GRAFFITI AS GIFT:

STREET ART'S CONCEPTUAL EMERGENCE

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

AN INTRODUCTION (AND DISCLAIMER)

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art movement of the twenty-first century outweighs the pitfalls of writing something in perpetual danger of becoming outdated.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

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

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

THOUGHTS AND REFERENCES ON THE HISTORY OF GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

Graffiti – a traditionally assertive marking of a name, alias, or identifying design in public space – has existed for millennia, with evidence surviving as far back as ancient Greece. In the preserved city of Pompeii, subversive mark-making was already moving beyond simple signatures to biting political caricatures – illustrations that would have been viewed as 'profane' in public conversation. Throughout history, however, much of graffiti remained documentary, and existed as more of a historical record of someone *having been there* (McCormick, 2011: 20). Unsurprisingly, most of these markings were made by those in military service: Viking warriors left their names scrawled into the

Hagia Sophia in Turkey; Napoleon's troops have been described as defacing the Sphinx in the eighteenth century; and during World War II, cartoons featuring a long-nosed character alongside the words 'Kilroy was here', began appearing wherever U.S. servicemen were stationed (Ross, 2016: 480). In the eighteenth century, English poet Lord Byron engraved his name into the ancient Greek temple to Poseidon on Cape Sounion – a mark now described as 'a cherished part of modern Greek heritage' (Agence France-Presse, 2008). In contemporary literature on the emergence of modern street art, the above are typically the examples listed when laying out historical precedent for the graffiti movement that emerged in the 1960s. What is not often considered, however, is the way in which this form of territorial mark-making contributed to the creation of a more aesthetically-oriented art movement, street art: artworks similarly disseminated through public space that go beyond a means of expressing *I was here*.

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

Many contemporary street artists are aware of their medium historically existing as both a form of graffiti's territorial mark-making and a means of community activism, but I assert that it was not until graffiti became an aggressive target of law enforcement in the 1980s that street art emerged as a substantively new entity, and began to develop on its own aesthetic and historically-informed trajectory. When a 1982 *Atlantic Monthly* article introduced the 'broken windows theory' which specifically called out graffiti as part of the plight of urban ruin (Kelling), parts of the movement evolved into something more appropriately named 'street art', drawing more upon its roots in community activism to unmistakably prove itself an asset to the people who live alongside it, rather than a plague to be wiped out. This shift is often cited as the medium moving from 'graffiti' to 'post graffiti' (Waclawek, 2010: 60), but I argue that this was actually the birth of contemporary street art, as tags became more elaborate and illustrative designs quickly began to appear beside more unreadable scrawls. Street art emerged as a coexisting art movement – graffiti as a gift – part of an evolutionary framework that didn't replace but instead added on to the traditions graffiti began. It is dedicated to proving that visual expression, whether textual or illustrative, sanctioned or illegal, can be an asset not an injury. Banksy's 2005 book *Wall and Piece* dedicates an entire page to the broken windows theory, describing its origins before recounting a letter the artist received from

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

This populist prerogative extends politically; much street art is created in response to the damaging symptoms of the larger economic trend of global wealth inequality. It is for this reason that many street artists consider themselves socialists, or at the very least anti-capitalists (as is also the case with social practice artists and others). As public space came to be commodified by advertising throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, everyday people were barraged more and more with forceful messages from companies trying everything possible to convert them into customers. Cuban street artist Jorge Rodriguez Gerada began with 'culture-jamming' in the 1990s with the collective 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 *Tilted Arc,* 'to remove the work is to destroy the work' (Michalos, 2007: 179).

It has often been said that street art is what you encounter on the way to a gallery, and because you're not yet mentally primed for an art experience, the work is more likely to affect you, merely through the serendipitous nature of the encounter (Ruiz, 2011: 4). Public art functions similarly, but because commissioned work is typically more constrained in its site of installation, this serendipity is not as pervasive as that experienced with street art – an art form not limited by content, form or location. In this way, street art borrows again from the art historical canon in that it is interventional. Just as Dadaists called some objects artworks 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 remakes 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 under-graduate 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.

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