

Power to the People: Street Art as an Agency for Change

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For those who create their own dreams.

“If graffiti changed anything, it would be illegal.”

—Banksy

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PREFACE

My passion for art and personal expression led me to writing this thesis. As one that strives to find beauty in even the most ordinary of things, I believe street art to be one of the purest forms of artistic expression that exists. I cannot expect everyone who reads this to share my enthusiasm for the art form, to find deeper meaning in a stencil on the wall of their city, or to smile when they read a headline about the newest Banksy stunt. I can only hope they look at their surroundings with open eyes, and, if only for a second, stop to observe the work laid out in front of them and realize it's for them.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The cold, concrete walls of the spaces we inhabit have become living canvases. Crying out to be heard as though they have come alive with every spray of an aerosol can or smoothing of a sticker or poster, they act as reflections of ourselves and the cities in which we live. Blotches of color and the curvature of thick black lines speak to us as the poetry of our time and illustrate the cultural climate and political commentary of our everyday lives. Their messages, too loud to be ignored, make looking down while walking nearly impossible and instead force us to lift our eyes and observe our surroundings.

Graffiti and street art are generally described as any form of unsanctioned art that occurs in a public or privately owned space. Typically the terms are used synonymously, but works belonging to each term possess qualities that represent differences in style, motivation, and purpose. Unsanctioned art is exhibited through various mediums—including tags, pieces, sculpture, stenciling, sticker art, art intervention, flash mobs, yarn bombing, and street installations. Unconstrained by form, medium, or message, the art form offers creative freedom and while artists have varied motivations behind what drives their work, graffiti and street art tend to carry strong subversive messages for activism. Gregory Snyder mentions in his work, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*, that “while the reaction [to graffiti] from the public [is] often positive, the reaction from City Hall [is] not” (24). It was not long before the art form was constructed into an urban problem in which government officials saw its eradication as a means to secure the “perception that the politicians were back in control” (25). This would only solve the problem of appearances, however, and would “take precedence

over actual structural changes that might reduce the conditions that produce crime” (25). Now considered illegal vandalism, it is the reclaiming of public spaces for unendorsed art that continues to exemplify a form of political resistance acting as a major force for change as well as an act of rebellion in itself (17). Some artists and their works have become highly commercialized and mainstream, while others—particularly those who use their art to communicate anti-greed or anti-corporation messages—are still seen as vandals.

The word graffiti, from the Italian *graffiare*, meaning “to scratch,” has been used to describe a variety of wall writings including prehistoric cave paintings and a wide variety of political, sexual, humorous, and self-identifying messages that have been scratched, painted, and marked on walls throughout history (Castleman xi). Graffiti has been found on carved rocks in the ancient Egyptian town of Abu Simbel, and has also been discovered in the Italian city of Pompeii (Bartholome and Snyder). Ancient graffiti messages addressed topics from the pleasures of food to advice on love and friendship (Bartholome and Snyder). While modern graffiti is more self-conscious and literate as a means of reflecting on current affairs, research on ancient graffiti has revealed that it was often raunchy in tone (Bartholome and Snyder).

The earliest stages of what is known in the present day as street art, began in 1960s New York City with hip hop graffiti. Rebellious youth used spray paint and markers to “tag” their names on walls and subway cars around the city. According to Devon Brewer’s *Hip-Hop Graffiti Writers' Evaluation of Strategies to Control Illegal Graffiti*, “there [are] four major values in hip hop graffiti: fame, artistic expression, power and rebellion” (188). That being said, it was the act of tagging, also referred to as “getting up,” that was initially utilized as a means of gaining reputation, popularity, fame, and respect among fellow graffiti artists, who refer to themselves as writers. The subculture of graffiti soon “progressed from scribbled signatures done with magic

markers to elaborate masterpieces done with multiple aerosol colors in the dark of the night,” (Snyder 24) referred to as “pieces.” These pieces, as described by Leonard Kriegel in "Graffiti: Tunnel Notes of a New Yorker,” were great artistic expressions “filled with curlicued shapes and exploding slashes, zigzagging to a visual anarchy that testified to a love of color and line” (432). As the art form began to develop and evolve, so did “its sense of purpose” (Castleman 19). No longer were writers “content simply to write their names,” but instead, “accompan[ied] their works with messages” (40) that offered commentary “on current political and social issues” (43) forcing the passerby to examine and question things (Ferrante).

The art form “flirts in the public eye,” almost as if hiding in plain sight, “revealing all” while somehow managing not to reveal too much (Macdonald 2). Often times:

We are unaware that the city walls are alive with its social drama. We don’t hear the intricate commentaries they have to offer us about the lives, relationships and identities of those who wrote them. And why should we even care? Because...this drama, these commentaries and the vibrant subculture that lies behind them have a great deal to tell us about the culture we live in and some of the people who share it with us. (2)

So, how does street art communicate socially relevant, and often times strongly political, themes to the public? How has the art form proven to be a catalyst for both political and social change, and how is this reflected in various cultures? What are the identifiable characteristics of street art that have led to its acceptance, and, ultimately, the more serious aesthetic appreciation the art form has experienced?

This paper will explore the history and progressive development of street art by focusing on its place in society throughout the years. I will investigate primary, secondary, and third level

critical sources, reviews, analysis, and theories behind the art form. In addition, I will observe the artwork of well-known street artists Banksy (English), Jean-Michel Basquiat (American), JR (French), and Shepard Fairey (American) as well as street art and graffiti exhibitions. I will also examine journals, texts, documentary films and videos, and research studies of the art form by street art experts, and political and cultural scholars.

For this project, I will focus on the ways in which graffiti and street art have instigated public action by exploring how the art form has been used in America, Egypt, and Brazil as a means of empowering the people of these nations. A brief history of unauthorized art will be addressed paying particular attention to graffiti and the evolution of the art form to include present-day street art. It is important to note that the last decade of the art form will provide the primary context for this analysis. American street art will be the main focus, while examples of the art form in Brazil and Egypt will be used to present comparative references. American graffiti, as a generic term, will be used to illustrate how the art form has evolved into a commercial art that is being showcased in museums, in contrast to graffiti that emerges as a response to major political and social crises and upheavals taking place around the globe as exhibited in Egypt and Brazil.

It is the premise of this investigation that throughout the years, street art has evolved from graffiti writing into a social and artistic movement blanketing the walls of cities around the world in its various forms. The art form continues to communicate messages in the public arena that are accessible to all, and acts as an instrument for advocacy and an essential element and reflection of the human existence. It remains a vital instrument of protest to bring about social change for communities of people who have no voice. While street art has become mainstream and commercialized in certain instances, the art form offers a visual expression of protest that

empowers those who cannot be silenced any longer, and however brief—the shift of power is too great to be ignored.

Chapter 2

FROM GRAFFITI TO STREET ART

When the word graffiti is mentioned, thoughts of indiscernible lettering and spraypaint typically come to mind, but several new types of the art form have emerged in recent years to include stenciling, stickers and other developments that are now labeled as street art. Graffiti and street art vary by technique and also sociological elements. Nicholas Ganz mentions in his book *“Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five Continents,”* that graffiti is “largely governed by the desire to spread one’s tag and achieve fame” (10). Writers are greatly concerned with the act of tagging and ‘getting up’ as much as possible in order to establish their work as better than everyone else’s. Street art, on the contrary, “tends to have fewer rules and embraces a much broader range of styles and techniques” (11).

A Brief History of Graffiti

Graffiti, in broad terms, has been found throughout history: from pictures carved into the walls of the Lascaux Cave in France to ancient Greek and Roman cities. In *Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents* by Nicholas Ganz and Tristan Manco, it is mentioned that bones and stones were used for carving, but that “early man also anticipated the stencil and spray technique” by “blowing coloured powder through hollow bones around his hands to make silhouettes” (8). Excavations in Pompeii have shed light on a plethora of graffiti, including slogans for upcoming elections and drawings as well as obscenities (8). Cedar Lewisohn notes in his book, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*, that while today we tend to associate graffiti with geographical areas of social decline, this is not at all the case in Pompeii. Instead, “graffiti was

not restricted to one area or a particular class of social dwelling,” and was often poetic in nature with “examples of love poems being written directly on the walls inside people’s houses” (27). Not all forms of graffiti were poetic in nature. In fact, graffiti in the Roman world was oftentimes “associated with politics and was a popular way of speaking back to authority. The city walls constituted a place where people would ridicule, or complain about, the authorities” (27).

After the burial of Pompeii in AD 79, it is uncertain what resulted for graffiti, but it is said to have hit its peak in the first century (27). The art form is thought to have been predominant from the Julian period up to the reign of Nero. During the Middle Ages, graffiti becomes visible again and is found primarily on the exterior of churches (27). Shakespeare’s time also provides evidence that graffiti writing was prevalent. It was not until the late nineteenth century that “public opinion turned against graffiti...due to the relationship between the working classes, who are imagined to be the authors of the graffiti, and the elite, who dominated cultural production” (27). It was during this time that people of higher status became less sympathetic to those of lesser rank, and “after the Romantic interest in graffiti as ‘pure creative act’, the Victorians returned to ‘real art’, losing interest in art that was being produced in the streets” (27).

Writing on walls appeared during the Second World War as a tool used by the Nazis to spread their propaganda, but for the most part, graffiti was also important for resistance movements as a way of publicizing their protests to the general public” (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 8). An example of this is “The White Rose,” a German group of nonconformists who, until their capture in 1943, “spoke out against Hitler and his regime in 1942 through leaflets and painted slogans” (8). Because of their highly intellectual approach to these publication leaflets, members of this movement sparked change that would have them regarded as heroes today in Germany. Posters and painted words also helped protesters present their views in the public eye during

student revolts spanning the 1960s and 70s, and French students even utilized “the *pochior* (the French word for stencil graffiti) technique” (8).

Tagging was invented in the mid-1960s. Graffiti taking place prior to 1965 “had largely been gang-related and has its own history and traditions” that are “separate from [the] graffiti writing” in which this project focuses (Lewisohn, 31). Graffiti as we know it today developed toward the end of the 1970s in New York and Philadelphia “where artists such as Taki 183, Julio 204, Cat 161 and Cornbread (from Philadelphia) painted their names on walls or in subway stations around Manhattan” (Figure 1) (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 8). It was the “unique make-up of



Figure 1 – Graffiti Tags

New York City—in which the Harlem slums and the glamorous world of Broadway stand side by side—[that] seems to have been a breeding-ground for the first graffiti artists, bringing together many different cultures and class issues in one single place” (9). This created an environment that, as a “breakaway from poverty and the ghetto,” provided fuel to the battle between artists and “the power brokers of society” (9). It was not long before graffiti swept through the world, leaving “thousands of youngsters under its spell” (9).

The desire for fame remains at the root of graffiti writing, but not in the traditional sense. Writers are concerned more so with branding as opposed to personal identity, and re-inscribing the city, which they accomplish through mass coverage as well as style. The previously mentioned Taki 183 was the first writer to achieve fame when “his hobby of writing his

nickname and street number around the five boroughs of New York was immortalized in an article in the *New York Times* in 1971 (Lewisohn 43). Soon, hundreds of writers followed suit and took to the streets with the activity. Graffiti writing presented the opportunity for people from peripheral areas of society to become someone, even if this was only recognized within their own sub-sect (43). Graffiti and the subculture of the writer can be thought of as a secret society of sorts in which a language exists that can only be understood by those involved. This involvement provides an invigorating opportunity to become part of the conversation taking place on the walls of the city, especially for those with “little or no voice in society” (45).

Fraught conditions of urban communities gave rise to graffiti, where the majority of artists were youth that were “victims of urban renewal schemes and highway building that took place in the middle of the last century” (Lewisohn 7). Urban renewal is typically presented as the “desire to improve the lives of others, but it is mostly just a pretext for the real motive: making money” (7). This speaks to the long history of hostility toward the urban poor. Lewisohn adds:

Planners think it's a great idea to bulldoze and rebuild, to displace the teeming neighbourhoods with real-estate opportunities for entrepreneurs, while destroying these 'dangerous' communities that might upset the social order... The underlying political idea was to isolate and break up potentially rebellious communities, to prevent the formation of a critical mass for unrest. (7)

It was this, along with the motivation of making suburban life affordable for the ‘common people,’ that drove a change in focus onto economic development in the United States after the Second World War” (7). This spawned the creation of new money and generated “visions of great opportunity in suburban development to the detriment of the cities, which were allowed to crumble and die. These formerly vital communities, displaced and relocated, suffered” as a result

(7). Soon, these shining towers turned into disreputable, unlivable housing projects, and in the “ensuing era of neglect and economic decline, graffiti was born” (7).

The Evolution of Graffiti into an Art Movement

Graffiti art, as urban youth’s creative response to harsh urban conditions, led to the creation of a new community—one that wouldn’t be destroyed, but instead, was “autonomous and impossible to control” (7). Graffiti writing’s evolution from the first stages of tagging to the “point where it emerges as a fully formulated movement happened extremely quickly: over a period of five years” (31). Culturally speaking, this was quite the phenomenon, and the importance of “dispossessed young people in New York City in the 1970s and early 1980s channeling their frustrations and boredom into making visual art—not music, not sport, but *art*—is unprecedented” (31). The art form that grew from this phenomenon enabled youth to “view the world in terms of all the visual languages that were available to them as sources to quote from and remix” (31). Occurring in a completely spontaneous fashion, this activity happened without any “initial financial backing or incentive, and the first group of graffiti writers had little or no art-school training or knowledge” (31). It could be argued that this art movement achieved a cultural significance that would surpass all others in the second half of the twentieth century” (31).

For tagging, graffiti artists would use their real names or nicknames, but it was not too long before pseudonyms began to emerge. With the “glut of new graffiti artists brandishing their names across the whole city,” writers began to search for ways to make their work stand out (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 9). As a result, tags grew larger and larger until the first ‘pieces,’ short for ‘masterpieces,’ appeared. Trains were targeted by graffiti writers not only because they traveled

the entire length of the city, but because they were seen by millions (Figure 2). Ganz reports that



Figure 2 – NYC Train Bombed with Graffiti

“by the mid-1980s...there was not a single train that had not at one time been spray-painted from top to bottom” (9). This lasted until around 1986, when New York authorities installed fences around station yards and began routinely buffing graffiti from train-cars as a means of protecting city property (9). Graffiti continued to spread as writers from the New York scene traveled around. Soon the phenomenon swept across the USA, and before long, European trains became a target. Around this time, European exhibitions began to take place in Amsterdam and Antwerp, and pieces sprouted up across Europe starting in the early 1980s. It was during the mid-1980s, however, that the graffiti scene in Europe exploded. While some of the graffiti in Europe was modeled after the American movement, the art form began to take on a shape and a style of its own (9).

The Emergence of Street Art

While it was letters that once dominated, the “culture has [since] expanded: new forms are explored, and characters, symbols and abstractions have begun to proliferate” (7). Ganz adds:

Over the past few years, graffiti artists have been using a wider scope of expression. Personal style is free to develop without any constraints, and stickers, posters, stencils, airbrush, oil-based chalk, all varieties of paint and even sculpture are used. Most artists have been liberated from relying solely on the spraycan.”

(7)

This is reflected in a newer form of graffiti, now referred to as street art, that developed as artists began to use “more innovative approaches to form and technique that [went] beyond traditional perceptions of the classic graffiti style” (7). Many graffiti writers were after recognition, by means of “spray-painting the most trains or the best pieces,” but it was the street artist that “wanted to communicate with the passerby or shape their environment without any constraints” (9). Spraypaint, as the original graffiti tool, remains vital to graffiti artists around the world, but “the choice of material available these days—oil or acrylic paint, airbrush, oil-based chalk, posters and stickers, to name a few—is extensive and has widened the scope artistically” (10). Graffiti continues to evolve, as it is the very nature of the art form to try new techniques, which oftentimes results in a shift from the “original concept to completely different areas. In its creative drive, it continually transcends its own borders as it devises fascinating new variations to bring life and colour to public spaces” (372).

While street art was taking place throughout the 1970s, it was not until the 1990s that the art form would enter the forefront of public consciousness. The transition from graffiti writing to street art is greatly attributed to the battle of Mayor Ed Koch on New York train graffiti in 1989.

The art form “became symbolic of a certain attitude. Just as graffiti writing was a visual symbol of all things hip hop in the 1980s, street art is inextricably linked with a caring, sharing ‘no logo’ anti-capitalist rebelliousness” (81). Just as street art developed from graffiti, the art form itself is continually evolving. It represents a style that is “‘in your face’, anti-authoritarian, irreverent, irrepressible, wise, ironic, [and also acts as] a voice for the powerless and the have-nots” (Lewisohn 8). Because of this, the art form has taken the world by storm. While there is some crossover between the sub-genre of street art and its predecessor, graffiti, there are distinct differences in form, style, medium, and purpose. The term street art itself represents a broad range of “artists working all over the world in many different ways” (15). It breaks from the “tradition of the tag, and [also] focus[es] on visual symbols that embrace a much wider range of media than graffiti writers would use” (21). While graffiti presents a more standardized language, street art tends to reflect the place in which it is installed as artists utilize their surroundings in creative ways. This can be exemplified in the work of Anderson Augusto and



Figure 3 – Augusto and Delafuente’s Gemelia project

Leonardo Delafuente whose Gemelia project makes use of street fixtures and storm drains to make a statement (Figure 3). Street art is representative of its:

Creators' political opinions and creative desires, and these change from country to country, even from district to district. Just as art in museums is a reflection of the cultures that produced it, street art reveals the hidden narrative of those who make it. (65)

Chapter 3

DELIVERY OF A MESSAGE

Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel sing in their song, “The Sound of Silence,” that “the words of the prophets were written on the subway walls and the tenement halls.” These lyrics illustrate the way in which street art can serve as a powerful means of reaching the public in order to raise awareness of social and political issues. Street artists have no intention of changing the way in which we define art, but instead, attempt to “question the existing environment with its own language” (Schwartzman). In his book *Street Art*, Allan Schwartzman states that the work of street artists is meant to “communicate with everyday people about socially relevant themes in ways that are informed by esthetic values without being imprisoned by them.” Because of the “social, political, and economic influence of the art world,” (Stowers) messages are effectively, and almost effortlessly, delivered through the art form.

In George Stowers’ essay, “Graffiti Art: An Essay Concerning The Recognition of Some Forms of Graffiti As Art,” he says:

Most of the time when we encounter art and are transported by it to other worlds, we are in a location in which we expect this to happen. However, this is not the case with graffiti [and street] art. For it appears suddenly and in unexpected places. Thus, when we apprehend it, we are transported to these other worlds at a time and in a place that we are not accustomed to doing so.

Accessibility

The accessibility of the art form contributes to its power, and, as stated by English street artist Banksy, it is “graffiti [that] ultimately wins out because it becomes part of your city, it's a tool. A wall is a very big weapon,” he says, “it's one of the nastiest things you can hit someone with.” Stowers goes on to mention in his essay that the art as ‘writing’ is a “creative method of communicating with other writers and the general public...the artist's identity, expression, and ideas.” This type of communication is vital because of its ability to link “people [together] regardless of cultural, lingual, or racial differences in ways that nothing else can.”

In his book *Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries*, Lyman Chaffee explores the complexities of communication and the variety of ways information is transmitted. He mentions that communication systems are created for the allowance of “governments, organizations, and individuals to present their views, demands, needs, and ideas” (3). How these communication systems take shape in a given society is based on history, cultural conditions, and the type of political system currently in place (3). Oftentimes, the flow of information “originate[s] from below by grass-roots groups,” and this is best exemplified by “politicized street art [and] graphics” (3). Because of the universal nature of street art, it can be recognized as a medium for mass communication as it provides a voice for those who “otherwise could not comment upon or support current or perceived social problems” (3-4). Chaffee mentions that the art form can “shape and move human emotions and gauge political sentiments” (4). Because “language and visual symbols help shape perception,” the “clichés, slogans, and symbols—the substance of political rhetoric” that are communicated by street art “help

[to] mobilize [the] people” (4). Street art as a method of communication is even more vital under “repressive regimes where authoritarian systems attempt to reduce public space” (4). The art form “breaks the conspiracy of silence,” claims Chaffee:

Like the press, one role of street art is to form social consciousness. In authoritarian systems where outlets for free expression are limited, it is one of the few gauges of political sentiment. In more open systems, street art enables various entities to lobby for their interests. Street art, in essence, connotes a decentralized, democratic form in which there is universal access, and the real control over messages comes from the social producers. (4)

The Aesthetics of Street Art

The aesthetics of street art contribute greatly to the impact of its message. Artists, similar to commercial advertisers, consider the affect color and design will have in communicating to their public. Chaffee explains that color is used as a means of manipulating emotions. He states that warm colors—vibrant shades such as red, orange, and yellow—“generate a feeling of excitement,” while reds and black represent passion and convey “emotions of revolution, death, and violence” (6). Blue and green shades—cool colors—“indicate calm, reassurance, and the environment,” and that white is a symbol of “peace and purity” (6). Through the manipulation of various colors, different types of messages are communicated, as “colors parallel image and message” (6). While these associations with color are easily recognizable, it is doubtful that all graffiti and street artists are this diligent with their work, but instead can be expected to use colors that stray from what is conventional.

Messages are further intensified by shape, design, and placement. In order to maximize visibility and visual impact, the artists must place their work in areas of high traffic, and few places are off limits in the world of street art. Artists, conscious of the fact that their works are not likely to be preserved, rely on messages and designs that will be easily consumed. The majority of the time, this is done overnight by wholly papering a city or town (7). In some cases, the duration of a work can last several years. Murals are a perfect example of this. Quick, inexpensive, and meant for an immediate purpose, murals are used to inform and educate (7). This mode of communication seeks to point out problems, question value systems that are in place, make claims, and suggest alternatives (8).

Street Art as a Tool

Street art serves as a tool for advocacy as well as a reporting forum. It functions socially as it helps to shed light on events, identify key players, provide social commentary, and even to articulate political agendas and present visions (8). It plays a role that is often in direct opposition to the media, by offering its commentary, criticisms, and probing questions. Partisan in nature, the art form is not obligated to remain neutral or unbiased, but instead works toward advancing a cause or idea. Street art is accessible to everyone regardless of point of view, and by its very nature acts as an arena for expression and a sounding board of sorts for the marginalized. Whether the art form is sanctioned or unauthorized, it is exemplified by expressive thought directly communicated to its audience through the use of an “economy of words and ideas, and rhetorically simple discourse” (9). Rarely are the messages hard to decipher. Instead, street artists rely on simple, concise messages and a fusing of thoughts, ideas and commentary to initiate a political dialogue. The ever-changing political sphere forces street art to be highly adaptable; as

issues arise, the art form's themes alter to reflect current problems. Reflected through graffiti, murals, stickers, and posters, unsanctioned art communicates thoughts on pressing issues that are political, social, economic, and cultural in nature (9).

As street art breathes life into the walls, a community dialogue is sparked as people begin to ask questions. Passersby, now forced to reflect on what it is they see, become aware of the presence, and viewpoint, of an active underground resistance movement. Street art, in direct opposition to commercial advertising, seeks to neutralize the themes and "ideological discourse of the streets" (19). Thus, a question of control is raised: who controls the streets? Is it the capitalists or socialists? The art form is a power tool for inspiring, energizing, generating morale, and raising the spirits of its public, which is most "pronounced at times of crisis, war, [and] revolution" (20). People consume information as it is available to them, and it is street art that is utilized as a means of transmitting messages that help to supplement the availability of information and ideas (23).

The art form acts as a "framing device" for its communities around the world, as a "parallel voice of the city, and as a modern primitive art" that can be found all around for those who wish to look (Lewisohn 30). One must assume that street art is an effective means of communication; if it were not, the general response to eradicate the art form, specifically from those in power, would not be so great. From its inception, modern day unsanctioned art was a reflection of the turbulent New York political situation. Through style and content, the art form presented images of a nation undergoing civil- and women's-rights movements, power outages, a serial killer on the loose, and "staunch racial issues" (38). Acting as stimuli, these factors combined with "pictorial influences" to produce "overtly political messages" through art (38). Lee, an innovator of the New York subway graffiti movement, mentions that the "political

atmosphere is ripe for people who want to listen to art as the first word of a collective consciousness. People know what's going on, but they need to see it in the arts to confirm it" (79). Street artists are influential not only in the number of people their work reaches, but also the number of artists inspired to make work of their own. The art form is "a visual language that incorporates the world around it" (39). Jeffrey Deitch, a modern and contemporary art dealer, states that street art has "become the most influential cultural innovation of the past thirty years" (30).

Some street artists rely on guerilla tactics to deliver their messages, and a few have even taken to "corporate sabotage" as the main element of their work (81). This further exemplifies the multi-faceted nature of the art form, which remains unbound from the "layered editorial complicity" the public experiences so heavily in the media (93). Street art and graffiti will always retain a sense of authority that will forever be "relevant in terms of representing the outside, non-edited view" because the artists' work is presented directly to the viewer with no curator in between to dictate what is good and what is not (131). The communicative power of street art lies in the fact that there is just one editor—just the artist, directly initiating a dialogue with the viewer. It is the mix of "social activism, social outrage, and creativity" that enable the art form to deliver a strong message in the most "beautiful [of] public gestures" (153).

Chapter 4

CITY WALLS AS A CANVAS

The landscape of the city itself also plays an important role, as it serves as the canvas and expressive outlet for communicating the messages of street artists and their work. Cities act as both “physical and imagined spaces” (Brown-Glaude 114) “where differences are constructed in, and themselves construct, city life and space” (Bridge and Watson 507). A once gray wall, now seemingly alive through a multitude of color, speaks to the “establishment [a] sense of belonging infused with symbolic meaning” (Visconti et al. 513). Luca Visconti, John Sherry Jr., Stefania Borghini, and Laurel Anderson tell us in their research study, “Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the ‘Public’ in Public Place” that “inscription as a means of emplacing ideology [is] undisputed” (513). It is part of human nature to desire an outlet for expression, especially in the public. At times this was done through the “telling [of] a story or posing a question, [and] many times by presenting a political ideology” (513). Banksy mentions in his book *Banksy: Wall and Piece* that “A wall has always been the best place to publish your work,” and through the medium of street art, the “most honest art form available [because] there is no elitism or hype,” one can exhibit their work “on some of the best walls a town has to offer, and nobody is put off by the price of admission” (8). This illustrates the need to “be creative in the sense of remaking the world for ourselves as we make and find our place and identity” (Visconti et al. 521).

The urban landscape is in constant flux, and the “massive changes and transformations” that continue to take place in our surroundings “have been answered by politicized forms of street art” (Ferrante). Julia Ferrante states in her article “‘Street Art’ Provides Text for Understanding Cities in Transformation,” that it is “less about reading and interpreting the

individual pieces rather than seeing them in the context of social commentary.” Street art, and the streets themselves that define and code our cities, express “the underground and anti-establishment,” and “serve as part of a living commentary and conversation about what is happening in a city.” She states that in order to “to find out the condition of a country as this moment, you have to look to the street. You express yourself in the street, and you see things in the street.” Because of its omnipresent nature, street and urban art have become a part of the cultural fabric of a city, and part of what makes a city a city. It offers “a creative look to the city but also a voice against what the city has turned into. Street art is a critical commentary on aspects of globalization and gentrification.”

The city walls act as a canvas on which “graffiti marks and illuminates contemporary urban culture,” and provides decoration to the “daily life of the city with varieties of color, meaning, and style” (Ferrell 3). Urban artists create a cultural space otherwise nonexistent within the urban environment, where their “clandestine art form which has become almost ubiquitous in our urban lives” (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 7). Om-Rio, a female graffiti artist from Brazil, mentions that she wants to “open people’s minds, make them review their conception, and test their soul” (Ganz, *Graffiti Women*, 38). Sweden’s DPKG adds that the goal of the graffiti and street artist is to “let the future into the world and create reality the way it really wants to be. It’s our duty,” she says “to make the surrounding environment more interesting to the rest of humanity” (39).

Before one can examine the place of the artist in society, it is vital that we first define what it is that we view as art. Instead of looking to the galleries for what it is that represents, encourages, expresses, and inspires us, we must look to the street and its walls:

Where the militants leave their painted words during marches, [and where] governments choose to ignore their democratic rights of freedom of speech. [This

shows] that the cities are not just big shopping malls, or touristy money-making facilities, but places of life and energy.” (Laurie Legrand, artist, 138)

By engaging with the city physically, urban artists develop a special relationship with it. In a way “they forge a very...intimate negotiation with space by altering it” and instead of playing the role of consumer, exist as the role of creator whose identity is forged on the walls of the city (Lewisohn 93).

Street Art as Part of the Visual Culture

The various forms of street art have become part of the visual culture gaining an international presence with support from Web sites, art and artist communities, books and magazines, and even film. Writing first started to expand when tourists would travel to New York City and take their photos of graffiti to other cities in the States or overseas, “bourgeoning movements” back home (Snyder 25). In addition, gallery owners and the media also became important vehicles for disseminating writings to a larger population” (25). It is through these various media forms that people have been allowed more insight into street art. This has been critical in “help[ing] people to understand [the art form] and how and where it harmonizes with [,] and goes a step beyond [,] traditional methods” (Stowers). According to Nancy Macdonald’s book, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York*, street art now “enjoys status as a global phenomenon” (2). The art form’s “influence on mainstream’s modern art goes back to Jean Dubuffet and Pablo Picasso [as well as] other cultures and ‘outsider’ art” (Rahn 9).

Ernest Abel and Barbara Buckley mention in their book *The Handwriting on the Wall: Toward a Sociology and Psychology of Graffiti*, that the examination of graffiti and street art is

“to a great extent a cross-cultural investigation of class and ethnic differences” whose “messages [tend to] reflect shared attitudes and values as well as ethnocentric variations on main cultural themes” (144). Their research also found that outdoor graffiti is wholly nonexistent in both middle- and upper-class white neighborhoods. This speaks to the importance of cities in the existence of unsanctioned art. Cities contain an “abundance of personalities who are forced to integrate and deal with each other every day,” and are “fully fabricated and organized by” their residents (Ganz, *Graffiti Women*, 144). People from all different backgrounds join together and somehow manage to adhere to “the same general rules and function as [a] mass in [their] own creation” (145). While graffiti as we know it today has a “relatively short history” it has “managed to touch almost every corner of the globe” (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 7). Recently there has been an undeniable shift in the public and social impact of street art and graffiti culture, and a dramatic transformation is clear. The Internet and communication revolutions have helped to “spread graffiti to [the] four corners of the earth,” with the first local pieces beginning to pop up in “dictatorships like Burma and North Korea” (374).

Graffiti and street art that is developing outside of North America, offers a prime example of urban art that emerges as a response to major political and social crises and upheavals—specifically the movements taking place in Egypt and Brazil. The people of these nations have found street art to be an important tool for expression, in which their “ethnic and ethnic-linguistic identification and symbols” represent their strive for “political recognition and rights under [their] dominant cultures” (Chaffee 11). The art form has enabled artists to create language and symbols that provide them with meaningful new identifiers that redefine political discourse.

Street Art and the Egyptian Revolution

It wasn't too long ago that graffiti, or graffiti worth mentioning, was hard to come by in the Arab world. With the start of the Egyptian Revolution in January of 2011, Cairo has since established itself as the street art capital of the Middle East. While the movement began with "hastily scrawled slogans calling for the overthrow of the Mubarak regime," it has quickly evolved into one "characterized by well-crafted motifs, both aesthetic and politically provocative" (Wood). Josh Wood mentions in his article in the New York Times "The Maturing of Street Art in Cairo," that each morning sheds sunlight on new pieces fresh from the night before, with works ranging from "stencils of South American revolutionary Che Guevara [portrayed with] an Islamist-style beard" to a face-off between a tank and a man on a bike transporting bread on his head. "The words 'You Are Beautiful' are stenciled on a wall on a side street of Tahrir Square," just a short distance "from the site of some of the bloodiest street battles" of the new Revolution, along with the words 'Respect Existence or Expect Resistance' (Figure 4) painted nearby by local street artist Keizer (Wood). Thanks to a "thinning of police



Figure 4 – Respect Existence or Expect Resistance

forces [and] a more tolerant atmosphere among residents toward public art,” graffiti has been able to flourish (Wood). While some pieces do not contain strong political messages, much of Cairo’s street art speaks to the “frustrations of a post-revolution Egypt where many see shadows of the former regime and way of doing things in the transitional government run by the military” (Wood).

Street art in Cairo functions in the traditional sense: encouraging people to draw their own conclusion in a world where they are constantly being told what to think. Following a deadly football riot between protestors and the police in Port Said, Egypt in February 2012, Mohamed Mahmoud street now serves as a canvas for some of Egypt's most creative revolutionary street art (Figure 5). Rawya Rageh reports in an *Al Jazeera English* news broadcast



Figure 5 – Mohamed Mahmoud Street Mural

that street art in Cairo “takes the message to a whole new level—telling the story of death [and] injustice, in a street that’s seen it all.” The documentary film *The Noise of Cairo: The Artists Behind the Egyptian Revolution* sheds light on the silenced masses of Egypt who found their voices through the vehicle of street art. The Revolution has sparked a ‘New Egypt’ of sorts where, speaking freely without fear, people are beginning to communicate new and different

ideas. There is a new life and a new expression in Egypt, in which art plays a vital part in it.

Graffiti and Brazil's Economic Boom

The onslaught of military regimes in the Hispanic world has resulted in routine swings between democratic and authoritarian regimes. After the fall of a political system that has employed harsh rule for a long period of time, “an emotional catharsis often takes place immediately following its demise” (Chaffee 10). This emotional rage is pent up as a result of “repressive control and the inability to freely express oneself or to air one’s grievances,” and often “produce[s] an outpouring of slogans and sentiments from a broad spectrum of society” (10). The purging of emotion can last anywhere from a few weeks to several years, and is reflected on an individual and group level as people “indulge in expressive excess after years of suffering silence” (10). Graffiti in Brazil, in its rawest and purest form, serves as “a symbolic act of protest and defiance against fallen regimes,” but also as a symbol of “regenerated values of democracy” (10). Work produced as part of this catharsis commemorates political transformation and creates an historical record of the events, happenings, emotions, and thinking” (10).

Brazil’s recent economic boom is accentuating of certain social ills and inequalities already present in its society. Like the early days of New York graffiti, the Brazilian graffiti scene exposes a “strong opposition towards the rich upper classes from people living in the ghettos” (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 18). Street art in Brazil reflects social and economic problems as well as the drug and gang conflicts of which the country’s people are all too familiar. Although still in the early stages of its development, practitioners of the art form have already been forced to diversify, as spraypaint is quite difficult to come by. It can be recognized that the graffiti occurring in Brazil is unique for many reasons. Due to various political and economic factors,

the art form “developed in relative isolation” which “led to a style and approach that is extremely original” (Lewisohn 52). The perception of street art is also different in Latin America, and while most often it is illegal, it is viewed as “the people’s art,” and the public is proud of the colorful works that decorate the walls of their streets (89).

São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are presently at the center of the graffiti movement in Brazil, and for the past few years have had significant influence on graffiti styles around the globe. The art form in Brazil has introduced a completely new form of the bubble letter that, as a sign of respect, is never painted over. Brazil is most famed, however, for its *pixação* (or *pichação*) a “cryptic and elongated writing style” (Figure 6) that originated in São Paulo during the 1980s (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 18-19). *Pixação*, from the Portuguese verb “*pichar*,” or to cover with tar, “reflects the urban decay and deep class divisions that still define much of São



Figure 6 – *Pixação* in São Paulo

Paulo,” a city comprised of a population nearing upwards of 20 million people (Romero). The writers of this script, known as *pixadores*, “risk life and limb” to reach the tops of the tallest buildings, and leave no surface uncovered (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 18-19). *Pixação* consumes

nearly every building in Brazil and can best be described as an “extremely harsh visual language” (Figure 7) that is a “fiercely political statement” (Lewisohn 59). Simon Romero mentions in his New York Times article “At War With São Paulo’s Establishment, Black Paint in Hand,” that the young people of São Paulo have armed themselves with “black paint, rollers, spray cans and no shortage of personal daring” in an attempt to engage in class warfare against the landscape of their city.



Figure 7 – Pixação in São Paulo (2)

Intent on cleaning up the city, authorities have waged a war on what they refer to as “visual pollution,” to include outlawing billboard advertisements, demolishing abandoned skyscrapers and the elevated highway (the “Big Worm”), and often times violently displacing thousands of people from certain areas of the city (Romero). This battle has “become intertwined with a deeper social conflict between Brazil’s haves and have-nots, where the angry and disenfranchised lash out in a form of expression unrivaled in other cities” (Romero). A strong

graffiti subculture has emerged, and their greatest instrument for voicing their indignation, pixação—described as an “alphabet designed for urban invasion,”—has “enveloped some of São Paulo’s government buildings, residential high-rises, [and] public monuments” (Romero). The pixação script has even appeared on the arm of Rio de Janeiro’s Christ the Redeemer statue (Romero).

Banksy

Julia Ferrante states that the world of street art “claims a number of well-known artists whose work on the street may be recognized through distinctive styles of signature tags.” She mentions that perhaps the “best-known among them is the British artist Banksy, who is famous for his politically charged stencil art.” The identity of the English artist “has long escaped from the media while [somehow] obtaining an international reputation” (Visconti et al. 517) as a graffiti artist, political activist, film director, and painter (*Banksy Paradox*). The artist, having grown up in Bristol, had gotten “involved in the city’s long-standing graffiti scene at the end of the 80s boom” (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 138). While he originally dealt with the classic graffiti style, Banksy turned to stencils after an embarrassing incident in which, abandoned by the rest of his crew because he painted too slowly, he” was forced to hide from the authorities for six hours beneath a train (138). It was stenciling that allowed him to best express his mocking and humorous commentary into a powerful means of communication.

The work of Banksy incorporates satire and subversive witticisms to communicate a cheeky dark humor that is executed through a stenciling technique (Figure 8). Such works of political and social commentary have appeared on signs, walls, streets, and bridges around the world, (*Banksy Paradox*) and Banksy has even gone as far as to build physical props (Baker).



Figure 8 – Follow Your Dreams (Cancelled)

Banksy's art features images of various types of animals such as rats and apes, policemen, children, soldiers, the elderly, and a range of pop-culture icons. His stencils are both humorous and salient, and often are combined with slogans to convey a message that is generally anti-war, anti-establishment or anti-capitalist in nature. The artist has stated that through his work he “want[s] to show that money hasn't crushed the humanity out of everything.”

Banksy has gained an international reputation by pushing the limits through his countless pieces of street art as well as highly illegal pranks such as works on the Israeli separation wall (Figure 9) that echo the political situation surrounding the area. Randy Kennedy mentions in his New York Times article “Need Talent to Exhibit in Museums? Not This Prankster,” another incident in which Banksy snuck into the Elephant pen at the London Zoo to scrawl a message that expressed the point of view of an elephant: “I want out. This place is too cold. Keeper smells. Boring, boring, boring.” Another stunt through which he gained significant press



Figure 9 – Banksy at the West Bank Barrier

coverage was the mounting of a stuffed rat with wrap-around sunglasses on a wall in the Natural History Museum in London. Other stunts have included “doctoring copies of Paris Hilton’s debut album in numerous record stores across the UK, and [even] placing a life-size replica of a Guantanamo Bay detainee in Disneyland” (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 139). More recently, he managed to “carr[y] his own humorous artworks into four New York institutions - the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum and the American Museum of Natural History[,] and [attach] them with...adhesive to the walls, alongside other paintings and exhibits” (Kennedy). It is undeniable that his “sense of placement” is always both “highly considered and highly effective, and while many street artists present their messages in a

‘take it or leave it’ fashion without any discourse for their work, Banksy offers some form of critical opinion time and time again” (Lewisohn 117).

Banksy’s addition to the MET’s American wing was a small, gold-framed portrait of a woman wearing a gas mask (Figure 10). His contribution to the Brooklyn Museum was a painting of a colonial-era military officer wearing a red coat (Figure 11). The man was holding a can of spray paint, with antiwar graffiti scribbled in the background. It was hung, strategically, no doubt, in the museum’s permanent collection in the American Identities gallery. Shortly after the execution of these stunts, pictures—seemingly taken by an accomplice of Banksy—surfaced on the Wooster Collective website—a “repository of pictures of graffiti and other street and



Figure 10 – Woman with Gas Mask



Figure 11 – Officer with Spray Paint

urban art.” The pictures show a bearded man wearing an overcoat and hat, “looking like Inspector Jacques Clouseau, hanging his [own] paintings in the museums” (Kennedy). Banksy expressed the motivation behind these museum invasions was that “[he]’d wandered round a lot of art galleries thinking, 'I could have done that,' so it seemed only right that I should try.” He

stated that “galleries are just trophy cabinets for a handful of millionaires...the public never has any real say in what art they see” (Kennedy).

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Although best known for his neo-impressionist paintings developed toward the later half of his career, Jean-Michel Basquiat can be easily crowned as a street art pioneer. In his essay “The Defining Years: Notes on Five Key Works,” Fred Hoffman describes Basquiat as an artist with an innate quality that allowed him to “distill his perceptions of the outside world down to their essence and, in turn [project] them outward through his creative acts.” This role manifested itself under the pseudonym SAMO, standing for Same Old Shit (Figure 12). Through this tag, Basquiat “transformed his own observations into pithy text messages inscribed on the edifices of



Figure 12 – SAMO

the urban environment,” and it wasn’t long before these means of expression became the “basis for his early artistic output” (Hoffman). Using just one word, short phrase, or “simple image to refer to a person, event, or recent observation,” his work “refined an external perception down to

its core” (Hoffman). Jeffrey Deitch mentions that the SAMO tag was a form of “disjointed street poetry that in the late 70s, one couldn’t go anywhere interesting in Lower Manhattan without noticing that someone named SAMO had been there first.” Although SAMO was just written as a name, what it stood for wasn’t at all just about a name. It is clear that Basquiat’s street writing had little to do with tagging, and doesn’t function in the same way. It is clear that he wanted his writing to be read by the general public in order to communicate meaning. Through the use of barcodes, corporate symbols, and poetic statements, Basquiat communicated a larger message that captivated and provoked his viewers for years.

Shepard Fairey

Referred to as one of today’s most influential street artists by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Shepard Fairey has exhibited work at The Smithsonian, Victoria and Albert Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art among others. His Barack Obama “Hope” poster (as part of his 2008 Presidential campaign) contributed greatly to his fame and mainstream acceptance as a street artist, but his career was ultimately launched with “Obey,” a propaganda-style street art campaign that has now developed into a “clothing company, graphic-design agency, magazine publisher and all-round alternative empire” (Lewisohn 101). The campaign originally featured an image of American wrestler Andre the Giant with the word ‘OBEY’ written in juxtaposition (Figure 13). Fairey began pasting the images around his hometown of Charleston, South Carolina, but soon took trips overseas in an attempt to spread his ‘non’-message. Fairey exemplified great innovation and sent out his posters to a network of collaborators around the world, who in turn would paste images for him. It did not take long for the campaign to catch on, and soon Obey images were seen in



Figure 13 – OBEY

almost every major city around the world. Repetition along with the “mysterious nature of the imagery, oblique symbolism, [and] authoritarian colour schemes of red, white and black” contributed greatly to the project’s success (101). The sinister image has even been said to confuse and anger viewers who have mistaken the parody work for a form of serious fascist propaganda. Robert Pincus, art critic for the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, states that the Obey campaign was a “reaction against earlier political art,” and while it “delivered no clear message,” it was “suggestively antiauthoritarian.”

JR

JR, who states that the street is “the largest art gallery in the world,” is a semi-anonymous French street artist who flyposts (the act of placing large posters in unauthorized places) the black-and-white photographic images of human faces across massive canvasses in urban and suburban landscapes across the globe. His work challenges preconceptions propagated by the media, and has earned him considerable recognition for his achievements, such as the TED Prize for 2011. The TED prize was born out of the TED Conference and is awarded to the world’s leading entrepreneurs, innovators, and entertainers to inspire change around the world. While his images can be seen all across the globe, he started out in the streets of Paris. His work highlights “simple juxtapositions that everyday people produce, while at the same time counteracting the

reductive messages propagated by mainstream advertising and media” (Lewisohn 123). JR takes photographs of people and then pastes the large-scale images along the street walls. The artist looks to the street to provide the canvas and atmosphere, and the people that inhabit these spaces to provide the context. For one of his projects, JR utilized portraits of some inhabitants of the Parisian ghettos, and placed them in the center of the city. The work “drew attention to the economic gulf between affluent Parisians and the deprived residents of Clichy-sous-Bois, the scene of riots in recent times” (123).

Another significant project led JR to Israel, where he produced portraits of people from both sides of the religious divide. The project featured images of ordinary Palestinians—such as taxi drivers, cooks, teachers that were pasted near to or below images of Israelis with the same job (Figure 14). This project was displayed on both sides of the separation wall, and despite the



Figure 14 – Separation Wall Portraits

tense political situation was met with positive reactions. The only graffiti that exists in Palestine is strictly political in nature, and while there was initial confusion from the public concerning the purpose of this project, “interpretations varied from political to aesthetic readings of the work” (123).

It is JR's work in places of conflict that has led to a direct experience of locations and situations, and has enabled the viewer to "cut through the mediated preconceptions generated by the media" (123). His street art exemplifies the ways in which the art form can be used to "expose media stereotypes while at the same time using the media attention the work provides to spread [an] alternative message" (123).

In summary, the landscape of the city contributes greatly to the importance of street art. Not only does it provide a canvas for visual expression, but also draws strength from its ability to directly communicate uncensored messages to the passerby. As the art form has progressed, it has gained significant international presence through predominant street artists and various exposure in the media—books, film, magazines, museum exhibits, and the web. The graffiti and street art movements taking place in Egypt and Brazil exemplify how the art form has become part of the visual culture of these countries, as in many countries around the world. Egypt's recent revolution and Brazil's economic boom have had great implications on the art form and its role as a vital instrument of protest giving voice to those with little or no power.

Chapter 5

REDEFINING PUBLIC SPACE

Through visual imagery and iconography, street art communicates messages that focus on themes such as anti-war, anti-capitalism, anarchism, hypocrisy, greed, poverty, and despair. Both politically and ideologically embedded, street art “denounces the insincerity and falseness of current society” and communicates this through the act of ‘defacing’ public space (Visconti et al. 517). Regardless of its illegality, I believe the art form should be recognized nonetheless for its ideological message. It acts as a “manifesto contesting the market domination and the exploitation of the consumer, [and] is interpreted as an indictment of consumerism and the excesses of materialism in a public space” (Visconti et al. 524). For the sake of understanding, I intend for ‘public space’ to imply walls and properties thought to be privately or government-controlled—areas that cannot be lawfully debased by artists.

According to a write up provided by the University of Chicago for the *Journal of Consumer Research*, "Consuming Street Art: Reclaiming Public Places," “a recurrent emptiness and disenchantment in the way citizens negotiate urban spaces” has been observed. It is street art that, as “an ambivalent and multi-faceted phenomenon,” has continued “to “stimulat[e] lively discussion about public space and its ties to the market.” The write up continues, “for those who feel that corporate logos are taking over the landscape,” street art “rejuvenates public spaces while talking back to the culture of over-consumption.” Artists are sparking an important dialogue through their street art “regarding the search for common space and the democratization of art.” Street artists strive to demonstrate that “while public space can be contested as private and commercialized by companies,” it is the artists who offer public space “back as a collective

good, where [a] sense of belonging and dialogue restore it to a meaningful place.” Banksy argues that:

The people who run our cities don’t understand graffiti because they think nothing has the right to exist unless it makes a profit... The people who truly deface our neighborhoods are the companies that scrawl giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. Any advertisement in public space that gives you no choice whether you see it or not is yours, it belongs to you, it’s yours to take, rearrange and re-use. Asking for permission is like asking to keep a rock someone just threw at your head. (8)

Street art in both public and private spaces makes a strong “statement against Western ideas of capitalism and private property” (Stowers). Banksy shows his agreement with this view when he states that he “like[d] to think [he] ha[d] the guts to stand up anonymously in a Western democracy and call for things no one else believes in—like peace and justice and freedom” (Banksy 25).

In my opinion, anonymity also allows artists to voice their social commentary and cultural criticisms on a public stage, in a way that bypasses the media’s power to condemn and censor. That being said, street art acts as art should: freedom. Because the art form is illegal, it is best for the artist to maintain a sense of secrecy. “Speak softly,” states Banksy in his book, *Wall and Piece*, “but carry a big can of paint” (8). Completely open and accessible to the public, for Ferrel, street art:

Breaks the hegemonic hold of corporate [and] governmental style over the urban environment and the situations of daily life. As a form of aesthetic sabotage, it interrupts the pleasant, efficient uniformity of ‘planned’ urban space and

predictable urban living. For the writers, graffiti disrupts the lived experience of mass culture, the passivity of mediated consumption. (176)

While some argue that street art is not something demanded by the public, street artists counter that “buildings, billboards, campaign ads, and flyers are also forced on the public” (Stowers). Artists claim that city landscapes “covered by ads and other commercial stimuli violate the spirit of the law by imposing the market ideology upon city dwellers” (Visconti et al. 515) and it is their work that calls attention to this very injustice. “The advertisers...are laughing at you,” says Banksy:

They leer at you from tall buildings and make you feel small. They make flippant comments from buses that imply you're not sexy enough and the fun is happening somewhere else. They are on TV making your girlfriend feel inadequate. They have access to the most sophisticated technology the world has ever seen and they bully you with it...You, however, are forbidden to touch them. Trademarks, intellectual property rights and copyright law mean advertisers can say what they like wherever they like with total impunity. (160)

The Artists' Right to Reclaim

Artists see city walls as public space that they have the right to reclaim, rearrange, and reuse. The art form represents a resistance to cultural domination, as a “streetwise counterpoint to the increasing authority of corporate advertisers and city governments over the environments of daily life” (Ferrell 176). “The town should be reclaimed,” says German female street artist Donna, “and in place of the usual order of everyday life, a creative chaos [must rise], from which a new truth can emerge [along with] a change to something positive” (Ganz, *Graffiti Women*,

152). Stowers claims that “spraycan art is an art form that is completely open to the public because it is not hemmed in by the confines or ‘laws’ of the gallery system or museum, [and] perhaps, that is its only crime.” To me, graffiti and street art embody the appearance of authority by acting in direct opposition to it. Unsanctioned art “overtly links ownership of the wall to control over its appearance, and defines beauty and ugliness in terms of power” (Ferrell 180). It makes one question the politics of ‘public space’ and ‘public art.’

In my opinion, art projects sanctioned by the powers that be seem to be less a reflection of the public will, and rarely take the interests of the people, in which it is their purpose to serve, into account; they are instead, “manifestations of an authoritarian aesthetic” (185). The “aesthetic assumptions of authorities,” best exemplified by shopping malls, urban parkways, [and] art exhibits, are designed to bolster “consumption, satisfaction, and control” (185). Presenting the public with the façade of pleasantness, the face of authority serves as a “comfortable flip side to barbed wire and jail cell,” and also manages to “mythologize ‘public’ space and art [by] seducing citizens into environments which are least their own” (185). I have discovered that unsanctioned art serves as a sort of public art that is outside the jurisdiction of political and corporate control. By reclaiming public space, artists are also regaining an aesthetic sense of authority from city planners and corporate developers (185). The ensuing battle over the streets and, in essence, the battle for aesthetic control, is essentially just a battle for “property and space, as well as meaning, appearance and perception. It is a battle over “style” (186).

I have found that the freedom to redesign one’s environment and make it one’s own, rests at the core of the graffiti and street art movements. Public space is a necessary component for this “anarchist” art form, which is open to all for creative expression or pure enjoyment. Graffiti and street art are a reflection of the world, and act as “the voice of the unelected, fighting back

against systems that are imposed on them” (Lewisohn 87). Artists offer a “literal critique of modernist ideologies, an anti-modernist tendency that symbolizes the failure of modernism, created by those whom it directly affected” (87). The “tags and images of those working in direct reaction to their architectural surroundings,” symbolize their fight “for a sense of individualism and territory in the face of an ever-expanding metropolis” (87). The success of the art form has sparked an acute awareness of self, city, and surroundings as well as the burgeoning of social intelligence.

When do Street Art and Graffiti Become Vandalism?

Even as the art form is becoming more widely accepted and mainstream through its use by the commercial world, there is still a thin, murky line between what is considered street art and vandalism. So when do street art and graffiti become vandalism? To address this question, it is important to first define vandalism as any action involving deliberate damage or destruction to public or private property. This would imply that any and all forms of unsanctioned art occurring in a public space are, by definition, considered illegal vandalism.

Because the very definition of vandalism implies the damage and destruction of property, I would argue that not all forms of street art are vandalism, but only those lacking the intention to stand as a meaningful form of expression. Many works occurring in public space are done so with the intention to aesthetically enhance their surroundings and to present a message to the passerby. While there is no denying that all unsanctioned works are illegal, they are not necessarily all cases of vandalism.

For the sake of this argument, it is of high importance to revisit the differences between graffiti and street art addressed in chapter one. Graffiti almost always consists of “tagging” and lettering done solely with the use of spray paint. Street art—as it has evolved from

graffiti writing—makes use of posters, stickers, paint, chalk, and even yarn and features images, shapes, color and most importantly—a message. While both graffiti and street artists engage in the battle over public space against those who control it and what it is used for, street art separates itself from graffiti in that it is in more of a dialogue with the city. Instead of an anarchist mentality that damages property as a means to “fight the system,” street artists use their work to communicate a particular message to their audience.

It is not my intention with this study to argue what is, and what is not, of artistic value, but instead to explore the graffiti and street art movements as social phenomenon. However, this is a slippery slope, as more often than not it is the artistic merit assigned to works of art that occur in the street that distinguish them from vandalism. As with any art form, it is all subjective. Graffiti itself is the bane of the city landscape. Many argue that a neighborhood adorned with graffiti communicates a message to the outside world that all social control is lost, and criminality is running rampant. A clear example of this is the New York transit system’s battle with the 1960s graffiti epidemic. This point of view is easy to sympathize with, and also proves the importance of distinguishing between graffiti as “tagging” and street art. Indiscernible, cryptic script scribbled across city walls, subway trains, disserted high-rises, and dumpsters are indeed both illegal and vandalism. That is not to say however, that the very act of such works do not communicate a deeper meaning of protest, as seen with the pixação script enveloping the walls of Brazil’s major cities.

Graffiti and street art as a means of artistic expression for inner-city children with no other outlet is also no argument against the art form’s classification as vandalism, as paper and pencil and relatively inexpensive art supplies are easy to come by. However, it is the act of reclaiming the public space to deliver an uncensored message that gives the art form its

authority. If genuine artistic expression is present, why wouldn't an artist want to share that with an audience? And more importantly, why would the public be opposed to it? In this instance, the issue is not artistic merit or even expression, but instead an issue of illegality. Should the art form be discredited simply because the artist relied on an unconventional mode of delivery?

It is often argued that graffiti and street art are not positive art forms. If they were, the art forms would not be illegal or considered vandalism. However, the ability of the art form to contribute to the public good is recognized by the government and the commercial markets every time a public art mural is commissioned or a graffiti script is used to advertise a company's newest product. I believe the biggest issue surrounding the graffiti and street art movements is the struggle for aesthetic control. Visual expression has the power to evoke thought and to instigate action. Unadulterated creative expression that can occur at any time in any space is in direct opposition to those with authority, especially if its message is one that speaks out against or criticizes this authority.

Chapter 6

CRIME AND ART. VANDALISM AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Street art is gaining prominence as a platform that gives voice to the people in a 21st century society inundated with concerns about individuality, political and social censorship, class struggles, the current state of the economy, elitism, and freedom from capitalism. The street acts as a “public gallery for creative work where everybody can express their voice, but it is not static,” as a stencil or poster could easily be washed or scraped away the next day (Ferrante). Street art has “always been and continues to be a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse culture [that] upsets the ‘aesthetics of authority’ embedded in a clean wall that is meant to inspire order” (Snyder 29-30). It was the construction of graffiti as a crime in New York City that enabled “politicians’ media campaigns [to play] on racist fears of urban youth [in order] to construct graffiti as a symbol of the city’s woes” (30). Waging a war on the art form and some of the cities “most talented teenagers” meant the city could finally be cleaned up. Through such tactics, policies began to rise that would “battle the perception of crime rather than actual crime” (30).

Giving the People a Voice

Over the years, the art form has evolved and “moved beyond piecing with spray cans to conceptual pieces that deal with signage, commercialism, fame, and urban aesthetics” (43). Void of any restraint, unsanctioned art enables artists to communicate freely with their audience in a way that allows “uninhibited reign to their thoughts” (Abel, Buckley 3). Through these inscriptions, graffiti and street art offer “intriguing insights into the people who author them and

into the society to which these people belong,” (3) by “uncover[ing] the more elusive aspects of a society’s character” (14). Today’s street art is both “crime and art, vandalism and community service” (Snyder, 44). As stated by Ernest Abel and Barbara Buckley in their book, *The Handwriting on the Wall: Toward a Sociology and Psychology of Graffiti*, the street artist “whose work brightens a drab area and adds color to the mind-dulling blandness of the inner city, [and] whose designs enliven the sterile concrete jungles, is considered by some to be upgrading his environment” (139). Despite the illegal nature of their work, street artists are “a public benefactor” (139). The art they provide to the people as an “attempt to beautify or improve public spaces” should not be disregarded simply because they did it “without first obtaining official approval” (139). That being said, the authors raise the following significant questions:

Do we stop searching for the inner meaning of a painting or a poem when it appears on a wall merely because we do not happen to acknowledge the wall as a suitable receptacle for art or literature? Do we stop trying to understand what motivated the artist or the writer merely because he chose to express his thought through some unconventional medium? (14)

Schmoo, a graffiti writer of seven years, adds, “graffiti writers are out challenging the issues of property ownership, race boundaries, and culture. They are out there making people think about what our society is, and what some of our laws really mean.” It is the “creative activists and dwellers” whose activity enacts “their sense of ownership of the commons [through which] street art provides the opportunity for authentic participation to flourish beyond institutionalized political arenas” (Visconti et al. 512). Because public space is a combination of man-made and

natural order, places serve as “significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world” (512).

A Defining Expression of Our Times

The street art movement has not only become more relevant than ever, but is also a defining expression of our times—a new age of uncertainty and shifting values. According to Elizabeth Hirschman’s work “Aesthetics, Ideologies, and the Limits of Marketing Concept,” “street artists may act as artists and ideologists.” Whether they “express their subjective conceptions of beauty, emotion or some other aesthetic ideal,” they are able to simultaneously “formulate beliefs about the nature of reality and values regarding desirable states of reality” (46). If street art is done well, it is seen as a huge contribution as well as a commentary of what’s going on in the neighborhood, by creative minds (Visconti et al. 519). In Michael Walsh’s *Graffito*, graffiti artist Eskae is quoted as saying:

People with money can put up signs...if you don't have money you're marginalized [and] you're not allowed to express yourself or to put up words or messages that you think other people should see. Camel (cigarettes), they're up all over the country and look at the message Camel is sending...they're just trying to keep the masses paralyzed so they can go about their business with little resistance. (25)

Eskae continues, “[street] art is free for all to come and view, no one can own it, it belongs to all of us” (Walsh, back cover).

The history of street art is “a fascinating tale of evolution fueled by political and aesthetic ideologies in constant cross-cultural hybridization” (Visconti et al. 513) where “dwellers, art

experts, and government officials...actually look at street art interventions as acts of beautification or even public art, but also as the ultimate defacement of public order” (513). The passerby is called on to be both a critical reader as well as an active author of street art texts and messages, but also to “react by completing artists’ work so as to fulfill a sense of collective identity and belonging to shared space” (521). The impact of street art is huge, as it brings an air of “happiness to everyday boring life” (521). In addition to “obvious creativity, [and] a sense of community...it brings people together,” and, in a way, creates culture (522).

Chapter 7

MAINSTREAMING OF STREET ART

In the early 1970s urban youth communicated their frustrations in the form of spray painted lines, curves and bubble letters that would soon engulf New York City's subway cars and stations. When the public encountered graffiti for the first time, it had no idea what it was seeing. Today graffiti and street art, almost always mistaken as synonymous terms, are instantly recognizable. From its inception, graffiti was declared vandalism by the government and transit authorities, but has managed to continually develop "stylistically and in terms of the industry that has grown up around it" (Lewisohn 31). Various forms of mass media such as film, popular videos and magazines depicting graffiti, helped the movement spread into a global phenomenon, and it was not too long before New York City's art world would begin to consider this new sweeping form of expression as "Radical Chic" (Abel, Buckley 141). While this could mean that some impact is lost, as in any type of domestication process, I believe the power of the art form lies in its ability to continually arouse confrontation, make headlines, and divide public opinion.

The far-reaching impact of graffiti culture has led to a deepened interest in the art form over the years as well as mainstream acceptance. Some street artists generated so much attention through their work on the streets that it was not too long before the galleries began to recognize graffiti as a valid genre of art. This offered an "unlikely form of social mobility" which led to the "creation of several young stars" such as Basquiat and Keith Haring "who were [heavily] courted by the art world" (Lewisohn 35). As a result, the vibrant subculture's strong popular appeal gained relevance over the years and has since become strikingly evident in the advertising, design, art galleries and museums, fashion, and even toy industry of today. The commercial world responded positively to graffiti and street art after segments of the market discovered the

art form's potential to enhance company image and reach youthful consumers. Street artists can now be found in design agencies, working as freelance graphic artists, completing commissioned public works, designing shoes, and even curating their own exhibits. I have observed that over the years a bond has formed between the graffiti and street art scene and the business world that has led to the exploitation of interests in its products as artists themselves have quickly learned how to profit from their position. Many artists no longer exclusively work in the streets, but also paint works on canvas to be exhibited in galleries. Today, some artists even enjoy international fame as their work is exhibited in renowned museums across the globe such as The Smithsonian, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles orchestrated a panel discussion on graffiti as well as a hugely successful exhibit celebrating urban graffiti, the first of its kind in the US.

The commercial world's increased interest in the art form has led to a surge in the value of works by street artists, which are handled in the same way as other legitimate genres of art. While this does make it easier for many artists to curate their own exhibits and events, few receive the amount of success as artists such as Banksy, who's work has fetched upwards of six-figures when auctioned off by Sotheby's and the like (Ganz, *Graffiti World*, 374). The evolution of graffiti into the movement from which street art and its various forms of expression developed, is not at all common across all parts of the world. Instead, American graffiti, as a generic term, offers a stark contrast to the graffiti (still in its purest and rawest form) that has emerged as a response to major political and social crises and upheavals—specifically that which is taking place in Egypt and Brazil.

It should not be assumed, however, that all artists strive to achieve commercial success or have their work exhibited in galleries or museums. In fact, many do not even wish to be

considered artists or have their craft be defined as any form of art. They prefer to work illegally on the streets, as their motivation is to contribute creatively to their environment, and to brighten the lives of the passerby. Brazilian street artist Deninja claims that while “graffiti is art,” it is not “a hypocritical art, like a lot of (although not all) the stuff you see in the galleries, but something that we do without the hope of getting anything in return” (Ganz, *Graffiti Women*, 40). She adds that graffiti acts as an art “that is there in the street for those that don’t have a culture, don’t understand art but like it for what it is...for the beggars, poor children, prostitutes, lunatics and drunks of the streets” (40). Not to be bought or sold, but, instead, art that is for the people.

Advertising and more traditional modes of message delivery have led to an increased acceptance of graffiti and street art. It is argued by some that this has negatively affected the art form as its depiction in the commercial sector presents a sterilized impression, divergent to what the art form in its rawest form is meant to represent. That being said, when the style is used for commercial means, it takes on a very different meaning. Instead of achieving some sort of social result or inspiring social change—forcing the viewer to think as any form of artwork would function, it “becomes a tool working in the service of another object” (113). While advertising presents a watered-down and commercial-driven use of street art style, it also contributes to its popularity. In my opinion, this contributes positively to the authority of the art form—once exposed to the medium in a controlled manner, consumers may be inclined to look upon unsanctioned street art and graffiti they confront in the street with more appreciation and “a heightened sense of sophistication” (113).

The presence of graffiti and street art in the museum world is an interesting phenomenon in itself. Museums are representative of “temples to history” that speak to wealth and culture (127). Even the structures of these institutions intimidate their audiences with the idea that they

are the ultimate arbiters of taste in which a “hierarchical value system for the works they display” has been created (127). The thin line between the illegality and legitimacy of graffiti is further blurred as institutions, ironically often funded by the government, celebrate the art form. More often than not, they are seen as part of the “political apparatus” whose purpose is to regenerate, educate and culturally enhance their public. While unsanctioned street art shares many of the same goals as the museum—to stimulate thought as well as to educate, inform, and culturally enhance its public—I believe it acts in direct opposition to the idea of the cultural institution. By offering an immediate viewing experience that is no less valid than what is displayed in a museum, graffiti and street art present a real-life, non-curated context that is more representative of the way we as viewers naturally process information—a more accurate reflection of the world, our world.

Chapter 8

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Over the years, graffiti has evolved in style and form as well as purpose. No longer about just tagging a name, street art is instead about activism. Far from meaningless, the point and purpose of street art is representative of our desire to communicate with one another and to express ourselves. While street artists have varied motivations behind what drives their work, street art tends to carry powerful, rebellious messages for activism. In Tony Silver's hip hop documentary, *Style Wars*, a young writer reveals to his mother that he just wants to "bomb" trains and is not concerned about others. Street art has shifted significantly away from this, as it is the intention of the art form to be understood, and:

Invites people to suspend, or at least modulate, their object position. [It is through the] reclamation of public space, as creative destruction, wherein wrongly privatized space is returned to its rightful owners. The built environment becomes a canvas, and often a palimpsest, in the sense that even though the original is overwritten, traces of it remain, restoring private to public, and engaging hitherto passive passerby, galvanizing them into an active interaction. (Visconti et al. 514-15)

As a voice for engagement and activism, street art addresses the gap, and creates dialogue and transactions between people, concerns, and their environments. It is at this level of participation that spectators are drawn in as active participants through which discourse is achieved, and action is instigated as a means to achieve some sort of social result. Through street art,

connections among city inhabitants are established, and no longer is the passerby detached without a sense of belonging, navigating through their town without meaningful consumption.

This is referred to as street democracy, and communicates the idea that there is a sense of duty imparted to citizens. This is significant because the street artists create their own democratic setting and assume the right to consume public space through their own means and in their own terms. By redefining public space as if it were their own, street artists contribute to the collective good and call for participation from their audience. A form of political resistance is created and activism is enacted. Through the use of art in unsolicited places, street art is able to elicit reflection and social action in which artists and the everyday person can collectively produce a visual commons that invites the participation of all. Street artists play the role of curator in their urban landscapes, and are thus able to circumnavigate the constraints imposed by laws and regulation of the government and commercial world. This creates relationships of greater connectedness amongst a city's inhabitants and their environment.

Through this investigation, I have come to the conclusion that in the past twenty years street art has evolved from simple graffiti writing into a social and artistic movement. Enveloping the world in its many forms, I believe the art form has the power to effectively communicate messages to the public that are accessible to all. The art form acts as an instrument of protest and advocacy as well as a genuine reflection of the human existence. As illustrated by the movements taking place in Brazil and Egypt, it is my opinion that street art and graffiti provide a vital means of expression to those who have no voice. In the future, the art form will continue to evolve around the world not only in the commercial realm, but also in the eyes of the public as it becomes more perceptive to the art form as a powerful means of expression with the ability to instigate social change.

While many may argue that the mainstreaming of the art form weakens its message, I think the commercialization of the art form has contributed to its power. Without the recognition of American graffiti and street art by the art world and its galleries in the early 80s, the phenomenon may not have spread around the globe to the same effect. I believe the watered-down forms of graffiti and street art that bombard the public through advertising allow them to be more receptive to the art form in its purest form. Seeing the art form represented as a part of everyday life through fashion, museum exhibitions, toys, and design, viewers are less threatened by the unsanctioned works they see in the streets. While most of us are conscious of the fact that street art blanketing the walls of our cities is usually illegal, we are still compelled to lift our eyes and examine what it is we see. By examining modern murals, I have observed that while the end remains the same, the means has shifted. It is the need for social change that has given rise to this art form as an instrument, carried out as public protest art. Whether or not the viewer recognizes artistic merit, the messages presented are too loud to be ignored.

It is not my intention to make a case for the legalization of graffiti and street art, but, instead, to recognize that it is the unauthorized nature of these works—and anonymity—that contribute to its very authority. Artists are able to directly communicate messages that convey uncensored truths. Street art is the poetry of our time; it illustrates the cultural climate of our cities by offering social and political commentary that speaks to our everyday lives, and it forces us to become acutely aware of our surroundings. While there may never come a day that street art is deemed lawful, Banksy asks us to:

Imagine a city where graffiti wasn't illegal, a city where everybody drew whatever they liked. Where every street was awash with a million colours and little phrases. Where standing at a bus stop was never boring. A city that felt like a party where

everyone was invited, not just the estate agents and barons of big business.

Imagine a city like that and stop leaning against the wall—it's wet. (Banksy 85)

What started with a simple tag—just a name—and a marker, has evolved into a global phenomenon that communicates to us an uncensored message of advocacy, humanity, and freedom. Street art acts as a reflection of our very existence, and continues to speak to us in ways we all seemingly can understand. Forcing us to pay attention, the graphic displays of artistic expression and subversion shout out to us to stop, look, and think about our environments and to actively assign meaning to what it is we see.

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