Eloquent Vandals

The lead visual article for this issue, Jeff Ferrell’s ‘Placelessness’, explores some provocative questions about the way that street art relates to place, and its power to turn a single space into a multitude of possibilities of the city. The book consists of short stories describing 55 fictitious lives, other times, and other places… another city within

'Sometimes the City', offers a further meditation on collective attempts to cultivate, instrumentalise, commodify, and protect the art of the streets. With acts of creative crime and resistance are also capable of generating and shaping public/fine art discourse.

The theme of this issue also raises critical considerations of the city's relationship with acts of creative crime and resistance.

Critical theory/studies/history – and indeed often do so, 'protect' the art of the streets.

Our lead academic article for this issue, Alison Young, University of Melbourne (AU), brings back to the centre of positioning and understanding their work in relation to the public/fine art discourse.

In this issue, we also explore the importance of ourstory and theirstory – whilst freeing us from narratives that transcend 'history' and bring in herstory, yourstory, and with appropriate citation. The copyright of all articles remains with the author of the articles. However, the copyright of the layout and design of articles published in the Nuart Journal remains with the Nuart Journal and may not be used in any other publications.
ART AND BELONGING:

ON PLACE, DISPLACEMENT AND PLACELESSNESS

Alison Young
University of Melbourne

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

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

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

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

Very quickly, street art was in many places at once. As it travelled, street art seemed to bring qualities of creativity, ‘edginess’, cool – and money. Often identified as a key marker of the ‘creative city’ or ‘cultural precinct’, the presence of street art was used by city authorities for place branding to potential tourists and to encourage the clustering of ‘creative industries’ such as fashion, advertising, and architecture in areas where street art could be found, in initiatives that drew from the ideas of Richard Florida’s ‘creative class’ (2005). In search of urban creativity, street art was mobilised not only across topographies and geographies, but also across markets, with variable price points thanks to the diversity of forms that street art could be shaped into: Banksy stencils printed on a tea towel, prints, T-shirts, action figures, as well as artworks sold through auction houses and galleries and art collections (Young 2014; 2016).

When street art stayed in place – on walls, in streets – this stasis did not mean its images were exempted from monetisation. Instead, painted walls in so-called ‘edgy’ neighbourhoods became markers of value. To live or work in an area where the walls had been painted by artists meant a price that could be applied to rents and house prices, and one that would mobilise upwards over time.2 As Schacter writes, ‘Of all the ways economic utility is generated within the Creative City, however, it is place making or place marketing that is highest up on the list’ (emphasis in original) (2014: 163).

The shift from ‘place marking’ to ‘place marketing’ did not go unnoticed by those with a direct financial stake in the trade in housing and property. Once developers had perceived a relationship between property values and the presence of illicit street art randomly placed on walls over time, it did not take long for this apparent correlation to be converted into a belief that commissioned art interventions would have the same effect on markets. Mural projects, usually involving large-scale gable end murals painted with the consent of residents or city authorities, can now be found in innumerable cities and towns.

Much debate has ensued as to whether legal murals offer positive or negative consequences for neighbourhoods, for street art culture, and for social attitudes to the presence of paint on urban surfaces (Kramer, 2010; McAuliffe, 2013; Schacter, 2014) and it is likely that mural projects and mural festivals give rise to multiple, sometimes contradictory, and context-dependent effects that should make commentators hesitant to generalise: a street art festival such as Nuart in Stavanger, Norway, will have a different history and effect than the actions of a local council in Dulwich in London. However, one consequence of the proliferation of the presence of legal murals has been a very specific variant of the monetisation of the presence of paint on surfaces: the work of street artists and graffiti writers can be incorporated into property developments themselves.

Gentrification is notorious for its ‘repurposing’ (or cannibalisation) of places, usually turning old factories into apartments, or creating havens of consumerism inside now-defunct industrial spaces. In Fitzroy, in Melbourne, property developers turned their attention to the 100-year-old Star Lyric Theatre. It had been a theatre and then a neighbourhood cinema for decades; later, it was occupied by a discount homewares shop before sitting unused and unoccupied for several years. Once slated for development, 158 apartments are now to be built on the site. Prior to construction commencing, in 2017 the street artist Rone was commissioned by the developers to hold an exhibition, called Empty, within the derelict building.3 The exhibition was no doubt partly intended by the developers as a means of managing neighbourhood resentment, but the experience of the exhibition itself transcended mere public relations (Figure 1. Rone, Empty, Photographic ©Alison Young).

Rone’s show combined site-specific work – painting directly onto the peeling walls, around an existing mural from the building’s days as a theatre – with photographs of works he had painted in abandoned buildings whose locations were undisclosed. Those works, in buildings clearly heading for collapse, acted as reminders to the show’s visitors that the Lyric building was also demolition-bound. The sparse installation also foregrounded the architecture of the theatre, putting it on display as a kind of anticipatory memorial to the imminent loss of the building itself. Although the show ran for only ten days, more than 12,000 people attended. At its conclusion, the building was padlocked, and shortly afterwards, hoardings went up that announced its destruction. Within a few months, the building was bulldozed, and gone, present only as the moniker of an as-yet unbuilt apartment building.

This example is in part a familiar tale of loss: something that was once a community theatre is today simply another development opportunity. But the exhibition managed to be more than that: for ten days, the building once more was a focal point in its community, and a space in which art was displayed, looked at, experienced, and communicated as something that can be remembered. It thus seemed that art might reanimate the dying building. This proved, however, to be illusory: the exhibition was shut down on schedule, the site was padlocked, and, shortly afterwards, the building was bulldozed to the ground.

An even more stark demonstration of street art’s
contemporary subservience to the interests of property can be found in a ‘display’ property, part of another development in Fitzroy, near the Lyric Theatre. The exterior of the building has been painted in colourful abstract shapes and signed by Sofles, a Brisbane-based graffiti writer associated with authentic, hardcore wall writing, albeit one who has shown himself to be interested in commercial collaboration (Figure 2. Façade by Sofles. Photograph ©Alison Young).

That this development is another step along the path towards the annihilation of street art as anything other than decoration is confirmed by the sign on an adjacent property development, simply called ‘Fitzroy Ltd’, as if acknowledging that the very idea of Fitzroy as a neighbourhood has been reduced to a corporate signifier or a commodified ‘mood’ or ‘feel’ that an apartment purchaser can acquire.

As Schacter commented, ‘Street art has today come to shed any radicality it may have once contained not simply through selling itself, but, perhaps more perniciously, through it selling a false notion of place’ (emphasis in original) (2014: 162). Rone’s subsequent activities have starkly proved this point. His projects have used the same key features that seemed so effective in Empty: liaison with a developer to gain access to a site slated for development, installation of site-specific works within the soon-to-be-demolished building, inclusion of photographs of works painted in unnamed locations, and a highly limited exhibition schedule.4 With each project’s repetition of these features, the creativity of the projects seems to diminish, resulting in a practice that seems less about art and more about the ‘artwashing’ of property development (Evans, 2015; Young, 2016).

In the relationship of contemporary manifestations of ‘street’ art to space and place, a paradox is at work here. Although it was once used to activate places, to make them into dynamic spaces of contestation, challenge, encounter, and atmosphere, when street art is deployed in soon-to-be-developed derelict buildings, it marks the death of space. Instead of creating dynamic or activated spaces, these commissioned interventions annihilate creative potential, reducing locations to mere approximations of what the place could be. It is not that street art festivals, projects, murals, interventions and actions can no longer activate places, but rather that neighbourhoods like Fitzroy (and Shoreditch and Williamsburg and Kreuzberg) are plainly showing us what is at stake, and how things can go wrong. We can no longer simply assume that street art (or even graffiti, thanks to the use of Sofles’s work in the example above) can exist with the same kinds of impact or challenge that it once did. Asking ‘What hope is there for Street Art?’ (2014: 170), Rafael Schacter pointed to a number of artists engaging in ‘urban experimentation’ or ‘urban intervention’; these artists are ‘working to produce a new type of visuality for the city, who have and do come to question their environments, who have and do question the intellectual and physical milieu in which they stand’ (emphasis in original) (2014: 171).

While ‘urban interventionists’ make use of the city’s environments to construct counter-narratives and question the value and meaning of its milieu, it is also worth examining the insights of a number of artists whose work seems simultaneously to focus upon place, drawing on locations to situate and structure their works, while neglecting the conceptualisations that underpin the meanings of ‘home’, ‘city’, ‘property’, and even ‘place’ itself. Thinking through the relationships of their resulting artworks to place and space can assist us no longer to simply mourn street art’s lost radical impact, tempting though this is and satisfying though it may feel. Instead we might start to think about street art’s present and future radical potential: asking questions about the relationships of art (street art, graffiti, and contemporary art alike) to space and to place. How can art respond to the now widespread phenomenon of displacement and disconnection from place? How can street art engage with placelessness? What can placelessness and displacement teach us that we might use to resist the co-optation of street art from place-making to place selling?

To pose some possible answers, or to begin a conversation around these questions, I consider here work by three artists. Two have been known in the past as street artists or graffiti writers; one has always been considered a fine artist. All three combine multiple practices in their work. All work in or away from their ‘home’ location; all of them seek to problematise ideas of place, home, and the inhabitation of space.

THE PLACE OF HOME

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

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

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

In Landed, he created another model of his family home, this time a near-full size replica, which he painted black and installed as if it was sinking into the ground. The
Figure 1
Figure 2
Figure 3
Figure 4
idea, said Strange, was that the house had fallen out of the sky, as in The Wizard of Oz – a neatly humorous reference to Australia (Young, 2016). For Strange, the work allowed him to ask larger questions about belonging, evoking the relationship between the early British colonisers and the place in which they had landed. The half-sunken house showed something of the cataclysmic impact that Northern European cultures had had upon the land and its peoples. It delivers, said Strange, ‘a physical sense of whether this house belongs here. And from that you can ask, “Do we belong here? Does the city belong here?”’ (Young, 2016).

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

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

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

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

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

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

STRANGERS IN A FAMILIAR PLACE

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

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

DISPLACED IN PLACE

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

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

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

*Fallout* arose out of the ‘triple disaster’ of March 2011, when the Fukushima reactor in northern Japan went into meltdown after an earthquake and a tsunami. Pinchuk had been living in Tokyo at the time. Years afterwards, she travelled to Fukushima to record the landscape in the disaster’s aftermath. Here she photographed locations, identifying small signatures or apparently insignificant places that would hold a key to the artworks she would later make. In Fukushima, two things became significant for her. First, the nuclear clean-up involved digging up the radioactive earth, bagging it, and removing it for burial: she saw trucks filled with bags of radioactive earth, some of it spilling out, revealing the potential futility of the exercise. At the same time, she repeatedly encountered fishermen’s nets spread across the ground; some had been stranded there in the disaster, others were in use by those who had crept back into the Grey Zone of the clean-up and who had returned to their pre-disaster livelihood despite the potential risks (Figure 8. Stanislava Pinchuk, process photograph for *Fallout*. Photograph ©Stanislava Pinchuk).

Pinchuk mapped sites of soil removal, radioactivity readings and landscape, generating a data map of a blighted landscape. Instead of hammering, she transferred the data onto paper using a needle to create tiny pinpricks that, once
again, were almost invisible until caught by the light. The result was a map of twisted topography, enigmatic folds and creases that destabilise our sense of what we are looking at. The twisted mesh of the artwork also evokes the fishing nets stretched across the poisoned soil (Figure 9. Stanislava Pinchuk, Fallout. Photograph ©Stanislava Pinchuk).

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is therefore worth following the paths traced by artists like Ian Strange and Stanislava Pinchuk out of the street art scene, as a means of considering the role of art both in the dislocation from a sense of place, through the displacing effects of the gentrification process, and also in being able to represent loss of the conversation with and in space through the trauma and rupture of displacement and placelessness. In Ian Strange’s work, the home itself becomes a vacant site of trauma and loss; in Alys’s work the mundane acts of urban life such as walking, freighted with uncertainty of meaning, show how we require fences and borders for meaning and order; and in Pinchuk’s work, we see how the places that we take for granted are always about to be overwhelmed by a wave or to collapse into an earthquake or to be destroyed by war or radiation – the things we hold on to are always on the point of being lost. Despite what developers seek to communicate to us about art in urban space as a guarantor of the value of property, these artworks of displacement tell us that in every place we are on the verge of placelessness; in each of our possessions lies the moment of our future dispossession.
Alison Young is the Francine V. McNiff Professor of Criminology in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Alison is the author of Street Art World (2016), Street Art, Public City (2014), Street/Studio (2010) (with Ghostpatrol, Miso and T. Smits), Judging the Image (2005) and Imagining Crime (1996), as well as numerous articles on the intersections of law, crime, and the image. She is the founder of the Urban Environments Research Network, an interdisciplinary group of academics, artists, activists and architects. She's also a Research Convenor within the Future Cities Cluster in the Melbourne Sustainable Societies Institute, and is a member of the Research Unit in Public Cultures, an interdisciplinary group of academics, artists, policymakers and urban designers interested in communicative cities, mobility, networked cultures, and public space. Alison is currently researching the relationships between art, culture, crime, and urban atmospheres.

References


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


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

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

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


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

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

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

Put simply, street art and the internet are inextricably linked, and it is the constant revision of both that offers ample resources in the reframing and dissolution of rigid and binary constructs. Through an examination of primarily digital contemporary literature, both academic and journalistic, I present an argument that defines street art as a movement under constant negotiation, one that can be viewed through a specific lens and with specific goals in mind. Of course, not all street artists operate in the same way or for the same reasons. But by analysing how some of the most prominent street artists – predominately Banksy, Swoon, and Shepard Fairey – describe their motivations, and by surveying the ways in which their work has been received and understood, a handful of commonalities come into focus. Most notably, I assert that street art functions as a gift: where graffiti was a reclamation of space for those in military service: Viking warriors left their names scrawled into the Hagia Sophia in Turkey; Napoleon’s troops have been described as defacing the Sphinx in the eighteenth century; and during World War II, cartoons featuring a long-nosed character alongside the words ‘Kilroy was here’, began appearing wherever U.S. servicemen were stationed (Ross, 2016: 480). In the eighteenth century, English poet Lord Byron engraved his name into the ancient Greek temple to Poseidon on Cape Sounion – a mark now described as ‘a cherished part of modern Greek heritage’ (Agence France-Presse, 2008). In contemporary literature on the emergence of modern street art, the above are typically the examples listed when laying out historical precedent for the graffiti movement that emerged in the 1960s. What is not often considered, however, is the way in which this form of territorial mark-making contributed to the creation of a more aesthetically-oriented art movement, street art: artworks similarly disseminated through public space that go beyond a means of expressing I was here.

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

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

**STREET ART’S POPULIST POLITICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

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

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

**INCORPORATING CONTEMPORARY ART HISTORY**

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

It has often been said that street art is what you encounter on the way to a gallery, and because you’re not yet mentally primed for an art experience, the work is more likely to affect you, merely through the serendipitous nature of the encounter (Rui, 2011: 4). Public art functions similarly, but because commissioned work is typically more constrained in its site of installation, this serendipity is not as pervasive as that experienced with street art – an art form not limited by content, form or location. In this way, street art borrows again from the art historical canon in that it is interventional. Just as Dadaists called some objects art-works and physically smashed others, street art questions the very nature of art and the role our institutions play in disseminating the work of artists to the public. D*Face remixes British currency with skulls, and Roadsworth transforms cross-walks into shoe prints and dandelions (Blackshaw, 2008: 52, 156). Street art attempts to blur the boundaries between art and life by bringing more art into daily life, just as the interventional works of the Dadaists and the Neo-Dadaists were attempting to confuse art and life. A significant distinction here is that street art works to endow disenfranchised communities with art, while Dada disenfranchises art from itself. In this way, street art flips Dadaist philosophy on its head, proving the significance of art while Dadaism worked to prove its insignificance, or at least, its potential for insignificance (Richter, 1965). While Dada was ‘born out of negative reaction to the horrors of the First World War’ (Budd, 2004), street art emerged after nearly an entire century of relative peace, as a means of bridging the art world and the communities with which it had lost touch.

**DEFINING NON-BINARY DISTINCTIONS**

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

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

**STREET ART THEORY**

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

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

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

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

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

**CONCLUSION**

Excessive capitalism, limited public funding for the arts, and an insulated art world made street art’s existence necessary in continuing the legacy of art as one of free expression. Street artists have taken the parts of art history and the art world that speak and appeal to them, and turned the system inside out, drawing upon graffiti’s rich history to bring art back to a public excluded by admission prices and a post-post conceptual art world. Even defining street art as I have done here may be a paradox as street art requires no explanation. But the evidence remains that the street art movement is not only intertwined with but also emerged from graffiti – drawing on the history of site-specific art, the Situationists, and Dadaism, and driven by a desire to fight exploitative power structures in both the art world and the world at large. Whether it is a variation of this definition or something wholly different, the academic community surrounding street art has a responsibility to understand its conceptual basis and art historical influences fully, and disseminate that information to the public so that we can all come to better know and appreciate the street art of our shared spaces. The term ‘graffiti’ carries the weight of the twentieth century with it; it is either seen as a point of pride by those who practice it, or it is a word associated with vandalism, defacement, and crime. When the commercial and academic worlds ignore the difference between street art and graffiti, a tremendous disservice is done to the former – an art movement based on building up communities that has been developing independently for decades.
Lindsey Mancini (previously Lindsey Davis) is a digital editor and emerging street art scholar investigating public art’s potential as a transformative societal element. Based in New Haven, Connecticut, she currently works in communications at the Yale School of Art and as an adjunct professor of contemporary art at Eastern Connecticut State University. She is also the director of ArtAround, a nonprofit web platform for mapping art in public spaces.

References


Does Preserving Street Art Destroy Its ‘Authenticity’?

Enrico Bonadio
The City Law School
City University of London

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

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

Several commentators stress that graffiti and street art are ‘participatory’, which means that anyone could point over the art, destroy it, add something to it, or complement it (Blanché, 2014; Chatzidakis, 2016). Altering street art can thus be considered as part of a ‘design dialogue’ (Merrill, 2015) or ‘democratic multiparty conversation’ (Hansen, 2015a) within the urban environment. Artworks placed in the street – the argument goes – cannot be properly understood as ‘finished’ works created by just one person, but they instead require constant exposure to change to remain authentic (Mulcahy and Flessas, 2016; Mulcahy and Flessas, 2016) as well as ‘collapsed-artist’s responsibility to highlight their pieces and the way they are created. Therefore, these forms of art means their preservation would often undermine their authenticity by freezing the artworks and the dialogue they spur in time and space (Merrill, 2015: 383): using Alison Young’s words, ‘conservation is not conversation’ (Young, 2016, 182). For example, using perspex sheets to protect a street artwork – which may be considered as a form of in situ conservation – would effectively terminate the communication between artists and turn the piece into a ‘civic amenity or, worse, a cultural commodity’ (Young 2016: 182), in addition to increasing the risk of its removal and commercialisation (Hansen 2015a). Susan Hansen also argues that ‘street art’s invitation to engage in the city’s ephemeral dialogue is antithetical to traditional heritage frameworks’ (Hansen, 2017). These words are echoed by Laima Nomeikaite: ‘[framing] street artworks deprives citizens of the right to experience them (in the public space and ephemerality) in daily life and the broader right to engage with the city’ (Nomeikaite, 2017). Similarly, it has been noted by heritage-focused scholars that the target of any conservation decision must be the protection of the ‘significance’ of the place (De La Torre, 2014); and that we should abandon the focus on the concept of material authenticity and the ‘preservationist desire to freeze the moment of heritage and to conserve heritage as an unchanging monument to the past’ (Smith, 2006: 6).

Ex situ preservation would be even more damaging to the authenticity of street art and graffiti, as it completely removes the work from its often crucial urban context (removals and relocations of street artworks have recently occurred many times, with several Banksy murals receiving such treatment). Indeed, the very meaning of most street artworks is often dependent on their in situ nature and the on-going dynamic relationship within the community in which they exist (Young, 2013). Street and graffiti artists do not simply treat the city as a canvas; they also use the streetscape as a structural element of their artworks. Anything around the actual piece is part of the artistic experience, including – it has been suggested – the taste of pollution, the smell of dog’s excrement or take away food, the noise of traffic and people’s conversation (Mulcahy and Flessas, 2016) as well as ‘collapsed-walls as a creative background’ (Chatzidakis, 2016: 18) and ‘the genius loci, i.e. the atmosphere, the smell, the noises, the tactile experience’ (Blanché, 2018).1 Removal of street art pieces that aim at extracting profits and increasing economic interest in the ‘preserved’ artwork would be even less acceptable from a heritage perspective: indeed, economic value is not recognised as a legitimate heritage value by many values-based-management practitioners (De La Torre, 2014).

Photographs and videos therefore play an important role in disseminating and raising awareness about these art forms, while also preserving the intangible heritage of artworks that are often doomed to fade quickly. Even New York’s Judge Block, in his 2013 decision refusing to enjoin the demolition of the famous 5Pointz site, stressed the importance of photographic documentation for conservation purposes. He noted that ‘the plaintiffs’ works can live on in other media. The ... works have been photographed, and the court, during the hearing, exhorted the plaintiffs to photograph all those which they might wish to preserve.’

Photographs and videos of graffiti, especially illegal graffiti (which is more likely to be removed quickly), are increasingly being shown in galleries and museums. Examples include photographer Henry Chalfant’s curated exhibition of photographs of New York subway graffiti pieces from the ’70s and ’80s.4 Exhibitions of graffiti pictures aim not only to document the art, but also to preserve its subservience. For example, an exhibition in Modena, Italy, in 2016 named 1984 – Evoluzione e rigenerazione del writing5 displayed photographs of illegal graffiti created by writers predominately from the gallery’s urban area. The aim was to allow viewers to juxtapose the artworks in both the street – where they are created and are usually perceived as vandalism by the general public – and in a gallery space. The exhibition’s organisers tried to ‘counteract the elitist nature of modern artistic institutions’, by creating ‘a continuity between the inside and the outside’ of the gallery and ‘literally turned inside out the boundaries of the white cube’ (Baldini, 2018: 27–32). In this case, as has been noted, pictures of graffiti constitute the works themselves (Rivasi, 2018), and the...
reproductions do not lack any of the main features that are relevant to the appreciation of graffiti (Baldini, 2018). Even some graffiti artists support the idea of having photographs of their works in a gallery. Italian writer Fra 32 confirmed that coming across pictures of his own pieces in the 1984 exhibition in Modena was ‘an experience that [felt] authentic’ (Baldini, 2018: 29).

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

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

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

The in situ method of preservation might sometimes respond to this objective, especially if the artwork has been commissioned or authorised. Perspex or other protective barriers, despite preventing or limiting the dialogue between urban artists and the streets, nevertheless have some merit: they make it possible for the aficionados of these forms of art to continue to enjoy the art in the same environment in which it was originally created. The selected method of in situ conservation should endeavour to both protect the integrity of the artwork as much as possible and minimise the impact of screens or barriers on its message and visual aesthetics (for example, in terms of light reflection). Due consideration should also be given to the rights of the property owner: while their consent should arguably be sought and obtained, if possible, in exceptional cases of outstanding art, in situ preservation plans should proceed even without their authorisation. In such cases, property owners could possibly be compensated if the conservation of the artwork negatively affects their ability to fully enjoy their space. Also, the decision to conserve the piece should be approved by as many stakeholders as possible, not only the owner of the property (if different from the person who wants to conserve the art), but also the artist herself and the local community which hosts the work: this is in line with findings of certain heritage studies that have considered heritage experts as merely an equally interested party in heritage ‘with equal and valid views, but no more’, with a view to rebalancing ‘the input and negotiating power of all interested parties’ (Smith and Waterton, 2009: 153-171).

Some commentators have advocated fine-tuning heritageisation procedures to make them more ‘participatory’ and respectful of the rights of others. Alberto Frigerio and Elvira Khakimova, for example, have suggested a system where local communities would be encouraged to propose selected pieces to be inserted in national lists of outstanding street artworks, by requiring a minimum amount of signatures. They also recommend local councils assess the conformity of the recommended art with pre-identified parameters (Frigerio and Khakimova, 2013). For instance, they should not carry any discriminatory or offensive messages or be dangerous for the public or the surrounding environment, and any artworks incorporated into private properties would require the consent of the building’s owner. These are sensible requirements and should be coupled with a consideration of the main precondition for listing a street and graffiti artwork: its artistic merit. People who have extensive knowledge and understanding of these artistic movements, be they artists, agents or curators, should be involved when making the final decision. Leaving the final say to assessors who are experts in traditional fine arts with no awareness of the creative processes and outputs of the street and graffiti art communities would be a mistake, as it may increase the risk of an underestimation of the value of the art and its consequential destruction.

As mentioned, in situ preservation projects make more sense for street artworks that are commissioned or authorised. Take the mural entitled ‘Tutumond’ commissioned to, and painted by, Keith Haring in June 1989 in the Tuscan town of Pisa. It has been restored and preserved via perspex sheets with the support of the local municipality, and in 2013 was also listed by the Italian Ministry of Culture as an ‘artistic-historical product of particular importance’. The protective glasses are minimal, being just 2.20 metres high (while the entire mural’s height doesn’t exceed 10 metres), and aren’t too close to the painting so that it can breathe. Glasses thus don’t spoil the view people have of the mural. Also, and perhaps more importantly, straight after painting the mural, Keith Haring himself agreed with possible conservation plans (the artist would die just a few months after) and even expressed his desire for the mural to last for many years and stressed the need to repaint it should the need to preserve it arise (Dickens et al., 2016).

In situ preservation plans may not work for street artworks that are created illegally, though. When it comes to such works, I share the concerns of the commentators that stress the participatory nature of street art and the inadequacy of conservation projects: works produced illegally may indeed attract more ‘dialogue’ than commissioned or authorised pieces do, with fellow artists being more prone to leave their sign close to or upon the unauthorised work. As ex situ conservation is even less acceptable for the reasons highlighted above (especially if the art is site-specific and the relocation limits the free enjoyment of the detached piece), the main tool to conserve illegal street art appears to be photographic documentation.

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

CONCLUSION

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

1 See also Ed Bartlett, Street Art (Lonely Planet 2017: 150) reporting the opinion of the Portuguese artist Vhils: ‘The context of the environment is vital, as the work needs to communicate and co-create a story with the existing history of a place. I don’t want to make works that ‘take over’ an area, but rather are a part of the fabric of that space’.

2 Photographic documentation is relevant to muralism as well (Cockcroft, Weber, Cockcroft 1997).

3 See Dr Sabina Andron ‘100 Days of Leake Street’ <https://sabinaandron.com/leake-street/>


6 An exhibition of pictures of ‘old school’ graffiti was organised in New York in November 2016 at the Eric Firestone Gallery <https://www.ericfirestonegallery.com/exhibitions/henrychalfant_1980/>. Henry Chalfant is an American photographer and videographer well-known for his work on graffiti and hip-hop culture. His pictures are in the collection of several prestigious museums.

7 In English ‘1984 – Evolution and Regeneration of Graffiti Writing’.

8 Interview with Pietro Rivasi, curator of the exhibition (September 2017).

9 Baldini also stresses that graffiti ‘need not change to enter the “temples” of contemporary art; they are those institutions that need to change to make room’ (Baldini, 2018).

10 In the interview with Pietro Rivasi, the latter added that graffiti writers themselves consider pictures as alternative to the original pieces, and that therefore showing pictures of graffiti in a museum or gallery matches writers’ practice of showing and disseminating their artistic outputs within the subculture.

11 See the interview with Christian Omodeo, co-organiser of the above mentioned Street Art Banksy and Co: L’Arte allo Stato Urbano exhibition in Bologna, by graffiti and street art aficionado Good Guy Boris, available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VF0dbtAcAp8

12 Yet, the ability to continue the ‘conversation in the street’ is not totally affected by glasses or other barriers. Other artists and taggers could still leave their sign or mark close to the artwork, and in particular in areas of the same wall which are not protected.

13 That is, converting the street into a type of museum (and thereby, by implication, robbing it of its true street integrity). That in situ preservation carries the risk of ‘musealising the street’ is a point made by art historian Christian Omodeo in a conversation the author had with him in London in March 2018 during the Art on the Streets – Art as Intervention conference at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

14 It has been argued for example that low-quality perspex glasses do not let the wall breathe, which may damage the painting.

15 Decreto 335/2013. The mural was inserted in the list of ‘beni tutelati’.

16 Jan Schilling, Preserving art that was never meant to last, (May 7, 2012) <http://www.dw.com/en/preserving-art-that-was-never-meant-to-last/a-15933463>

Enrico Bonadio is Senior Lecturer in Law at City, University of London, where he teaches various modules on intellectual property (IP) law. He holds law degrees from the University of Florence (PhD) and the University of Pisa (LLB), and regularly lectures, publishes and advises in the field of intellectual property law. His research and teaching interests led him to give talks and lectures in more than 60 universities and research centres across the five continents. His current research agenda focuses on the intersection between visual arts – particularly street art and graffiti – and copyright (amongst other topics). He is currently editing a book entitled The Cambridge Handbook of Copyright in Street Art and Graffiti (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2019); he also recently edited a book entitled Non-Conventional Copyright – How Far Copyright Boundaries Can Be Stretched? with Nicola Lucchi (Edward Elgar, October 2018). Enrico has been a Visiting Scholar at Melbourne Law School (University of Melbourne, 2013), City University New York (CUNY Law School, 2016) and University of Tel Aviv (2018 and 2019). He is a Solicitor qualified to practise in England and Wales as well as in Italy. He practiced as an IP lawyer for several years, and frequently appears in the media as an IP expert. His research has been covered by CNN, Wall Street Journal, BBC, Washington Post, Independent and The Conversation, amongst other media outlets.

References


Cockcroft, E. S., Weber, J., Cockcroft, J. D. (1997) Towards a people’s art: the contemporary mural movement (Dutton Publisher).


Hansen, S. (2015a) This is not a Banksy!: Street Art as Aesthetic Protest, Journal of Media and Cultural Studies.


Nomeikaite, L. (2017) Street Art as Heritage: Right to the City?, Nuart Festival Website.


