed direction. They know they want to rebel, but they don’t know ‘what they want to rebel against’. Fortunately, the system is able to fill that void by providing them with a long list of stereotyped standard claims against what to rebel – an ‘activist kit’ (Kaczynski, 2012).

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Around the globe, art as a disposition of the Western market and as a coloniser is in the hands of a single social class, i.e., the upper middle class. Artists with class sensitivities and feelings of generosity and salvation approach complex social conflicts that they do not really understand with fascination, as if they were objects that are easy to apprehend (Martel in Pinto Veas, 2018). Thus, art is the propagator of spectacular ‘microfascisms’ and cultural hegemony. Telling the history of Capital with prejudices and stereotypes that obscure power relations. Stories of monsters and animals without historicity. Addressing poverty in Africa without considering the processes of colonisation (Ngozi Adichie, 2009). Addressing the crimes associated with drug trafficking without showing for whom this market really exists. In this way, sensitive and privileged artists not only belong to this oppressive faction, but they help to capitalise oppression while hiding it as such, with the excuse of making issues visible, while in actual fact only scratching the surface.

Street art is today one of the main expressions of artivism. Street art is often used as a tool in gentrification
DECOLONISING ARTIVISM
processes – creating guilt in the painters who are invited to paint in marginal neighbourhoods, which are often populated by people with darker skin and lower incomes. In this way, artists create representations of neighbour-
hoods through their white privilege filter, generating morally
correct images, capitalising on oppression in terms of the
merchandising of ‘good’, obfuscating power relations and
therewith extending disempowerment. Speaking in Spinozian
terms, they rely on sad affections. Sad affections are those
that diminish our power, and our ability to act. These include
emotions such as hope, grief, and guilt. These sad affects
are reproduced and reinforced by power (Spinoza, 2015).
Thus, Africans will always be represented as malnourished
victims and native Latino Americans as good savages;
impotent objects devoid of subjectivity and enunciation that
must be saved without asking for their opinion. This
reproduction of the white saviour is sometimes reflected
in artists’ pictorial work, and at other times, in the explana-
tory texts that now often accompany images circulated in
social networks or in curatorial presentations of exhibitions.

In the preface to The Condemned of the Earth,
Sartre writes:

But let it be understood that nobody reproaches us
with having been false to such and such a mission –
for the very good reason that we had no mission
at all. It is generosity itself that’s in question; this
fine melodious word has only one meaning: the
granting of a statutory charter. For the folk across
the water, new men, freed men, no one has the power
nor the right to give anything to anybody; for each
of them has every right, and the right to everything.
And when one day our human kind becomes full-
grown, it will not define itself as the sum total of the
whole world’s inhabitants, but as the infinite unity of
their mutual needs (Sartre, 1983: 7).

The techno-aesthetics of wall painting should be
decolonised, abandoning the microfascisms of generosity
and salvation. We should find a way to relate to otherness
without a banal objectification, but as an exchange of sub-
jects. Question the normalisation of false resistance and
abolish the ridiculous mission of ‘changing the world’ from
bourgeois comfort. The master’s tools will never dismantle
the master’s house (Lorde, 2018). Let’s not just tell the part
of the story that incites us.

There are ways of talking about the same conflicts
but, returning to Spinoza, with cheerful affections (Marx,
for example, considered shame as a revolutionary feeling)
that are empowering, that promote action against hegemony,
and do not hide power relations. We do not need First World
discourses to explain the realities of the glocal Third World.

As Sayek (2018: 11) has suggested, we should instead locate
and use alternative discourses:

...that refuse to appeal to victimisation and the
nullification of our subjectivities and agency. Dis-
courses that refuse to rely on reductionist and
paternalist thinking that would deny the power of our
concrete actions. We do not seek saviours or
discourses of salvation, but rather for our own
process of empowerment to be recognised as sub-
jects of the same order and with the same validity
as Western subjects, yet without being categorised
or translated as identical to them.

As artists, we should not be spokespersons for
an oppression that has not burned our own skin. Let’s not steal
the tears we have not cried. One can question power, capital,
and the system without capitalising on, or seeking to save,
people as objects – we should share our capacity for
enunciation and our own power with those less powerful.

Taking inspiration from literature, film, and illustration, combined with her own
research into local histories, Milu Correch’s narrative-based paintings continue the rich
tradition of Latin American muralism. Her ‘kids on cars’ series contained ‘plotlines’ ranging
from Classical mythology to Romantic symbolism while her more recent body of work
explores the brutal history of Western Europe’s Witchcraft Trials, which were responsible
for the deaths of over 40,000 men and women from the late 16th to the early 18th century.

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