

# Creating a Global Archive of COVID-19 Street Art

Heather Shirey & David Todd Lawrence  
Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA

## Notes on Research in Progress

Artists and graffiti writers producing work in the streets create art of an ephemeral nature that reveals very immediate responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic in a manner that can be raw and direct. In the context of a global public health crisis, street art has the potential to reach a wide audience, transform urban space, and foster a sustained dialogue. The role of art in the streets is particularly important at a time when museums and galleries are shuttered due to the pandemic.

For artists working illegally, the lockdown period has, depending on the location and mode of work, made it at once easier and more complicated to produce. Working in the streets might require violating stay-at-home orders and put one at a higher than normal level of risk, both legally and in terms of physical health.

At the same time, in many cities, miles of fresh wall space – often in the form of plywood covered shop windows – has served as an invitation to paint and write. Even as our physical movement in public spaces has been limited due to public health concerns, we have witnessed an explosion of street art around the world created in response to COVID-19.

The work of many artists and writers producing works in the street expresses an understanding that we are living through a transformational historical moment. Artists and writers convey disbelief and distrust, as well as hope and a vision for navigating new social norms. We would argue that it is crucial that we document and analyse street art responding to COVID-19 not only because it is so ephemeral, but also because it captures the complexity of pandemic experiences around the world.

## CREATING A BORN-DIGITAL ARCHIVE / GLOBAL STREET ART DATABASE

For the past two years we have been engaged in research on street art in collaboration with an interdisciplinary team of faculty and students from art history, geography, cultural studies, communication studies, international studies, and museum studies. This research group at the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of St. Thomas is called Urban Art Mapping. Working in collaboration with local arts organisations, our research prior to COVID-19 was focused on street art in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA. We have been interested in how art serves to activate community identity as a response to gentrification and broader economic and social pressures (Shirey, Lawrence, & Lorah, forthcoming 2021). This project has required us to develop a hands-on methodology for documenting, mapping, and analysing graffiti, murals, stickers, wheatpaste posters, light projections, and other forms of urban art. Our qualitative research involved ethnographic interviews with artists, business owners, and community members. We have also undertaken spatial analyses, allowing us to explore relationships between urban art and social, economic, and demographic variation in the neighbourhoods of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and Saint Paul). This methodology was absolutely reliant on our active presence in the streets and in the community.

In early March, our research trips were cancelled abruptly due to COVID-19, and our typical method of working, involving face-to-face interviews and documentation of street art in context, was now impossible. Working under stay-at-home orders, the dining room table was suddenly the centre of work life. At the same time, we became aware that street art was popping up all over the world in response to the pandemic, which we mostly saw by way of mainstream media coverage and Instagram (MacDowall, 2017; Young, 2016).<sup>1</sup> Working from a laptop instead of in the streets, we started creating the COVID-19 Street Art Database, seeking to document examples of COVID-19 related street art from around the world.<sup>2</sup> This archive includes both illegal and sanctioned art, with an emphasis on pieces located on fixed surfaces. Since spatial analysis is an important component of our team's research, we have not documented works that move, such as those painted on trains and trucks.

As we collect everything from small bits of text and stickers slapped up illicitly to large, commissioned murals, there are always different ways of categorising artworks in the database. For example, one could make the decision to separate out sanctioned versus illegal art, or to organise works by type so that all of the graffiti is grouped together, separate from all of the murals. Instead, from our perspective, it is useful to investigate not so much the format, but the larger contexts of individual works, what they communicate and what role they play in a conversation. Additionally, we are particularly interested in capturing change over the course of time, as discussed by Ulrich Blanché (2018).

Initially the database came in the rudimentary form of a spreadsheet, but we soon found this did not allow us the space to capture extensive metadata necessary for contextual analysis. We determined that a crowd-sourced database using the Omeka platform would enable us to define the specific metadata needed for our research methodology, which requires documenting what themes appear in what specific locations and at what point in time. Additionally, this platform, often used in the context of higher education and museums, offers many options for teaching with the material. In both cases, Omeka allows

us to make the metadata and images available for non-commercial, educational use, creating an archive that can serve as a resource for the public. In this respect, the images and metadata are shared in accordance with the best practices outlined in Enrico Bonadio's 2019 book *The Cambridge Handbook of Copyright in Street Art and Graffiti* (Bonadio, 2019).

By the time we had established the foundations of this project and were building a representative sample of art from around the world, another crisis erupted following the murder of George Floyd on May 25 in Minneapolis, just a few miles from where our research team is based. Over the days and weeks that followed, the streets of Minneapolis and Saint Paul were filled with art. Using the knowledge that we had acquired building the COVID-19 born-digital archive, our team was able to quickly launch the George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Database in early June.<sup>3</sup> With time, we intend to design curriculum materials so that both databases can be deployed as active tools to help create a more just and equitable world by way of an examination of street art.

In addition to documenting and preserving, the intention of both these street art archives is to help us understand how people responded to these crises – COVID-19 and systemic racism – in different locations and at different times. The metadata, which include a description of the work and the predominant themes, as well as the location and date of documentation, are designed to capture these responses across time and place.

Since the aim is to document work globally even during a time of lockdown, both archives are reliant on crowd-sourcing. Although we rely heavily on artists who share their own work on social media, they – as well as chroniclers of graffiti and street art around the world – can also submit photographs and metadata directly to us.

## THEMES AND ISSUES ADDRESSED IN COVID-19 STREET ART

The roughly 500 works in the COVID-19 Street Art database represent a wide range of artistic forms, themes, and iconography. In a favela in Rio de Janeiro, for example, Angelo Castro painted 'Fica em casa!' In this piece, a young boy brandishes a belt, mimicking an authoritarian adult who commands that a child 'Stay at home' with the threat of punishment, thus mocking the lack of authority and leadership of the Bolsonaro government.<sup>4</sup> A quickly drawn image of a doctor with text reading 'RIP Li Wenliang' appeared in Bangkok, Thailand, paying homage to the doctor who first called attention to the presence of a novel and deadly virus in Wuhan, China.<sup>5</sup>

Graffiti reading 'cops everywhere, hospitals nowhere' was thrown up on a wall in Athens, Greece, a location that prior to the crisis was already activated as a site for highly politicised graffiti.<sup>6</sup> A piece by Imnopi in New York City depicting a nurse wearing protective gear served as both a tribute to healthcare workers and a reminder of the public's obligation to stay healthy so as not to overtax the medical system.<sup>7</sup> Misha Blaise's poster in Austin, Texas, depicting a fat cupid in his underwear accompanied by text reading 'let love be your contagion', was a lighthearted call for hope and unity during the crisis.<sup>8</sup> Using a portrait of David Bowie and speech bubbles reading 'We could be heroes' with the addendum 'by just staying home', Emmalene Blake / ESTR made popular culture references to reinforce new social norms and reinforce public health guidelines (Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, one of the most basic roles of art in the streets relating to COVID-19 is to raise awareness of public health concerns and a great number of works, which appeared in a variety of forms, sought to educate the public about the virus and promote modes of prevention, such as the use of face masks and social distancing. An example is a large wall by the Mathare Roots Youth Group in Nairobi, Kenya, documented on April 2, 2020. This piece depicts a young man wearing a face mask, accompanied by text reading 'Corona is real'.<sup>10</sup> A large mural in San Antonio, Texas, by Colton Valentine shows Cardi B. with a face mask and a text bubble reading 'Coronavirus – Shit is real!'. In this case, the face mask and quote were an up-to-the-minute addition to an already existing piece.<sup>11</sup> On a smaller scale, a quickly written 'wash your hands' in Austin, Texas, was similarly created to convey a public health message, albeit prior to the tremendous outbreak of COVID-19 that later raged through the state.<sup>12</sup> A stencil by Domus26 in Washington D.C. showing two elephants social distancing on a see-saw, accompanied by text reading 'Play at a Safe Distance' uses humour to promote social distancing (Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> A COVID-19 update was added to previous graffiti in Wellington, New Zealand, where 'NZ stand together' was spray painted on an underpass in response to the Christchurch mosque shootings on March 15, 2019. In 2020, text

reading '2 meters apart' was added, something that would only make sense in the context of the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

In March and April, many works in the streets around the world expressed doubts about the threat of the Coronavirus, often articulating a fear or distrust in government. An example is a short line that reads 'Covid is a scam', hastily written on a barricade that was used to close off a street, turning it into a pedestrian pathway during a period of lockdown (Figure 3).<sup>15</sup> The Velvet Bandit's small paste up 'My Virus, My Choice' takes a dig at the politicised responses to COVID-19 and resistance to government mandates, especially in the USA, where restrictions that are put in place based on scientific evidence and in the service of the public good are often challenged on political grounds (Figure 4).<sup>16</sup>



Figure 1. 'We Could be Heroes'. Emmelane Blake / ESTR. Dublin, Ireland, May 12, 2020. Photograph: ©Emmelane Blake / ESTR.



Figure 4. 'My Virus, My Choice'. The Velvet Bandit. Geyserville, California, USA, May 22, 2020. Photograph ©The Velvet Bandit.

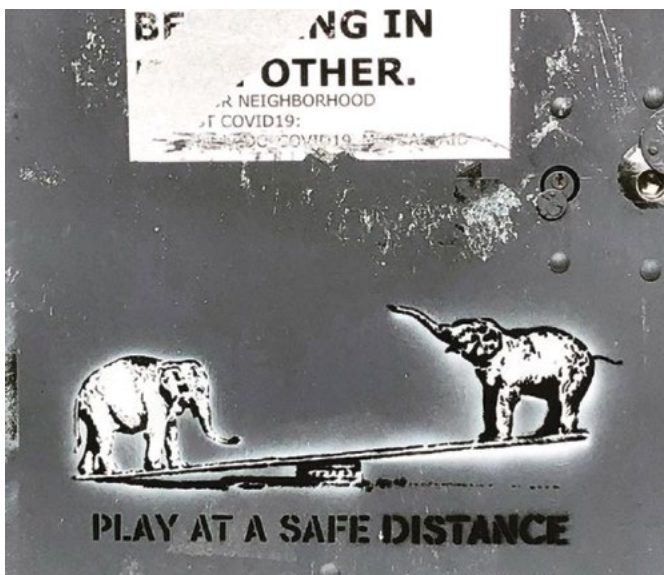


Figure 2. 'Play at a safe distance'. DOMUS26. Washington D.C., USA, May 10, 2020. Photograph ©DOMUS26.

Figure 3. 'Covid is a Scam'. Artist unknown. Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA, March 28, 2020. Photograph ©D. Christopher Brooks.



In the United States, where the former president and other leading officials have actively undermined the work of scientists by putting in place policies that run contrary to scientific evidence, a number of works focused specifically on White House advisor and immunologist Anthony Fauci, especially in New York, where the impact of the virus was particularly severe in early spring. Dellarious, for example, created a life-sized image of Dr. Fauci dressed in his signature suit and tie, holding a cardboard sign reading 'Trust Science (Not Morons)' (Figure 5).<sup>17</sup> Justifiably, many other works centred around the president himself. On April 23, 2020, Trump suggested in a briefing that a disinfectant might be used internally to 'cleanse' the body of the virus. The next day, Robin Bell responded with a light projection in Washington D.C. reading 'disinfect the president', referencing this absurd moment (Figure 6).<sup>18</sup> Representations of Trump as a virus are also frequent, such as 'Vote Out the Virus' with a grotesque closeup of a scowling president.<sup>19</sup>

Hoarding of basic supplies such as toilet paper and hand sanitizer made its way into street art, as fears of supply chain breakdowns and the realities of price gouging dominated the news in spring. Artists such as Ja!Da! in Cologne<sup>20</sup> and Teachr in Los Angeles<sup>21</sup> envisioned a black market in toilet paper, while Dario Fleming's 'Pure'll Gold', a larger-than-life rendition of hand sanitizer as liquid gold, mocked the inflated value and scarcity of previously common products.<sup>22</sup> Hoarding, price gouging, and supply chain disruptions made social disparities in society even more evident. Celout's mural in Melbourne, in which a white, blond mother and her matching white, blond child gasp in horror, presumably about a toilet paper shortage, prods at

the way affluence allows people to focus on supply chain issues, ignoring the larger inequities plaguing society (Figure 7).<sup>23</sup> As far as these inequities and losses of income are concerned, calls for rent strikes<sup>24</sup> emerged in many different countries, especially around May Day.

A great quantity of work we have documented focuses on essential workers, and healthcare workers in particular. As far as works examining hoarding are concerned, some of these pieces focus on the crisis caused by shortages of protective gear and the obligation of the public to protect healthcare workers. An example is a work by Frank Riot in east London with a close-up face of a healthcare worker wearing a '#protect NHS workers' mask, accompanied by an emphatic call for 'PPE PPE PPE' and 'TEST TEST TEST'.<sup>25</sup> Among expressions of gratitude, depictions that equate healthcare workers with superheroes (most notably Superman) are ubiquitous – they can be found from Russia<sup>26</sup> to England<sup>27</sup>.

Essential workers are defined differently, and sometimes more or less broadly, depending on location – and this has also evolved over time. A piece from Kenitra, Morocco, by Jalal Al Crete/Jalel L/k (mural) and Rizwan (calligraphy) expanded the definition beyond medical workers to include journalists, people working in construction, and members of the military, for example.<sup>28</sup> One can also find a critique of what are perceived as superficial signs of gratitude to essential workers: a stencil in Berlin reads 'higher salaries instead of praise', thus questioning the value of expressions of gratitude in the context of tremendous economic inequity.<sup>29</sup> Image-based works also offer nuance to these expressions of gratitude. A wheatpaste piece showing two nurses with text reading 'How do you like us now, Boris?' was created in London by SubDude after Boris Johnson had recovered from COVID-19 (Figure 8).<sup>30</sup> When Johnson was released from hospital, he issued a public expression of gratitude to his nurses, both of whom were immigrants to the UK. This was remarkable considering his attacks on the NHS in late 2019 as well as his long-standing anti-immigration stance.



Figure 5. 'Trust Science (Not Morons)'. Dellarious. Rochester, NY, USA, April 26, 2020. Photograph ©Dellarious.



Figure 6. 'Disinfect the President'. Robin Bell. Washington, D.C., USA, April 24, 2020. Photograph ©Robin Bell.

## CONCLUSION

Both COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd allowed for new variations of existing structural critiques that relate to issues such as the militarisation of the police<sup>31</sup>, surveillance, patriarchy, and racial inequities<sup>32</sup> – all of which are exacerbated in a time of crisis. In this regard, it was particularly noteworthy that, following Floyd's death, to many people the importance of going out to protest and engage with public spaces outweighed the public health risks involved.

All the while, the quantity of street art produced in response to these intertwined crises – the pandemic, systemic racism, and the militarisation of police around the world – is astounding. We find ourselves wondering, at what point in history has so much art been created in response to a set of issues around the world and in such a condensed period of time?<sup>33</sup> Although the art is destined to be short-lived, owing partly to Urban Art Mapping it will continue to tell our stories of both the pandemic and the fight for justice – specifically in the context of the ways in which we reestablish our relationship to public space, locally and globally. In 2020, art in the streets has proven once more to have the power to speak to the immediacy of the moment and – in the midst of an enduring crisis – to find an audience eager to engage.



**Figure 8.** 'So How Do You Like Us Now Boris?'. SubDude. London, UK, May 10, 2020. Photograph ©SubDude.



**Figure 7.** 'It's All Gone'. Celout. Melbourne, Australia, March 4, 2020. Photograph ©Celout.

Dr. Heather Shirey is a Professor of Art History at the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA. Her teaching and research focus on race and identity, migrations and diasporas, and street art and its communities.

Dr. David Todd Lawrence is Associate Professor of English at the University of St. Thomas, where he teaches African American literature and culture, folklore studies, and cultural studies.

Together with geographer Dr. Paul Lora, Shirey and Todd Lawrence co-direct Urban Art Mapping. Urban Art Mapping is a multi-disciplinary, multi-racial group of faculty and students from the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of St. Thomas. Student researchers include Tiaryn Daniels, Summer Erickson, Shukrani Nangwala, Hannah Shogren-Smith, and Chioma Uwagwu. The group created and manages two street art archives: the COVID-19 Street Art Database (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net>) and the George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Database (<https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net>).

- 1 As we shift our methodology from a field-based approach to one that is heavily reliant on social media, we reflect on observations by MacDowall (2017: 231-249) and Young (2016: 32-33) who discuss the 'mainstreaming' that potentially occurs as a result of dissemination of street art via social media. This is particularly interesting when unsanctioned art in the streets takes a truly global issue such as the COVID-19 pandemic as a topic.
- 2 Urban Art Mapping COVID-19 Street Art Database: <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/>.
- 3 <https://georgefloystreetart.omeka.net>
- 4 Angelo Campos, 'Fica em casa/Stay at home', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/411>.
- 5 'R.I.P Li Wenliang', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/198>.
- 6 'R.I.P Li Wenliang', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/198>.
- 7 Imnopi, 'Protect Nurses', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/456>.
- 8 Misha Blaise, 'Let Love Be Your Contagion', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/104>.
- 9 Emmalene Blake / ESTR, 'We Could Be Heroes', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/246>.
- 10 Mathare Roots Youth Group. 'Corona is Real', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/189>.
- 11 Colton Valentine, 'Cardi B with Face Mask', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/11>.
- 12 'Wash ur hands', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/413>.
- 13 DOMUS26, 'Play at a safe distance', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 28, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/424>.
- 14 'NZ stand (together) 2m apart', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/245>.
- 15 'Covid is a Scam', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 23, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/77>.
- 16 The Velvet Bandit, 'My Virus My Choice', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/386>.
- 17 Mike Dellaria/Dellarious, 'Trust Science (Not Morons)', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/102>.
- 18 Robin Bell, 'Disinfect the President', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/225>.
- 19 'Vote Out the Virus', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/481>.
- 20 Ja!Da!, 'Toilet Paper Dealer', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/360>.
- 21 Keith Biele/Teachr, 'Untitled (TP Guy)', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/67>.
- 22 Darion Fleming, 'Pure'll Gold', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/351>.
- 23 Celout, 'It's All Gone', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/119>.
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- 29 'Mehr Lohn statt Lob', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/493>.
- 30 SubDude London, 'So How Do You Like Us Now Boris?', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/235>.
- 31 'Cop. = Covid', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/79>.
- 32 Lionel Milton, 'Justice for Ahmaud', *Urban Art Mapping: COVID-19 Street Art*, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/270>.
- 33 Coupled with the explosion of art in the streets in the context of COVID-19, it is interesting to note that the critique of the institutional power of museums has grown stronger. As museums are now opening with limited capacity, how can they not become even more exclusive in terms of audience, potentially undoing efforts that many museum professionals have been making to rectify their elitist history?

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