

Banksy's artwork in detroit

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Banksy arrived in Detroit and created 4 pieces on various walls, in various locations around the increasingly troubled city. It is important to note from the beginning, that not one of the pieces Banksy created during his time in Detroit survives today. While a small sliver of one of the pieces – this one in fact – is physically in tact, what remains is a fundamentally incomplete and undoubtedly impoverished version of the work itself. The surviving portion is incomplete and impoverished because it is only a sliver of the broader canvas into which it was placed.

Once again, all of the pieces Banksy put up in Detroit have either been destroyed by the owners of the walls upon which they were created – not knowing the significance of the work – by individuals looking to profit from the sale of the work, or, in the case of this image, ‘preserved,’ significantly altered, or ‘destroyed’ – depending on one’s perspective – by individuals in the community seeking to save them from their inevitable destruction. It is equally important to recognize that they surely (and undoubtedly) would have been destroyed in one way or another. Street art is one of the only – if not the only – plastic arts that embrace’s its own eventual demise. It is, in other words, and its practitioners are eminently aware of this, inherently ephemeral. As this sequence of images by a Street Artist known as Mobstr indicates. The inherent ephemerality of these works of art is the result of a relatively unique set of contextual circumstances and social relationships of power within which most street artists ply their trade.

Just now, I referred to these pieces as works of art and I believe that that’s how they should be regarded. Not as vandalism, not as a crime, not as a nuisance, or blight – however all of these descriptors are accurate, once

again, depending on one's perspective. There is no other contemporary art movement that works at the same scope and grandeur as street artists' do. They consider walls that sometimes stretch horizontally for entire city blocks as a canvas of massive proportion. They see the blank concrete of a high rise and think of it not as private property, or the structure of someone's home or business, but as a concrete canvas.

The sheer size, complexity, and detail involved in some of street art's most notable exemplars qualifies it as an artform par excellence. However, in the eyes of the law, the majority of property owners, or in the by laws of municipal city councils, this is, for the most part, not the case. Once again, and for the most part, in the eyes of the law, street art is vandalism and property damage that upsets the stability of city life and the sensibility of city dwellers, making them fear for their safety on the streets of their city. From this perspective, street art needs to be eradicated, erased, and/or 'buffed out,' as the terminology of the street calls it, as soon as possible. Removing graffiti and street art is akin to fixing the broken windows that, if left unrepaired, as the infamous story told by Wilson and Kelling goes, will lead to further crime, disregard for private property, the apparent safety of others, and an overall degeneration of the city as a space reserved almost exclusively, according to David Harvey, for commerce and private property rights.

Succinctly, then, the life expectancy of a piece of street art is very short. It is not only over-zealous municipal councils and their legions of constables that go around buffing out the work of street artists, however. There are at least four other factors that make the work of street artists inherently

ephemeral. In addition to municipal officers buffing out pieces, the second factor limiting the life expectancy of street art, are property owners themselves. When a piece of private property gets tagged without the permission of the property owner, the inclination of the property owner is to get to rid of what they consider to be vandalism as soon as possible. This is especially the case when the owner isn't aware of the value of certain pieces. This one, done by Banksy in Melbourne, Australia, was apparently destroyed when, someone's father was house sitting and he thought he would do his son-in-law a favour by getting rid of it.

However, and generally speaking, the commercial value of street art by the vast majority of street artists, save a very select few, is close to nil. If you're a street artist and you're not Banksy, you breaking proverbial windows all the time. Property owners, then, seeking to maintain the aesthetic integrity of their property, are the second cause of street art's limited life expectancy. The third cause is other street artists themselves. Ever since the appearance of graffiti on the subways and walls of New York City and Philadelphia in the late 70s and early 80s, graffiti and street art have been caught up in a clandestine contest that revolves around territoriality, prestige, ego, and fame, based on the courage and capacity to get one's tag up in the most dangerous and visible locations possible.

Looked at from these five different perspectives, street art is one of the few 'plastic arts' that is planned, designed, and created in full knowledge that the end product will, in one way or another, disappear or be destroyed over time – and in some instances, very short periods of time. This inherent

ephemerality is, of course, where the digital camera and the Internet become incredibly important implements in the street artist's quiver.

As much as these artists are reliant on the physical qualities of cinder block, concrete, wood, and steel, to exercise their creative vision, they are equally reliant on the immaterial, virtual, and distributed hardware and software characteristic of the Web 2.0 era, to document that which in all likelihood, and in the very near future, will disappear for one of the five reasons listed above. Taking into account the ephemeral transience of street art from the perspective of the artists themselves, these same artists can, then, as much as they are regarded as street artists, also be regarded as digital artists, digital photographers, albeit digital artists and photographers that go to great lengths, and put themselves at great risk, in the preparation of their compositions. This point is important enough to recognize, but to stop here would be to cut short a more in depth examination of the practice of creating street art and the absolute importance of the concrete yet entirely transient and stochastic qualities of the urban canvas to the art form.

As I hope to demonstrate, the vagaries of the urban fabric serve only to reinforce the point just made regarding the importance of the digital camera and the Internet. AWKWARD – the very particular qualities of the surfaces upon which this kind of art is produced – the individual qualities of very particular walls – and the either serendipitous or pre-planned incorporation of trash, foliage, or other elements of the natural (or manufactured world) into the pieces themselves – very much unlike the blank stretched canvas upon which other forms of art are produced – play an incredibly important role in the creation of street art. Reciprocally, and at the same time, they also

underscore the importance of the digital camera, the digital photograph, and the Internet to the preservation and dissemination of the works themselves. I think this can best be explained by reference to the photographs themselves.

If we look at this piece by Banksy for instance, created in the run up to the London Olympics in 2012 and around the same time as his 'Slave Labour' piece, we see a pole-vaulter falling backwards, not quite making it over the barbed wire fence and onto the discarded mattress below. For the time being, I'm less interested in a semiotic reading of the piece than I am in paying attention to the actual physical things that play a part in the construction of this semiotic meaning. The mattress and the fence are absolutely integral elements of the piece. They are as important to the work as the pole and the pole-vaulter. If absent, for whatever reason, the piece itself wouldn't be the same piece. Or, rather, it would be an entirely different piece, with an entirely different meaning. For instance, after this photograph was taken, there is a good chance that the mattress might have been discarded, the fence taken down in order to install the requisite Plexiglas.

The point being, that the artist has obviously deemed these elements of the urban fabric to be elemental to the overall work itself. If removed or altered in any way, as they surely will be, the work is no longer that of the artist. Much like deleting scenes from Hamlet would fundamentally alter the play as Shakespeare intended it, removing the mattress alters the piece as Banksy intended it. If the mattress goes missing, is moved, or shifted, the artwork, as the artist envisioned and created it, is no longer. This example too, indicates how important the actual elements of the urban fabric are to the

piece. They are intricately woven into the artwork itself. This is becoming ever more important and prominent in Banksy's work and if I can speculate for a moment, I think this has everything to do with his politics – I presume he's a 'he' at least – it has everything to do with his politics, the market value of his work, and the propensity of property owners to remove it and auction it off, or of municipal councils to put it behind Plexiglas. So what would happen if this wall was cut out and moved to a gallery, into a private salon, or placed behind Plexiglas? Or what if we simply come back in Winter?

Well, of course, the flowers that this boy is vomiting would die. They would either be uprooted and killed, squashed behind the Perspex and killed, or in time, and as a result of the elements, die of natural causes. This is, of course, in addition to, and on top of, the fact that the piece itself has a very limited shelf life for the five reasons described above. As mentioned previously, once the work of street art is finished, the artist responsible for its production turns his/her back on it, in effect abandoning the work, leaving it to live or die as the street sees fit. Before doing so, however, and for the most part... The work, as the artist intended it (and as he/she created it), is documented with a photograph. This practice too has its historical lineage. These are slides taken by Martha Cooper, a photographer, along with Harry Chalfant, responsible for archiving the early history of graffiti on the streets of this fair city we all find ourselves in today. Without the photographs of Cooper and Chalfant, not to mention the artists themselves, this important stage in the history of arguably one of the most important artistic movements of the past century would have never been preserved for us to see today.

The photographic record of these inherently ephemeral works, then, preserves them and at least some of the context within which they existed at the time of their creation. In a manner of speaking, then, not only does the digital photograph enable the preservation and dissemination of the artwork in a state that the artist obviously approved of, but the physical act of taking the digital photograph is the final brush stroke that signifies the piece is finished and the artist is done with his/her work. The moment at which he/she can turn around and walk away. Much like an oil painter who, when the canvas is completed to his/her satisfaction puts his/her name to the piece, the digital photograph serves as the street artist's signature of sorts. It signifies that the work is as the artist intended it and that, in the state it was when the photograph was taken, is complete. So, again, similar to the signature in the top right corner of the Picasso, the signature is a sign that signifies the painting is complete. The digital photograph plays much the same role.

Once again, it functions in much the same way as the artist's signature in that it denotes that the artist is happy with the result and the scene looks as it should. One of the more provocative questions that this pushes to the fore of our investigation, is, then, what if the piece is altered or removed from the context in which it was created for any reason whatsoever? Extracted from the broader landscape that plays such a pivotal role in its interpretation and meaning. Does it continue to be a Banksy for instance? And I think there's a very good argument that it does not. Doesn't the digital photograph of the work – in the place where the artist created it and inclusive of the elements so pivotal to its meaning – more accurately represent the artwork than the '

salvaged' (or preserved) work when it's placed in the white cube of a gallery? And I think the answer is, yes, yes it does.

If this is the case, then, the photograph serves not only as the signature of the artist, but because of the ephemeral nature of the work and the resolute importance of the surroundings to it's meaning also as a work of art itself – albeit one that reciprocally depends on spray paint to be completed. As mentioned earlier, in these instances, the street artist can be equally considered a digital artist, albeit a digital artist that goes to great lengths and puts him/herself at great personal risk in the preparation of their compositions. This piece was placed inside the perimeter of the dilapidated and abandoned confines of a Packard Assembly plant – a 3-and-a-half million square foot ruin on the south east side of metro Detroit. To be honest, and in my opinion, the piece itself isn't one of Banksy's best . It is, however, notable because it makes specific and pointed reference to the very particular and exact location in which it was created. It is, much like a lot of his more recent work, heavily context dependent. “ I remember when all this was trees.” And it is this ‘ this’ that I think distinguishes this piece.

At the end of the process of filling in the stencil, and writing the phrase, Banksy metaphorically signs the piece by taking a photograph of it. And he takes the photograph of the piece as he wanted it to look – knowing full well that it will probably disappear in the near term. The stencil itself is frame left, with the ruins occupying frame right, inviting the viewer of the photograph to complete the story the boy is telling by following the implicit directions offered in the word bubble. This is how Banksy wanted us to see the piece. This is where he wanted the piece to be. This is the location and

the perspective from which he wanted it interpreted. The location and the broader context in which it is placed is, in fact, as important (or more so) than the image of the boy himself. This photograph, then, is a more accurate representation of the artwork in the way the artist created it than the actual piece that is now housed in a Gallery in South West Detroit.

The only thing that marks the place of the original – in January of 2012 at least – this too has probably changed – is an odd tangle of colourful fabric whose origins and purpose are impossible to verify – other than the fact that they are placed at the exact location where the piece was once located. Completely extracted from the context that constitutes an incredibly important part of the ‘ canvas’ itself, the meaning of the piece as the artist intended it, no longer makes sense.

Or perhaps, and rather, it still makes sense, but the sense that is now being made is not that intended by its creator, but, rather, by those persons who ‘ saved’ it from its eventual destruction... or by somewhat obsessed academics like myself. Therefore, by moving the piece and extracting it from the place that is part and parcel of itself – that plays such an important role in the work – those individuals that preserved it, or saved a relatively small portion of the piece, did so by means of destroying the larger piece which might include the 3. 5 million square feet that constitute the abandoned factory’s footprint. In the absence of these 3. 5 million square feet, we no longer have a piece of street art by Banksy, but a roughly 7’ x 7’ corner of a piece that forms part of a much larger work of art. The fact that the photograph is also a poor representation of these 3-and-a-half million square feet is something I’m still thinking through. To conclude, s however, and

completely omitting from consideration any conversation regarding the ephemeral nature of street art in relation to Benjamin's notion of the 'aura' as it relates to works of art that no longer exist, something I'm going to take up in my book as a result of the ephemeral nature of street art and the fact that the urban canvas is part and parcel of the artwork itself I would like to conclude by reiterating that as much as street artists can be thought of as artists that work within (and with!) the very concrete confines and materials of the urban fabric, they can also, and perhaps better, be thought of as digital artists that go to great lengths in the preparation of their compositions.

Thank you so much for your time and attention today. You've no idea how much I appreciate them both.