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Paint the Town Red or Climb the Concrete Jungle: How Street Art Can Defy or Fail to Escape
the Disciplinary Apparatus of Capitalistic Control in the Art Market

Street art is a contemporary art movement that sparks controversy, defies definition, and spans a wide range of expressions and intentions. The merits of graffiti are widely debated, with both criticism and critical appreciation for its complex role in free expression. Meanwhile, street art is increasingly making its way into institutions and into the “gift shop,” or becoming institutionalized. One of the most popular and critically acclaimed street artists of the current century is Banksy, an anonymous artist reportedly from the U.K. In one of his most widely publicized stunts to date, Banksy’s painting was intended to self-destruct at a live auction in 2018 after it was sold, but a malfunction in the auto-destructive mechanism caused the work to only shred halfway. Originally titled *Girl with Balloon*, the new painting was titled *Love is in the Bin* and sold for a record \$25 million. Banksy’s work ultimately failed to escape the frame it sought to challenge. Similarly, 5Pointz, once a cultural mecca and thriving center for sanctioned street art in Queens, was destroyed overnight after the developer decided to sell the building and whitewash the paintings. Both works failed to escape the capitalistic regime of ownership, instead becoming yet another object of re-appropriation and capitalistic control. The paradox of ownership in street art stem from its impermanency, which directly resists institutionalization or homogenization. Nonetheless, the capitalist market manages to monetize even that which critiques it, commodifying street art and bringing it under market logic and capitalistic control.



Banksy, *Love is in the Bin*, 2018. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

By and large, graffiti is the most publicly accessible form of art, as it pervades public spaces and defies traditional boundaries for where art should be displayed. Sammond and Creadick argue that graffiti is “of the people, by the people, for the people.” Historically, graffiti is a popular form of art that arose from urbanization and situated itself in large cities, relying on pedestrian traffic for viewership. Graffiti can be interpreted as the “voice of the voiceless,” a firmly anti-establishment movement for those without a political voice to demand change. At the same time, graffiti plays with the “simultaneous gestures of representation and erasure, legibility and illegibility, authorship and anonymity,” lending it a level of complexity that adds to its cultural significance (Sammond and Creadick). From a philosophical standpoint, Chackal argues that “illegality is a prototype and paradigmatic feature of street art” that composes the appeal of street art. Moreover, illegality is a form of “cultural capital” that adds “aesthetic power” to the work. By defying the law and traditional establishments, street art can maintain its authenticity and cultural genuineness (Chackal).

Street artists act on a variety of motivations beyond those of monetary value, seeking to reclaim what is due them in public spaces— whether that comes in the form of agency, fame, ownership, or destruction. In Bansky’s 2006 book *Wall and Piece*, he writes, “People look at an oil painting and admire the use of brushstrokes to convey meaning. People look at a graffiti painting and admire the use of a drainpipe to gain access” (237). Graffiti is formed under fundamentally different conditions than sanctioned art, and this process is integral to the creation and appreciation of street art. In interviews with street artists, many affirmed the thrill of “scratching, irritating, making people run away [. . .] the gusto of the prohibited” (Visconti et al.). One artist put it in plain terms: “I don’t appreciate this society, it’s fucked up, and so I’ll dirty this wall, and when they say they want to clean the wall they should instead think about

cleaning up what's behind it ... what's inside it." Graffiti is a language of rebellion and protest, and some street artists revel in making a small dent in a world of hypocrisy, tainted institutions masked by pristine white walls. Others view their tagging as a "form of exhibition," making their mark on a world that otherwise would leave behind no record that they existed (Visconti et al.).

The spaces people consume are interchangeably intertwined with capitalistic systems and consumer culture, but street art aims to facilitate conversation in public spaces as an act of resistance against the onslaught of nonstop one-sided subliminal advertising. Visconti et al. present public space as a public good that is consumed by urban dwellers and artists alike. As a battleground between "collective sharing versus capitalistic appropriation," the ownership of public space is constantly being contested. The article draws attention to the need for increased consumer agency, "beyond the domain of privately owned and consumed goods" (Visconti et al.). In other words, the authors advocate for a world with collective ownership and meaningful consumption of shared spaces. Street art, then, can be viewed as an "authentic voice" that facilitates conversation and street democracy, "where sense of belonging and dialogue restore it a meaningful place" (Visconti et al.). This view is shared by Cowick, who makes the case that street art is a channel of communication that can provide a voice to the disenfranchised, a space for the people to "identify problems, question values, make claims, and suggest alternatives." Spaces that do not push some underlying consumerist message onto the viewer are rare, but street art is one way for people to regain agency in the spaces they consume.

The fleeting nature of street art embodies its spirit and power, conveying messages that resonate with diverse audiences and capture the essence of social movements. In simplest terms, street art is a free show offered to the general mass, the audience for its consumption, in exchange for their viewership and reception. In a world that values economic profit over all else,

the very act of contributing one's talents for no profit is a revolutionary concept, one that goes against everything capitalism stands for. Carmen Cowick, an expert in the preservation of documents and collections, highlights the complexities that arise from the precarious legal status of street artists and the inherently transient nature of their work. Any effort on the artist's part to hand over their work to an institution could have them deemed a "sell-out." While she advocates for preserving street art, she concludes that ephemerality is an essential component of street art as a genre—graffiti naturally resists archival and permanence. On the other hand, Chackal notes that from the street artist's perspective, "risk, danger, and audacity" is inherent to the aesthetic of street art, and street artists earn respect and legitimacy primarily through their "spontaneity, greater autonomy, and authentic production form." As such, many street artists look down upon sanctioned and traditionally housed art forms because they fail to hold up to this metric of authenticity. Rather than follow mainstream art trends, most street artists work to subvert dominant narratives, customs, and rules— even if that means their work will never be featured in an exhibition or find a permanent home in some wealthy collector's basement.

Here is where the tension between institutional art and street art comes to a head: graffiti simply cannot maintain its authenticity when it is removed from its original context, displayed in museums, or commodified by auction houses. There is a tangible loss of power when street art is institutionalized, turned into a commodity for a privileged few rather than a mass communication for all. Sammond and Creadick characterize graffiti as "full of meaning, yet also known, felt, and experienced as ephemeral." From the viewer's perspective, the temporary nature of graffiti creates a viewership experience that is impossible to achieve with an immortalized work of art. Thus, as Sammond and Creadick argue, "efforts to fight graffiti's ephemerality" often fail to acknowledge the role of context, environment, and setting in the overall impact that graffiti has

on the viewer. Graffiti is a mass communication that refuses to be confined within institutional boundaries. The aesthetic impact of graffiti is “surprising, because our everyday lives are in danger of becoming gray” (Visconti et al.). Street art is a burst of color in an otherwise gray concrete jungle, a flower that grows from cracks in sidewalks and fades as fast as it blooms.

The art establishment perpetuates social inequalities and concentrates wealth in the hands of a privileged few, and this appropriation only serves to exacerbate exclusionary dynamics. At their core, institutions such as museums and auction houses serve to gatekeep ideas, consolidate institutional wealth and power, and control the archival, documentation, and appraisal of art. These mechanisms determine who holds authority and influence in the art world, shaping art appreciation into a commodified shopping experience and stripping it of accessibility. Visconti et al. highlight how “artists are deploying street art aesthetics both to sell their own garments and to design products for major international companies,” using their art to launch careers in the fashion industry. With street art aesthetics increasingly being featured in commercial products, Visconti et al. caution that what started as a resistance against the commercialization of urban spaces can make way for “the opportunistic bending of street art to market logic.” Through the institutionalization of street art, street art can be placed “under the control of the market by means of art auctions, galleries, and other forms of commercial exchange” (Visconti et al.). What initially emerged as a grassroots, democratizing social movement is co-opted by the wealthy, who adopt it as a fashionable costume. In doing so, they transform the essence of street culture, stripping it of its original intent and rendering it yet another practice that reinforces exclusion and privilege. The appropriation and commodification of street culture by the affluent serve as a poignant example of how social movements are diluted, ultimately perpetuating social inequities rather than challenging them.

Banksy's work can be read as a microcosm or a cultural inflection point of sorts for the building tensions between street artists and art institutions. The piece provides commentary on the absurdity of the art world and the hollowness of consumerism, sending a strong anti-consumerist message. The original artwork, titled *Girl with Balloon*, was one of Banksy's most well-known and iconic pieces. The work features a young girl reaching for a balloon and invites ambiguity about whether she is setting the balloon free or losing it. Evoking the loss of childhood innocence, *Girl with Balloon* has become a powerful symbol of social inequality, with Banksy producing multiple variations of the image in support of social campaigns. Despite Banksy's historical aversion to the art establishment, he agreed to auction off an original painting he made of the mural, which was set to sell at an impressive £1 million, or 1.24 million USD. In the official description from Sotheby's, the auction house acknowledges that "his foray into the art world establishment [. . . is] dissident and subversive, operating on paradoxical levels that further served to heighten the underlying political and satirical impetus of his art" ("Love is in the Bin"). Irrespective of the auction house's insistence that they are 'in on the joke,' however, Banksy's choice to destroy his work rather than allow it to be sold presents a clear attack on the auction house and the art establishment itself.

Once again, the auction house transforms art into a consumable product rather than something to be shared, reflecting the influence of corporate greed and the capitalistic drive to turn everything into capital. The frame surrounding the painting is representative of the art establishment, and it is also the vehicle of destruction that Banksy uses to shred his own work. The frame surrounding the artwork is a meticulously crafted piece in a classical style, adorned with embroidery and painted with gold. The embellished design serves as a representation of the art institution itself, symbolizing wealth and the art establishment. Drawing attention to the

viewer's gaze, the frame serves to make the viewer conscious of the lens through which institutionalized art is observed. What affects the perception of the value of art is not necessarily the art itself, but rather the context it is situated in— the expensive frame alerts the viewer that an art authority has deemed the painting valuable and worthy of display. Hidden in Banksy's frame, however, is a destructive mechanism that was meant to cause the piece to end up in shreds on the floor. In the clamor of the wealthy to attach their names to cultural capital, the original meaning of the work is lost. In contrast, graffiti as a means of expression is inherently democratizing, creating a work that has no true owner. The iconic painting lives on not through memorialization, but through memory and cultural impact. The act of shredding the artwork can be read as Banksy's attempt to escape the confinement of art's commodification and return the painting to its rightful purpose of promoting social equality rather than gatekeeping wealth.

On the other hand, Banksy's failed attempt to destroy his work also demonstrates how easily street art can become yet another vice of private commercial industry. Erber explores how contemporary capitalism shapes the creation and dissemination of art, claiming that "economic rationality penetrates every corner of our existence," including modern contemporary art (151). The paradox of authenticity in street art is reflected in the work itself. When Banksy chose to build the shredding mechanism into the frame itself, he intended to destroy the work fully, leaving it in shreds on the floor. However, it only shredded halfway, an ironic end to the project that generated lively debate and discussion. The auction house benefited immensely from the publicity generated by the stunt, and the live performance cemented the work's status as a cultural artifact. Although *Love is in the Bin* was initially lauded by the press and the public for critiquing market capitalism and the commodification of street art, this development caused the piece to skyrocket in market value. Ultimately, Banksy's show of solidarity wound up fueling the

capitalist machine that it purportedly criticized. It never fully escaped the "frame" it sought to challenge, remaining caught between two worlds.

Whether the motivation is wealth or control, the capitalistic drive to commodify art and public spaces ensures that street art cannot last. Banksy developed an aversion early on to unauthorized appropriation and people who profit from his work without having any grasp of its message or purpose. Cowick argues that more attention should be dedicated to preserving street art, highlighting its significance within social and political movements. Banksy presents an interesting case study in this regard, as he is a well-known street artist and yet there are still very few official records of his work, other than photographs taken and uploaded to the Internet. As a result of his increasing notoriety and acclaim, Banksy's work is often pilfered by individuals who sell his art for profit. Further highlighting this distressing behavior, "people have taken to stealing his work and selling it—it has been cut out of the walls in order to make a handsome profit" (Cowick). Moreover, despite achieving high levels of success as a street artist, Banksy still takes to destroying his stencils in fear that they would be forged and sold for a profit, and his fame did not stop "London police from buffing out his works in June 2012 [. . .] to clean the city in preparation for the Olympic Games" (Cowick). These contrasting responses represent the two extremes of capitalistic perversion: one, removing the work from its original context to be sold without permission from the artist, and the other, erasing the work from existence for the sake of maintaining appearances and homogenizing the urban landscape.

Banksy's case may serve as a cautionary tale that no matter how well-established or influential the artist, they can never fully escape the disciplinary apparatus of social control under a capitalistic society. Art does not exist in a vacuum, and the increasingly blurred boundaries between art and the capitalistic market for art merit a closer look at the relationship

between art and neoliberalism. Further complicating the appropriate reception to the piece is the fact that Banksy himself has a stake in both sides, despite his persona as a "man of the people." Erber points out that though the piece presents itself as a "rebuke of empty consumerism from a master," Banksy is actually partaking in capitalism in "the most deceptive manner," that is, "while selling itself as anti-capitalism" (150). As one dweller shared, "Should Banksy do advertising posters in the streets [. . .] I would raise barriers [. . .] to understand what is hidden beneath. The idea of being passive in front of it would make me feel somehow violated" (Visconti et al). Indeed, "the channeling of street art talent into the marketplace may be [. . .] an aspect of the endless cycle of capitalist appropriation," and art for the sake of art is essentially obsolete. As conversational commons give way to self-interest, the trend towards commodification buries the potential street art holds to disrupt homogenous city landscapes, leaving the door wide open for advertising from corporations and private ownership by institutions and elite individuals.

One master study in place-making that developed independently from the influence of private ownership or corporate advertising is 5Pointz, a curated living-art project that was once Queens' principal cultural mecca and collaborative storytelling space. The public mural space was born after the owner of the building, Jerry Wolkoff, hired graffiti artist Jonathan Cohen to curate exterior murals. According to Chaubal and Taylor, the site was a "world-class museum" in its own right, "arranging contributions of artwork [. . .] reminiscent of the exhibition standards in traditional galleries and museums." Experiencing a huge rise in prominence over the years, the "collaborative process through which 5Pointz was continually created and animated established [. . .] a cultural practice of ritualized place making" that established the place as a metropolis of hip-hop, artistry, and culture. Here, it is necessary to distinguish between space and place. Space

traditionally refers to “something anonymous, whereas place distinctively accounts for the meaningful experience of a given site,” or “consumed space.” In other words, “places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world” (Chaubal and Taylor). 5Pointz, at its peak, was greater than the sum of its parts; it was an experimental utopia of a cultural landscape that transformed an ordinary space into a beautiful and collaborative, collective place. One of the most tragic inequities found in marginalized communities is a lack of aesthetic beauty, starvation of the eyes, and a lack of places that serve them and give them meaning. 5Pointz was a place where public space was reclaimed as a shared good, creating a communal identity that is unparalleled by modern urban spaces. Some scholars refer to 5Pointz by the idyllic German term “Gesamtkunstwerk,” or “a total artwork [that] creates an imagined community of participatory spectators who would not necessarily know one another but would feel connected through their shared experience of the art” (Chaubal and Taylor). The collaborative process that created 5Pointz was what resonated with people, drawing in visitors and aspiring artists from all over the world to this place.



5Pointz, Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



5Pointz, Courtesy of Bloomberg.

The end of 5Pointz came suddenly and without warning, destroyed for the sake of the building owner’s capitalistic profit and demonstrating once again how quickly street art can be commodified and perverted. Along with the gentrification of Queens and the increasing popularity of 5Pointz as a tourist destination, the value of the original building shot up. Building owner Jerry Wolkoff “received approval from the New York City Planning Commission to demolish the 5Pointz building and construct two luxury condominiums in its place” in 2013. Overnight, Wolkoff quietly whitewashed the exterior of his building and destroyed the open museum that had once served an entire global community of artists (Chaubal and Taylor). As tragic as this ending was, it was also ironic: the years of unpaid work from the artists ultimately paid for the increased economic value of the space, the gentrification of the surrounding area, and the literal whitewashing of a thriving community of color.

5Pointz was a “defiant” kind of museum, institutionalizing for artists rather than against them. In other words, they provided benefits for street artists— legitimacy, recognition, stability—

while keeping the spirit of street art alive in the constantly evolving, dynamic place and leaving room for new voices and perspectives. In the case of 5Pointz, “where tangible and intangible elements were dynamically intertwined, documentation cannot suffice to encapsulate the complex dimensions and active sources of the site’s heritage value” (Chaubal and Taylor). 5Pointz artists were able to find a tacit compromise between the opposing forces of institutionalization and the “old school perspective” that “legality or institutionalization takes away from graffiti’s intrinsic nature as anti-establishment.” Their solution was “to legitimize their art form on their own terms, institutionalizing it while also subverting the concept of an art museum” (Chaubal and Taylor). The value of 5Pointz may be non-quantifiable in monetary terms, but this institutionalization without monetization inevitably brought about its destruction.

The challenges that street artists face in gaining any sort of legitimacy or protection for their work are rooted in capitalistic assumptions about what constitutes valuable art and is yet another paradigmatic feature of the market that makes artwork into products. Understandably furious about the destruction of their artwork, 5Pointz artists sought out retribution in court but found little success in establishing 5Pointz as a landmark that merits legal protections. According to Chaubal and Taylor, “the site’s loss helps to reveal shortcomings in preservation and intellectual property laws regarding the recognition and protection of collaborative cultural practices and their evolving loci.” These shortcomings were seen in the criteria for protection under the law, including a “thirty-year threshold for eligibility,” “special historical interest or value,” mentions in “either scholarly publications or dissertations, which apparently were the default criteria for the work’s ‘stature,’” and “moral rights” that fell outside the range of “work of an ephemeral nature” (Chaubal and Taylor). Indeed, “the Court seemed convinced that the

only value of any note that could be attached to the 5Pointz works was monetary, stating as it did that ‘paintings generally are meant to be sold’” (Chaubal and Taylor).

These backward and antiquated ideas about what art can and should be are institutionalized through the law and heritage policy, further contributing to the capitalistic disciplinary apparatus that effectively turns all human creativity, production, and labor into something to be sold. The law is exceedingly clear on this matter: art that falls outside the narrow definition of institutionalized art— art that is collaborative in nature and not for an individual’s profit or intellectual “property,” art that exists on borrowed space, art that is community-oriented, or made by people from marginalized communities— is not worthy of protection. It is exceedingly clear that anything unable to be sold is undeserving of preservation. Not all hope is lost, however: although 5Pointz could not be preserved, in 2018 the building owner was made to pay \$6.7 million to the 21 graffiti artists whose work he destroyed by a Brooklyn Supreme Court Judge. Wolkoff was found to have violated the Visual Artists Right Act (VARA) by not giving the artists adequate time to preserve their work (Chaubal and Taylor). Whether this monetary sum is enough to compensate for the damage done to the artists is left up to interpretation. After seven years of unending legal battles, it can only be taken as a bittersweet victory.

Done right, street art serves as a channel of communication that allow for diverse voices to be heard and create a sense of shared ownership. Beauty, ownership, heritage, and identity found in places are privileges reserved for an elite few— and the rest are expected to pay for belonging through other means, like changing their own appearance in lieu of changing the appearance of their environments. The onus of identity is shifted to the individual, who is expected to find their own meaning and purpose in their individualistic traits, advantages, and marketable abilities rather than in a communal identity. Urban dwellers, who are the main

audience for both street art and marketable commodities, hold little to no agency in the use of public spaces despite having an equal right to shared ownership. Some dwellers share that they are “irritated by the meaningless things [they] see, which are written just to scribble the walls.” Others defend the “authentic voice” of the place, saying “anonymous streets [. . .] don’t tell any story [. . .] I think it is a kind of rebellion against this sensation of being homogenized” (Visconti et al.). Homogenization serves several functions, among them is creating passive, meek, and servile workers who obey orders and follow predetermined paths. Architecture is not a neutral area—rows of identical buildings serve to erase individuality and diversity and reinforce the power of corporations in controlling individual lives. Street art is one way to negotiate a city’s collective identity, recreating public spaces to better reflect the diverse identities of its residents. In areas devoid of life, beauty, or surprise, graffiti is the language of the silenced, a reminder that humanity is composed of social animals that were not built to exist in anonymity.

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