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Street Art: Inside Out and Outside In




Madeleine Coultrip

**Senior Honors Project**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements  
of the Westover Honors Program**

**Westover Honors Program**

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## ABSTRACT

When artists choose to create art in the streets, they are moving away from the idea that art belongs in museums for the elite. They bring art to people instead of waiting for people to come to art. In this way, they are challenging the traditional idea that art is sacred and exclusive. Street art, therefore, presents a new kind of creative outlet. Street art seems to depend on raw mass communication that only the street can provide, but it is also rapidly morphing and constantly changing to fit new definitions and purposes. This study attempt to define street art and then to determine it's most successful venue.

After a look into the background, the study will then focus on a few key street artists' personal motivation to create street art. This study will then attempt to answer the question of what value street art holds in the art world. An interesting question s arises when the validity of the street art is questioned. What happens when it moves into galleries and museums? Does it lose its raw quality when its location is changed? What impact does the location have on the message and effectiveness?

From there this study will focus on how street art is viewed by the public, as there are many different perceptions about the purpose of street art in the public space. Outlining the four perceptions defined in another recent study, this study will work to clarify and examine perceptions of street art. The rhetoric of creativity in street art will also be considered, as street art has recently been studied as a form of advertising. With the aforementioned dislocations from the street to both fine art galleries and museums, to pure commercialization in advertising, the future of street art must be considered in a new light. Part fine art, part street art, it has evolved into an entity which, although unmistakably influences and is influenced by fine art, advertising, and public art, is

separate form any of these in its pure form. Proposed in this study is a definition that true street art must be considered simply as such—fine art in the streets; concluding that both the fine art and the street components are equally important to understanding the purpose and value of street art.

## INTRODUCTION

What began as a “risk to achieve fame through a name,”<sup>1</sup> graffiti originally was the language of a subculture fighting for territory and power. Although its origins are unclear, what is now called “street art” eventually crept in and the media became fascinated with it. Street art is celebrated by the media because it appears “to represent something almost universal and safe, but with a slight edge, despite the animosity from graffiti writers and the law.”<sup>2</sup> There is no official definition of the street art but it has generally come to be accepted to include any “art” seen on the streets. In the very broadest terms, graffiti is writing and drawing done illicitly on a public wall, which includes street art. The term graffiti, however, comes with a negative connotation because of the association with gangs, tags, and destruction of public property. For this study, “graffiti” will refer to any and all writing and drawing done illegally in a public space, including street art. But street art, as a sub category of graffiti, will be more explicitly defined and separated from other forms of graffiti. This definition will be the first step towards understanding street art in context.

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Romain. *London Street Art Anthology: Introduction*. Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2009, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Romain, 4.

Understanding the origin and intended function of street art will then allow this study to move forward. The reasons and motivation vary so greatly for each artist that the purpose of street art can be elusive, but with more street artists speaking openly about their work, and more in depth research being done, the mystery and anonymity of street art is dissolving. What began as a desperate attempt to escape definition and to move fluidly between art, graffiti, and advertising and yet remain on the streets where it would be seen, street art is now stuck in limbo. As it exists in an in between state, hung in galleries, priced at millions, being studied as species of advertising in its rhetoric, and in the public realm, the global street art movement seems to have confused its own place and role in the world. Many other areas have been impacted by and are impacting street art, but it should be understood that street art is its own enterprise and must remain as such, even as it evolves and expands and influences other areas.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Graffiti on the wall is not new, but “street art” is a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore this paper uses many recent articles published in cultural, rather than just academic discourses. Banksy, probably the most well known street artist currently, has published his own books, including *Wall and Piece* (2005). This autobiographical work offers a unique look inside the thoughts and life of Banksy. Here he offers his explanation for what he does and how he does it, including chronicles of his work. The reader gets to see some of Banksy’s work with some of his own written explanations and anecdotes. Relying more on pictures than on text, this is an excellent source as an authentic record for Banksy. However, he is not the only street artist to be discussed here.

“Hopeful Disobedience,” by Carlo McCormick (2009) focuses on another street artist—Shepard Fairey—the artist behind the Obama Hope poster. His contributions to both the political and art worlds in both museums and on the streets represents a cross contribution that shows the unique fluidity of street artist’s influence. This movement of street art going mainstream and being used in a political campaign represents a dramatic shift in the view of street art from its perceived role, from a counter-cultural phenomenon to a radical tool of social intervention and commercial enterprise. The article provides a focused look at one street artist who has brought street art into the mainstream.

Although these works show the most current work by a few artists, it is vital to read reports, studies, and reviews of what others have written or said about graffiti and street art to get a full understanding of its range of impact. Susan A. Phillips writes about graffiti from the perspective of an anthropologist. *Wallbangin’: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A. (1999)*, looks at a broader picture of human behavior with a focus on graffiti and gangs. This source looks at culture, race, and history in relation to the beginning of street art.

Another look at gangs and graffiti is presented in Craig Castleman’s *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York (1982)*. This book offers a descriptive study of the world of graffiti, from its beginnings in the late 1960s to the steps that NYC government took to try to combat the phenomenon. The author offers personal interviews with graffiti artists and law enforcement, looking at everything from graffiti organizations to the politics of graffiti.

As street art moves into the mainstream its role as a means of communication is becoming increasingly important. Andrea Mubi Brighenti, in "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain," (2010) follows a specific group of

graffiti artists and the relationship between city architecture, social relationships, and the public domain. The author looks at the unique conversations graffiti offers as part of an ongoing dialogue between the city and the graffiti artists as opposed to one-off works. In agreement with this statement is the work of Kurt Iveson, “Graffiti, Street Art and the City: Introduction” (2009). Giving basic background and pinpointing a few general ideas and different approaches to street art, Iveson introduces the complexity of street art and considers the many different purposes and motives it serves.

One such complexity is categorizing street art as fine art. Joe Austin [in “More To See Than a Canvas in White Cubes: For an Art in the Streets” (2010)] argues that street art is a missing piece of modern art. Using both art history and academic discussion of street art, Austin points to a gap where street art should be considered fine art. As neither simply graffiti nor modern painting, Austin claims that street art is a hybrid form of both and should be taken seriously in the art world. Comparing it to pop art and *collage*, Austin suggests that the unexpected authenticity of street art scares society, but that it is vitally important in cultural history. Austin concludes that street art only enhances city life and cultural richness. Not everyone agrees with this idea, however.

Ben Lewis, a filmmaker and art critic, writes in a review for the *London Evening Standard* that the recent controversial Street Art exhibition at the Tate Modern Gallery in London is “fun but dumb.”<sup>3</sup> In “No, it’s not Banksy...” (2008) Lewis notes the glaring absence of famous street artist Banksy in the outdoor exhibit that ran from May 23-August 25, 2008. He admits the exhibit was clever, but not artistically impressive. Commenting on the art world’s fascination with and desperation to own a piece of street

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Lewis, “No, It’s Not Banksy,” *London Evening Standard* Online Edition 23 May, 2008, 1.

art, Lewis also reveals the complexity of the street art market. He goes so far as to dismiss street art's place in the art world altogether, and comments that its monumental scale and fantasy graphics blind so many from seeing that it has nothing to do with "art in the galleries," but that it simply re-emphasizes the desire to brighten up decaying cities. Also pointing to the disconnect between art in the galleries and on the streets is "Flyboy in the Buttermilk" (2005) by Arthur C Danto. This article briefly looks at the career of Jean-Michel Basquiat, and his ties with graffiti. Basquiat, although starting out on the streets, left them to pursue a fine arts career. This crossover provides a little insight into the influence of street art on the fine arts world. Something that inevitably affects them both is the issue of pricing and selling the work.

This topic is explored in more depth in "Pictures on Walls? Producing, Pricing and Collecting the Street Art Screen Print" (2010) by Luke Dickens. Dickens conducted an in-depth study into the Banksy-founded street art screen print company, Pictures on Walls Ltd, or POW. Used as a real life case study for the "interplay between art and industry that defines this new graffiti movement,"<sup>4</sup> Dickens offers insight into the world of selling street art. Battling the claim of "selling out," POW works to promote street art as art despite a complicated economic entanglement. This battle is only one of many in street art's multiplex story.

With their common beginnings in the street, street art has been shadowed by graffiti writings associated through media with gangs and crime since it's beginning. In "The Street Art Plague: How Graffiti Is Framed by the Press" (2009), author Tatyana Varshavsky runs a textual analysis of daily newspaper articles involving street art to look

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<sup>4</sup> Luke Dickens, "Pictures on walls? Producing, Pricing and Collecting the Street Art Screen Print," *City 14*, no. 1/2 (February 2010): 64.



at how it is written about. Finding many negative comparisons, Varshavsky brings to attention the media's perhaps unfair framing of street art as only vandalism with no artistic merit of its own, although it is being auctioned at six-figure prices.

Providing a contrast to the usual social deviant status that street art and artists receive is another study looking to street art as inspiration for future advertising campaigns. Moving away from the art world, Stefania Borghini, *et al.* examines street art from the perspective in "Symbiotic Postures of Commercial Advertising and Street Art" (2010). The authors, who are professors at different universities in the US and Italy, performed a multisited ethnography of street art, searching for themes and insight. This study explores the creative tensions and synergies between countercultural and commercial communication forms of street art and advertising. It examines the legitimate cultural role that street art now plays in society and how it is shaping and changing advertising. Focusing on rhetoric, the author examines street art from the use of persuasive messages and discusses the role of future advertisements as they are influenced by street art.

Another study, by the same authors, although in a different order, looks beyond street art's physical likeness and into the realm of it as a reclamation of public space. The study, "Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the "Public" in Public Place" (2010), most notably breaks down the ideologies of viewing street art into two main views: individualistic and collectivistic. Further breaking these two sections down, the study provides insight into how the public and artists are very much split when it comes to street art's purpose and value.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Is street art graffiti, fine art, advertising, reclamation of public space, all of these or none of these? In what way does it hold value and merit?

## BACKGROUND of STREET ART

Graffiti “dates back to the wall paintings of prehistoric humans,”<sup>5</sup> but the graffiti in New York City, usually called “subway graffiti” is “thought to have begun in the late 1960s. During this time, a Washington Heights teenager named Demetrius first started writing his nickname, Taki, and his street number, 183, on walls, stoops, public monuments, and especially in subway stations all over Manhattan.”<sup>6</sup> Writers, as they were called, cared only to be the most seen. Within a few years a new emphasis began to be placed on the style of the writings, and embellishments became the focus of making these “hits” and “tags” stand out.<sup>7</sup> “‘The street’ is, according to almost all writers...the birthplace as well as the target of writing. Here, however the street should not be understood as a merely physical urban infrastructure. Rather, the street is a territorial construction fundamentally linked to the public destination of graffiti.”<sup>8</sup> Graffiti writings raise two main points, “First, seen from the inside, a tag is essentially a territory marker.”<sup>9</sup> And “second, seen from the outside, the writer in fact ‘touches’ something that belongs to all, something that is public...and, by doing so, he or she renders visible a

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<sup>5</sup> Graig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1982, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Castleman, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Castleman, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain," *Space & Culture* 13, no. 3 (August 2010): 326.

<sup>9</sup> Brighenti, 326.

number of questions about the norms and the rights, about the law—pluralistically conceived—that defines the nature and the register of social interaction in public spaces.”<sup>10</sup> This unique notion of public space is where street art begins to take shape.

Consuming public space is part of living in a society. The difference in consumptions, however, from feelings of bonding to avoidance, leaves the nature of public space to be continually negotiated and puts street art in “the forefront of such a spirited confrontation.”<sup>11</sup> Contemporary street art is not easily defined; its total range continues to grow and expand, but generally it can be seen in city architecture covered “with layers of stickers, posters, stencils, wheat pastes, emulsion and spray paint.”<sup>12</sup> And because of this vague definition, the range of inspirations and meanings is also broad, but some would say that this is why street art is so fascinating: “the most fascinating thing about this movement is that it is so young. Lots of people... are taking inspiration from a very shallow gene pool of ideas. And it’s quite boring most of the time, but occasionally you see flashes of genius.”<sup>13</sup>

Some may see street art as an independent zone that is temporarily taken from commercial and government control to be used by artists and dwellers looking for genuine interaction with each other.<sup>14</sup> Loosely classifying the varieties of mark making, Visconti, *et al.* has identified six common themes:

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<sup>10</sup> Brighenti, 327.

<sup>11</sup> Luca Visconti, *et al.*, “Street Art, Sweet Art? Reclaiming the “Public” in Public Place,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 37, no. 3 (October 2010): 512.

<sup>12</sup> Romain, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Pure Evil quoted in MacNaughton, *London Street Art Anthology*, Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Visconti, 512.

- Tags represent street art in an early form, focused on spreading an individual's name. Often repetitive, these marks appeared everywhere and were relatively simple.
- Highly stylized writing evolved from tags and focused on a more aesthetic practice of self-affirmation.
- Sticking is a practice of posting drawings, messages, or symbols so as to spread short messages quickly and broadly. This form allows most of the work to be done before the artist hits the street.
- Stenciling is a form that allows the artist to mimic the same symbol over and over easily and quickly in many places by using a cutout of some sort.
- Poetic assault is one of the more recent manifestations of street art, consisting of infusing dull public places with poetic content.
- Urban design relates to public beatification of architecture with an aesthetic focus.<sup>15</sup>

This list, while neither all-inclusive nor exclusive, offers a jumping off point for identifying and organizing street art, but does not elaborate on how to look at it or communicate why it is made. Although identifying the physical markings of street art is important to recognizing it, this study is even more focused on how to classify street art as a whole.

## **STREET ART as (FINE) ART**

The definition of art has been vastly debated and redefined throughout history. It is not within the scope of this study to try to fit street art into a predetermined definition in order to claim that it holds significance in the art world, but instead to look at how artists, critics, collectors, and dwellers, or passersby, view its validity as an artistic expression.

Some, like Banksy, view street art as reclamation not of just the streets, but of art itself. Few street artists are as vocal and prominent in the movement as the mysterious Banksy, whose real identity is unknown. A street artist from London, who works with a

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<sup>15</sup> Visconti, 513-14.

unique stencil technique and argues that his street art, like many others “is the product of a generation tired of growing up with a relentless barrage of logos and images being thrown at their head every day, and that much of it is an attempt to pick up these visual rocks and throw them back.”<sup>16</sup> Banksy focuses on his use of public space as a chance to reclaim and redefine art for the culture it represents:

Art is not like other culture because its success is not made by its audience. The public fill concert halls and cinemas every day, we read novels by the millions and buy records by the billions. We the people, affect the making and the quality of most of our culture, but not our art. The Art we look at is made by only a select few. A small group create, promote, purchase, exhibit and decide the success of Art. Only a few hundred people in the world have any real say. When you go to an Art gallery you are a simple tourist looking at a trophy cabinet of a few millionaires.<sup>17</sup>

For this reason, street artist Banksy took to the streets with his art. Banksy argues that graffiti is the “most honest art form available. There is no elitism or hype; it exhibits on some of the best walls a town had to offer, and nobody is put off by the price of admission.”<sup>18</sup> But with a steadily rising profile, more media coverage, museum exhibits, and growing auction values, is street art at risk of becoming “the tasty new flavor of the moment” and simply a “trendy fascination.”<sup>19</sup> Banksy’s vision and actions sometimes seem to contradict themselves; between, on the one hand, being accepted and highly valued in the art world, and on the other hand, becoming being less accessible for the common viewer, his life as an artist or street artist presents a double-edged sword.

Paolins, a street artist in Italy, provides this distinction: “[street art is] a form of art that is

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<sup>16</sup> Ian Edwards, "Banksy's Graffiti: A Not-so-simple Case of Criminal Damage?" *Journal of Criminal Law* 73, no. 4 (August 2009): 346.

<sup>17</sup> Banksy. *Wall and Piece*, London: Century, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Banksy.

<sup>19</sup> Carol McCormick, "Hopeful Disobedience," *Art In America* 97, No. 3 (March 2009): 54.

ungovernable...if it gets into museums, it loses 'cause it's no longer instinctive stuff.

Then it's just a drawing like any other...it must remain in the streets."<sup>20</sup>

Banksy, in an effort to make his art available to everyone, founded a screen-printing company called Pictures on Walls, Ltd (POW), which offers a unique look into "the interplay between art and industry"<sup>21</sup> that helps to define street art. Operating completely online, POW offers a limited number of screen-printed replications of works by better-known street artists, some even signed, for a relatively small fee, usually around \$200. A commercial industry by nature, POW believes very strongly in its mission. The most important aspect offered by studying such an industry is identified in an inside look into the debate between "selling out" commercially vs. the inevitable economic complications such companies face in their efforts to promote street art as art.<sup>22</sup> POW, standing as an example of how fluidly street art moves within culture, works hard to communicate that it operates "not as a buying in or selling out of street art,"<sup>23</sup> but regulating a standard for the consumption of street art, working to simultaneously validate its worth in the art world and to regulate its authentic street voice as much as possible. In an increasingly virtual world, street art is consumed online as much as it is in person. And as POW sells prints which circulate online at inflated prices and increasing monetary value, it becomes more and more apparent that "the material cultures of a street art aesthetic beyond its physical presence on the street"<sup>24</sup> is valued.

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<sup>20</sup> Brighenti, 321.

<sup>21</sup> Dickens, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Dickens, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Dickens, 70.

<sup>24</sup> Dickens, 78.

Not everyone thinks it should be, however. Ben Lewis, in a review of the Street Art exhibit held in 2008 at the Tate Modern museum in London, discusses his increasing discontent with street art and its inflated market value. The exhibit featured six works of art, from six different artists, which defaced the exterior walls of the Tate Modern and stood at about 45 feet high (Figure 1). Lewis indicates that, while the museum did commission the works as an exhibit of artistic merit, it keeps the work outside, perhaps to respect “the street in Street Art”<sup>25</sup> but also perhaps as “a cunning way of avoiding the big issue of whether the work really is art in the same sense as the stuff inside.”<sup>26</sup> This issue draws attention to the real value of street art and its complex past and present. Lewis points out that there have been some very famous participants in street art, but that they eventually moved into the galleries in order to validate their work and ideas. Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat both “rose to fame, calculatedly painting their designs on the walls around New York’s galleries and subsequently getting exhibitions in them.”<sup>27</sup> Basquiat, for instance, moved into the galleries because he “was after the kind of recognition that the establishment alone confers, not the ephemeral celebration of co-conspirators in an underground network.”<sup>28</sup> His influences were more avant-garde than those from the street and so he took to the galleries, still with the same visceral excitement, but with more concern for “the highest needs of the spirit”<sup>29</sup> than fame. The quality of ideas Basquiat was after is key to Lewis’s argument. From the way street art sells at auctions in the art world (Banksy’s work has sold for over \$100,000), Lewis

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, 2.

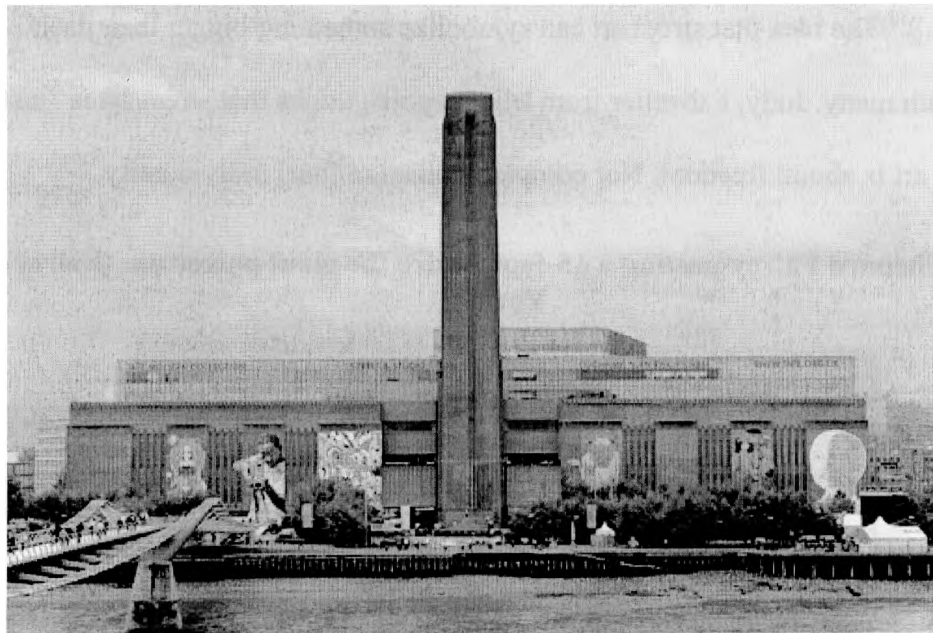
<sup>27</sup> Lewis, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur C. Danto, “Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Jean-Michel Basquiat,” *Nation* 280, no. 18 (May 9, 2005): 26.

<sup>29</sup> Danto, 26.

argues that there is clearly a market for it, but that the assessment of the work has to come from the quality of ideas, not the size of the check. Although Lewis does not care for the aesthetics of most street art, he admits that “the history of modern art has often been the story of ‘low’ art forms raised to the level of fine art by collectors and critics,”<sup>30</sup> and therefore, cannot be so easily dismissed. Lewis’s article asks the pivotal question; while street art is fun, clever, and expensive, is it good art?

**Figure 1. Tate Modern Street Art Exhibit. (Faile, JR, Nunca, Os Gemeos, Sixeart , and Blu, London)**



Shepard Fairey, also known as “Obey” on the streets, moves with less mystery and more notoriety (on the streets) than Banksy in his fluid shifts from street to commercial venues, and vice versa. Fairey says that these shifts should not matter;

I’m a street artist, whether or not I show in galleries or museums ... I believe in seizing public space in ways that make people question our use of it, but my art has nothing to do with the politics of street art. Much like

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<sup>30</sup> Lewis, 4.



my posters, shirts or charity work, it's really about communicating with as big an audience as possible, with as few filters as possible.<sup>31</sup>

Fairey, perhaps first famous for his image of Andre the giant (Figure 2) posted everywhere from walls to lampposts in every big city across the U.S.A., has gained more buzz from his *Obama Hope* poster of 2008. The iconic image of the first African-American U.S. president received attention from the president himself. Obama wrote a thank you note to Fairey calling to attention the “profound effect”<sup>32</sup> his work had on people. This praise ultimately reveals a “a tacit sanction of street art from the leader of the free world that is a dramatic shift in the perceived role of art as a radical tool of social intervention.”<sup>33</sup> The idea that street art can symbolize something bigger than itself resonates with many. Judy, a dweller from Minneapolis, thinks that street art is “just what [she] thinks art is about: freedom. Not commercialization [but] individuality.”<sup>34</sup>

**Figure 2. Shepard Fairey pasting a 15-foot Andre the giant poster up. (Fairey, New York)**



<sup>31</sup> McCormick, 54.

<sup>32</sup> McCormick, 51.

<sup>33</sup> McCormick, 51.

<sup>34</sup> Visconti, 525.

A relatively unheard of local street artist in Lynchburg, VA, Don Juan, says his main objective is to “put a smile on someone’s face.”<sup>35</sup> He frequently places his stencils in places with qualities like “bleak medium--gray concrete slabs in (usually) run-down or neglected areas,” or on crosswalk signs and attempts to make them into “something people can maybe appreciate a bit more,” and often reveals “something pleasantly unexpected”<sup>36</sup> (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Angry Crosswalk Man (Don Juan, Lynchburg, VA)**



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<sup>35</sup> Don Juan, Interviewed by author via e-mail, February 27, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Don Juan.

These differing motives and degrees of seriousness illustrate what Kurt Iveson introduces with his work. Iveson, very bluntly points out that “plenty of graffiti is crap,”<sup>37</sup> and to either celebrate all graffiti equally or to reduce it all to ‘anti-social behavior,’ regardless of quality, reveals “an analytical blindness...which ought to be contested.”<sup>38</sup> Removing these too narrow viewpoints allows street art to make its own place in the world.

Just as Lewis claims that street art is more street than art, Joe Austin argues the opposite. Viewed as a missing piece of modern art, Austin notes that street art can neither be simply framed within the history of just graffiti or just art: “removing these two frameworks opens up a new space for seeing [street art] as a valued addition to contemporary urban life.”<sup>39</sup> Removing it from simply graffiti, Austin attempts to connect street art into the history of modern art. Austin suggests a way that street art

might be profitably connected to a critical strand of modern art history that conventionally connects the dada movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to neo-dada and pop art of the 1950s and 1960s and from there into the pluralist era of the 1970s.<sup>40</sup>

Austin jumps into these connections without hesitation and with the knowledge and understanding to back each one up, but his real thesis comes after all the connecting is done. Austin concludes that street art, while neither entirely graffiti nor art, has a foot in each, and because of this stance, is actually a “significant contribution to, even a step

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<sup>37</sup> Kurt Iveson, "Graffiti, Street Art, and the City: Introduction," *City 14*, no. 1/2 (February 2010): 28.

<sup>38</sup> Iveson, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Joe Austin, "More To See Than a Canvas In a White Cube: For an Art in the Streets," *City 14*, no. 1/2 (February 2010): 34.

<sup>40</sup> Austin, 37-38.

forward for, modern art.”<sup>41</sup> Its real contribution is not so much in the style represented, but in the placement of the work: “Given its other opportunities, [street art] has insisted that what is at stake in modern art is actually located (and alive) outside and beyond the velvet ropes, in shared public space itself.”<sup>42</sup> Instead of taking inspiration and aesthetics from the world and isolating them in galleries and on canvas, street art counteracts the separation, instead melding environment and aesthetics—a revolutionary idea of creating art in the street and letting it belong there. This is where street art most clearly defines itself.

The fact that Austin draws so many connections to established and legitimate art movements, while others dismiss street art entirely, illustrates the complexity of defining and validating street art as art. There is no straightforward label for street art as of yet. In all genres of art, the artistic style and technique does not define artistic worth in and of itself, but is used as a guide for viewing the work and extracting its meaning and value. Street art is exactly the same. The subject matter, technique, craftsmanship, and meaning must come together to define value and success piece by piece. While this still leaves a lot up in the air in the art world, street art is beginning to be understood in many other avenues and directions.

## **STREET ART as ADVERTISING**

Street art has more recently been studied as a form of advertising. This idea is interesting because street art, for many artists, is about a response to or mockery of advertising in the first place. For example, Fairey’s aforementioned Andre the Giant

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<sup>41</sup> Austin, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Austin, 43.

posters and stickers which first began in 1989 “as a homemade study of the semiotics of youth-branding skate culture.”<sup>43</sup> Ultimately “the project worked as a sticker campaign that in the end advertised nothing. Hooking the viewer with a come-on but never delivering a product, it became a phenomenally widespread inside joke that traveled around the world like some viral meme.”<sup>44</sup> Banksy himself coined the term “brandalism” in 2005, “to define those practices of street art aiming to short circuit the one-way communication of established brands and declaim the independence of the individual voice.”<sup>45</sup> Banksy writes that, “any advert in public that gives you no choice whether you see it or not is yours. It’s yours to take, rearrange and reuse. You can do whatever you like with it. Asking for permission is like asking to keep a rock someone just threw at your head...they never asked for your permission, don’t even start asking for theirs.”<sup>46</sup> Banksy’s work, as well as that of others, has a strong opposition to advertising, but with these recent studies analyzing street art as advertising, perhaps street art has run its course as a controversial statement on society and become just another visual assault in the streets.

The evolution of street art is clearly surfacing, or maybe it is simply evolving. Although “advertising and graffiti writing stand, at first sight, on two almost opposite footings,”<sup>47</sup> there are undeniable similarities, and it has been suggested that they be studied together because of their “ubiquity in urban space and their visual impact on

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<sup>43</sup> McCormick, 51-52.

<sup>44</sup> McCormick, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Stefania Borghini, *et al*, "Symbiotic Postures Of Commercial Advertising And Street Art," *Journal of Advertising* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 119-120.

<sup>46</sup> Banksy, 160.

<sup>47</sup> Brighenti, 317.

urban landscape.”<sup>48</sup> The evolution of street art is in fact becoming part of “urban capitalism and entrepreneurialism.”<sup>49</sup> Street art is no longer just a vandal’s outlet for self-expression, thrill, or resistance, or a mere subculture practice. It is evolving into a “radical interrogation of public territories, a questioning of the social relationships that define the public domain.”<sup>50</sup> It has become a creative driving force instead of just a reactive one. A force that can no longer be ignored, nor should it be, street art offers its own insights into effective advertising in two ways—idea generation and social engagement.<sup>51</sup>

Street art has been compared not only to advertising, but is being studied as an inspiration for the future of outdoor advertising. Street art, unlike advertising, works to “promote noncommercial consumption.”<sup>52</sup> The relationship between street art and advertising is complex and confusing, but the connection cannot be denied. Particularly for young people who are more active participants in material culture than other age demographics, advertising becomes “vital and pleasant, emphasizing the search for beauty through the symbolic use of common culture, experience and reinterpretation as an authentic form of art.”<sup>53</sup> With this increasing popularity, comes increasing power. The most recent comprehensive study on street art as advertising, finds seven rhetorical practices:

- Aestheticization
- Playfulness and cheerfulness

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<sup>48</sup> Brighenti, 317.

<sup>49</sup> Brighenti, 323.

<sup>50</sup> Brighenti, 329.

<sup>51</sup> Borghini, 114.

<sup>52</sup> Borghini, 113.

<sup>53</sup> Borghini, 114.

- Meaning manipulation
- Replication
- Stylistic experimentation
- Rediscovery
- Competitive collusion<sup>54</sup>

Street art, more recently known for its aesthetic effect, offers a clear example of this in urban design. Often emphasizing overlooked displays like walls, curbstones, garbage cans, or stairs, street art uses the application of aesthetic characteristics to draw attention where there is none. In this way street art can encourage advertising to step outside the box and recreate traditional commercial ads with new functions such as “decoration, curiosity, surprise, or entertainment, or to utilize new unconventional media.”<sup>55</sup> Remarkably, recent studies have shown that, “creative media choices can facilitate consumers’ perceptions of ads and thus enhance brand attitudes.”<sup>56</sup>

In reaction to the sometimes gloomy, dull outlook cities can have, “street art relies on a language dominated by playful and cheerful codes.”<sup>57</sup> Often borrowing material from cartoons, street art may give an experience to viewers walking in the streets, “similar to reading a fairy tale.”<sup>58</sup> The novelty often used in street art, converting the repetitive aspects of everyday life to fresh, engaging ones, could help to engage the audience more. Street art sets itself apart from advertising by achieving a certain

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<sup>54</sup> Borghini, 116.

<sup>55</sup> Borghini 116.

<sup>56</sup> Borghini 116.

<sup>57</sup> Borghini 116.

<sup>58</sup> Borghini 116.

connectedness with the audience through offering them a cheerful gift. If advertisers were to do the same, although it may require a higher risk for some, it may diversify the creative processes. The transcendence that street art offers the public is partly why it is engaging to many viewers. The ability to transform an environment of everyday lifelessness into enjoyment and happiness, street art has both a physical and emotional appeal.

Street art combines content from many other cultural domains, such as politics, marketing, and popular arts, giving it an eclectic nature, but it does so carefully and skillfully as to give new meanings to the discourse in unexpected ways. This results in the successful destabilization of the expected into something new. The aforementioned term, “brandalism,” is a key example of this reinvention. The manipulation of meanings includes remixing conventional codes, decontextualizing logos or symbols, and finding new ways to use images in unexpected locations. The surprise element of street art is paramount in the effectiveness and likeability of what is essentially a crime and if advertisers were to use this tool more effectively and legally, perhaps they too could be as loved and as successful.

Another rhetorical practice used effectively by street artists is the replication of symbols and meanings. By using a template, but allowing for some variety, street artists replicate symbols quickly, easily, and effectively. The more unique the placement, like the higher up a light post a sticker may be with no obvious explanation, the more powerful the street art can become, and the surprising thrill it produces can be a powerful tool. Advertisers have long used replication, but street artists have realized the value that variety in replication can hold and harnessed that to achieve a following who are always



happily awaiting their unexpected delight, rather than anxiously trying to avoid the next predictable advertising attack.

Stylistic experimentation, because aesthetics are not always the first concern of street artists, allows for a freedom that ensures exposure, attention, interpretation, and retention through replicability, desirability, accessibility, and participation.<sup>59</sup>

Replicability is achieved through either a specialized technique or media, and must be able to repeat the message clearly. Through the imitation and reproduction of famous artists' styles and genres, (pop art, surrealism, informalism, action painting) street artists are able to manipulate the desirable associations and accessible communication tools into familiar but new concepts. The element of audience participation through intimacy, amusement, familiarity, and two-way communication is vital to the success of stylistic experimentation.<sup>60</sup> Street art allows many different aspects to collide creating a powerful and popular set of communication techniques.

Rediscovery is another powerful tool of street art. Physical rediscovery of the unseen is an evocative ideal which street art makes possible and utilizes as a means for transfiguration as restoration. Street art often celebrates and draws attention to forgotten and lost areas of towns, such as subway tunnels, lightposts, back alleys, and crumbling walls. This transformation is not just aestheticization of cities; it is a complete reversal of traditional advertising from the aim to reduce the consumer's sight scope to one single purchase option to allowing the passerby to observe normally unobserved, invisible urban lands. Street artists use a variety of practices to achieve this goal; changing things to draw attention to their original meanings, to increasing or decreasing the size of the work of art

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<sup>59</sup> Borghini, 121.

<sup>60</sup> Borghini, 121.

to increase the chance of exploring different communication venues, and making marginal or unspoken topics more vocal and notable ones. This tool illustrates a key feature in street art which sets it apart from traditional fine art or advertising, but which may impact each.

In another aspect that sets it apart, “creative socialism,”<sup>61</sup> street art allows for the overlapping, destruction, and deterioration of itself in order to recycle, renew, and make room for more. The creative collusion within the creative socialism has produced “an unwritten and now largely respected rule that no street artist has the right to destroy the work of another.”<sup>62</sup> There is also an element of competition that pushes artists to expand, rejuvenate, and reinvent their works for mutual benefit of all artists and viewers. The kind of free space that is produced also acts as a contemporary communication flow chart. In advertising, this is most applicable in social media and co-creation, where it can apply to “the dualism of belonging and egotism.”<sup>63</sup> The duality illustrated through this is one of the most powerful aspects of street art and the reason it speaks to so many. Both an interjection against society’s rules and a beautification of the environment society has created, street art signifies a kind of rebellion and partnership within itself.

These seven rhetorical practices help to illustrate the usefulness and applicability that street art has to areas outside of graffiti and art. The study that identified these seven practices asserts that “with thoughtfulness in order to avoid plagiarism or naive imitation, the rhetorical practices of street art can be employed to improve effectiveness, relevance,

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<sup>61</sup> Borghini, 123.

<sup>62</sup> Borghini, 123.

<sup>63</sup> Borghini, 123.

and social sensitivity of commercial advertising.”<sup>64</sup> But what happens when commercial enterprises use visual language from street art? A dweller interviewed in another study expresses his dissatisfaction with any commercial deployment of street art: “should Banksy do advertising posters in the streets I’d look for its subliminal commercial message. I would react differently, I would raise barriers, I mean . . . so to understand what is hidden beneath. The idea of being passive in front of it would make me feel somehow violated.”<sup>65</sup> This illustrates a disconnect between street art and advertising which may not completely allow for the two to mix successfully.

### **STREET ART as RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACES**

Street art can be seen as a powerful tool in reclaiming public space, by being viewed as “creative destruction, wherein wrongly privatized space is returned to its rightful owners.”<sup>66</sup> Given that street art transforms something free to be seen by all and is surrounded by so much controversy, it serves to highlight “the difficulty in representing what public space is or should be, that is, of an ideology of public space.”<sup>67</sup> One study by Visconti, *et al*, identifies two mutually exclusive ideologies on this position: individualistic versus collectivistic. Within the first venue “artists and/or dwellers act as separate agents who claim personal entitlement to public space or who dispose of these spaces according to market rules.”<sup>68</sup> Within the second main venue dwellers and artists “aim to defend the collective ownership of public space while striving for its restitution to

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<sup>64</sup> Borghini, 124.

<sup>65</sup> Visconti, 519.

<sup>66</sup> Visconti, 515.

<sup>67</sup> Visconti, 512.

<sup>68</sup> Visconti, 516.

meaningsul consumption.”<sup>69</sup> Within the two main ideologies, the study examines four basic categories; “(i) private appropriation of public space, and (ii) dweller’s resistance to the alienation of public space, (iii) artists’ claim for street democracy, and (iv) joint striving for common place (Table 2).”<sup>70</sup> The study then proceeds to define and explain each one as it relates to street art in the public realm.

**Table 2. The Function of street art in public space.**

		<b>DWELLERS</b>	
		Individualistic appraisal of public space	Collectivistic appraisal of public space
<b>STREET ARTISTS</b>	Individualistic appraisal of public space	<b>Private appropriation of public space</b> <u>Dialectical confrontation</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Contesting hypocrisy</i></li> <li>- <i>Self-affirmation</i></li> <li>- <i>Market exploitation</i></li> <li>- <i>Dwellers' preserving private property</i></li> </ul>	<b>Dwellers' resistance to the alienation of public space</b> <u>Dialectical confrontation</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Contesting street art locations, forms, and intents</i></li> <li>- <i>Defending the authentic voice of the place</i></li> </ul>
	Collectivistic appraisal of public space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Enchanting urban space via gift</i></li> <li>- <i>Enchanting urban space via vitalizing</i></li> </ul> <u>Dialectical confrontation</u> <b>Artists' claim for street democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Dialogical recreation of public place</i></li> <li>- <i>Sense of place and feeling the community</i></li> </ul> <u>Dialogical confrontation</u> <b>Striving for common place</b>

Private appropriation is defined as “an individualistic view of public space.”<sup>71</sup>

There are three main ways this category is seen: (1) “Contesting hypocrisy,” (2) “Self-affirmation,” (3) “Market Exploitation, and (4) Dwellers’ Preserving Private Property.”<sup>72</sup>

Some artists seem to be contesting the hypocrisy of clean, blank walls that assume

<sup>69</sup> Visconti, 516.

<sup>70</sup> Visconti, 517.

<sup>71</sup> Visconti, 517.

<sup>72</sup> Visconti, 517.

reverence while only concealing “corruption, selfishness, and social inequality.”<sup>73</sup> Others may be using street art as a kind of egotistical exhibitionism. And still others are looking for monetary gain and opportunistic market value (like Obey who carries over his street art practice into the commercial world). Due to the illegal nature of the act itself, some see street art as law-breaking conduct, which they will not stand for in public spaces. Some see street artists as vandals and think it is their job to make sure justice is served. These views have a common thread of seeing the individual ownership of public space before anything else, although in different ways.

The second category is the resistance by dwellers to the alienation of public space. They are dissatisfied with the ugliness of cities and so claim that, although a wall may be privately owned, it is publicly visible and therefore belongs to a greater public. Two main components this category takes into consideration are dwellers “(1) Contesting Street Art Locations, Forms, and Intents,”<sup>74</sup> and (2) “Defending the ‘Authentic Voice’ of the place.”<sup>75</sup> The first stresses the importance of location, content, and meaning behind the art; and finds that dwellers will not stand for just any or all graffiti, but they can appreciate a well placed, well thought out happening of it. They also stress the important tie an artist must have to the location. Native, local artists often provide stronger messages to other locals than artists’ passing through to this group. The above two subsection categories both fall under the individualistic view of street art. This view most notably makes for a dialectical confrontation between artists and dwellers, a kind of fight rather than a conversation.

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<sup>73</sup> Visconti, 517.

<sup>74</sup> Visconti, 518.

<sup>75</sup> Visconti, 519.

By promoting street democracy, artists' strive for a collective stance and have a twofold contestation of resisting individualistic use of public space while also fighting the deteriorating urban space they may inhabit. Finding a balance between stopping self-exhibitions while also fighting for art in the streets is achieved by, according to Visconti's study, "the enchantment of urban space via gift giving and via vitalizing."<sup>76</sup> Gift giving is essentially free surprises for the community, while vitalizing is to take this a step further and engage the community in the dialogue through the street art. The surprise conversations allow for the street democracy to grow, but ultimately offer only a dialectic confrontation also because artists are calling the shots and not necessarily allowing for dwellers to have a say.

In the final category within street art, striving for commonplace, efforts move beyond a claim and into creating real connection, belonging, and community. In the first section of this ideology, street art strives for a conversation with consumers and then begins to act as a guiding beacon of local community empowerment. Street art attracts tourism, builds pride and self-esteem in the locals, strengthens feelings of connectivity and closeness, and allows for many to feel a greater belonging in the public space.<sup>77</sup> This subsection, in which both dwellers and artists have a collectivistic view, allows for the first dialogical confrontation within the community.

By looking at street art through these four ideologies within two exclusive viewpoints, the perception of public space and the purpose that street arts serves can vary. Visconti's study takes into account that street art is in the streets for numerous reasons and can be interpreted in any number of ways. From individual concerns to democracy

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<sup>76</sup> Visconti, 520.

<sup>77</sup> Visconti, 525.

and community empowerment, Visconti's study illustrates how street art, unlike much of fine art, advertising, and other forms of graffiti, relies on the community and space it comes from to assign it worth and to find purpose.

## CONCLUSION

From its rough beginnings to its current controversial status, street art captures the fascination and imagination of many different people and is involved in many subjects. In what may have originally been a state of rebellion against law enforcement and rules of society, graffiti was born out of a need to be noticed and leave a mark on territory. This kind of writing still exists, but it has been overwhelmingly covered by a more aesthetically invigorating kind of mark referred to as street art. The Global Street Art Movement is evolving daily. While the artistic merit of street art is still being debated, its value in other areas such as urban planning and advertising is beginning to take shape. As this movement evolves in technique, subject matter, market importance, and purpose, its importance as rhetoric for creativity and viewing public space is also evolving. Although not a fully formed movement, street art already has much to offer. But most importantly, it should be considered a separate entity, remaining in the streets where it can influence fine art, public art, and advertising, but never forget its ties to freedom and community.

Although the drive and purpose varies greatly from artist to artist, there is a general acceptance by artists and viewers that street art is both a means to creative self-expression and a public gift of beautification. Giving art back to the society from which it comes, artists such as Banksy work hard to make the marks mean something, educate and/or entertain. Others are simply trying to communicate with as many people as

possible. And still others look for ways to make the world less gray. Defining the artistic worth of this genre is no easy feat. While some form the opinion that street art holds very little, if any artistic worth, others argue that it moves modern art forward in a new direction unlike any other genre before it. Because of such a range of ideas, street art must be viewed, as any art is, on a piece-by-piece basis and not through a vague “good” or “bad” window.

While artistic merit is being debated and judged, street art is being studied in many different areas. Finally, looking at its successes, it seems that advertising has a lot to learn from street art’s effective use of language. Street art, with its many forms, seems to have seven cohesive rhetorical practices, which can help explain its success in communicating to the public. They are (1) aestheticization, (2) playfulness and cheerfulness, (3) meaning manipulation, (4) replication, (5) stylistic experimentation, (6) rediscovery, and (7) competitive collusion. These seven practices provide a means to expand creative output in many areas. Advertising, if it could harness the power of street art, in theory, could occupy overwhelming power in the market. Some feel that this would only make people suspicious and feel cheated. The future will be telling. Even if advertising could learn to emulate street art, there might always be a piece missing in the equation. Essentially, legal graffiti-like advertising would lose some of its merit because the act of vandalism is what makes street art so interesting and empowering:

It is vandalism, no matter how ordered or beautiful. In fact, it is precisely in its illicit aspect that graffiti presents its most useful facet for social analysis. It creates intersections where legitimate and illegitimate meet and enables cultural groups to give themselves solidity and definition...it is often produced by those without power, to negotiate relationships with both the society from which they are disempowered and other within their own groups. If graffiti is a window into a culture...then it is the same



window that people use to look in on themselves as they actively construct the guidelines and concerns of their lives.<sup>78</sup>

In this sense, street art, in order to remain legitimate, must continue on the streets, by people, for people, and address the people's concerns. Others can learn from it, try to understand it, purchase it, and imitate it, but the fabrication and commercialization will never ring as true or be as much of an art as the pure erratic and beautifully unpredictable nature of art on the streets: "Perhaps we lose sight of this basic need for expression, as unsightly as it may seem. Graffiti may never be embraced wholeheartedly, and perhaps it must remain on the fringe of social acceptability to preserve the authenticity of its character."<sup>79</sup>

Finally, one study presents two different ideologies behind street art for redefining public space: individualistic and collectivistic. And by applying these ideologies to different categories found during the study, which include private appropriation of public space, dweller's resistance to the alienation of public space, artists' claim for street democracy, and joint striving for common place, common themes and confrontations are found. All of these have to do with both the artists' drive and the viewers' response. These two ideologies give us something more concrete to apply to street art and help to identify a message of communication in the public sphere. Allowing for a number of possibilities in the final confrontation, the purpose of street art, according to these ideologies is as varied as the artists' who make it.

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<sup>78</sup> Susan A. Phillips, *Wallbanging: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, 20.

<sup>79</sup> Tatyana Varshavsky, "The Street Art Plague," *Words.Beats.Life: The Global Journal of Hip-Hop Culture* 4, no. 1 (June 2009): 76.

Street art is not fine art, graffiti, public design nor advertising, although all of these areas can learn from it just as much as they inform and influence it. Street art is in limbo, which allows it to constantly transform and reinvent itself according to its creator and location. This idea speaks to the blurry lines that make up so much of mass culture. Neither black nor white, street art is literally a splash of color in our sometimes gray world.

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