Chapter 13
Digitized Street Art

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I think it takes much greater courage to create things to be gone, than to create things that will remain.

(Christo)

Abstract This chapter argues that "street art" is a mode of artistic expression reliant on the vagaries of the urban environment as its canvas and, as a result, is ultimately dependent on digital technologies to document, disseminate, and reproduce these inherently ephemeral artworks. Whether altered or destroyed by another artist or tagger, "buffed out" by overzealous municipal authorities, or simply decayed by the elements, street art is fundamentally ephemeral. It is this inherent ephemerality that requires the original piece be digitally documented and preserved. The digital camera and the Internet in particular, then, serve to preserve the work of street art that, in their absence, would otherwise be lost to time. By reference to firsthand field research undertaken in Detroit, Michigan, shortly after an "original" Banksy was relocated (and depending on one's perspective, destroyed or saved) by a local art gallery, this chapter concludes by exploring the idea that street artists working within the very physical and concrete confines of the urban city are better regarded as digital artists, albeit digital artists that go to great lengths in the preparation of their compositions.

Banksy in Detroit: An Introduction

In May of 2010, Banksy made his way to Detroit. Infamous yet anonymous,[1] Banksy is a street artist of world repute whose international fame is based largely

[1] Banksy's true identity remains a contentious topic of debate. Although never confirmed in an official capacity, the *Daily Mail* claims to have uncovered the "true" identity of the elusive street artist, believing him to be named Robin Gunningham (Tapper 2008).

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on the illegal application of aerosolized paint to walls, often with the assistance of a stencil. In the spring of 2010, he embarked on a “promotional” tour of the United States designed to create publicity for a documentary he directed called *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010). The film focused on the developmental history of “street art” and was eventually nominated for that year’s Academy Awards for Best Documentary. In each city the film was to premiere in, Banksy would arrive a few days prior and create a handful of pieces of street art so as to promote the film in the hopes of generating media attention and, reciprocally, ticket sales at the box office. This promotional tour is what led him to the troubled city of Detroit in general and the dilapidated Packard Motor Car factory on the city’s southeast side in particular.

Banksy created four individual pieces in Detroit, none of which survive to this day. While fragments of the piece he created at the Packard Plant remain, the work of art as the artist created it in situ was destroyed. The Packard Plant is an abandoned industrial manufacturing facility that once employed tens of thousands of individuals and whose three and a half million square feet now sit derelict among much of Detroit’s notorious industrial refuse. The walls that remain have become a favorite location for local graffiti writers and street artists that see on (and within) them a place to practice and hone their skills while remaining relatively sheltered from the legal sanctions of the depleted police forces that struggle to maintain order in the increasingly troubled metropolis.

Located among hundreds of discarded tires, mounds of broken cinder block, crumbling walls, trash, and the valueless remnants of the industrial infrastructure left behind after years of scavenging, the piece created at the Packard Plant depicts a child holding a can of red paint and a paintbrush with a caption that reads “I remember when all this was trees.” The piece itself is not particularly accomplished in terms of its artistic qualities and is rather crude in its message and design. As will become clear throughout what follows, however, this chapter is not interested in providing an aesthetic analysis of Banksy’s works. It is, rather, much more interested in the assessment of the inherent ephemerality of street art and, reciprocally, in the examination of the pivotal place of the digital camera and the Internet in the preservation and dissemination of these fleeting works of art.

What follows below, then, answers the central research question that inspired the present chapter. If street art is a form of artistic production fundamentally linked to, and dependent on, the concrete and stone that constitute urban city space, then what role does the digital camera and the Internet play in its creation, preservation, and dissemination? Street art is an inherently ephemeral art form whose end products are destroyed (or at the very least altered to the point that they no longer bear any significant resemblance to that produced by the artist) due to their being created in the public, on the street, and thus free of any kind of physical protection. The five primary causes underlying street art’s inherent ephemerality will be examined in much more detail below. For the time being, however, a number of qualifications need to be made so as to detail exactly what is being discussed and examined in the following pages.

The first qualification is better understood as an act of classification. Put simply, street art is not graffiti and graffiti is not street art.[2] The difference between the two eminently related, yet significantly different, art forms is located not so much in an historical/aesthetic turn, but much more so in an evolution of the art form over the years and in response to one of the primary causes for its ephemerality. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, graffiti was a burgeoning form of urban inscription[3] located primarily on the public transportation systems of New York City and Philadelphia (see Gastman and Neelon 2010). The municipal authorities of these cities regarded the rapidly proliferating tags and writings of some of their citizens on the subway cars, stations, and platforms as a threat to public order and as a visual blight that required rapid removal. Using a variety of tactics that are described in more detail below, the authorities in these municipalities waged aggressive and costly "wars on graffiti" that (in the space available at present to explain their outcomes) they effectively won.

Cleansing the subway systems of these illegal markings, however, had the unintended effect of driving them above ground, expanding the locus of this transgressive act beyond the confines of the subway system and thus converting all city streets into a makeshift and unsanctioned canvas for "writers." Throughout the years, the tags bearing the nickname of writers become increasingly complex. Developing from the rather crude markings of "Taki 183" (see *New York Times*, 1971), to the more accomplished work of a writer like Seen (active in New York in the early 1980s), to the so-called wild-style of graffiti, whose angular and geometric forms camouflage the name of the writer in complex arrangements of spray-painted confusion, graffiti cannot be regarded as a singular form of artistic inscription that obeys particular stylistic rules and/or conventions.

However, there are two central features that remain consistent throughout "graffiti" which assist in conceptually differentiating it from "street art." The first is the consistent use of aerosolized paint as its primary media. While some writers used broad-tipped felt markers to tag, the majority made use of spray paint to make their mark. The second consistent feature, and the one that most directly differentiates "graffiti" from "street art," is graffiti's all but ironclad dependence on typographic forms of urban inscription. That is, the repetitive yet always creative application of one's name, nickname, or moniker is the central feature that unites a wide range and amazing variety of graffiti writers throughout the years. As is to be expected, over the course of graffiti's evolution, the designs created by writers and taggers become increasingly complex. The development and profusion of "wild-style," a genre of

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[2]Some authors argue that "street art" is better thought of as "post-graffiti" (Dickens 2008) due to its similar yet different mode of urban inscription. This chapter, however, employs "street art" as its primary signifier to describe in general terms the contemporary state of a subcultural artistic movement that creates art on the street.

[3]It should be noted, however, that there were stylistic progenitors to what is commonly known and referred to as "graffiti." The widespread diffusion of the "Kilroy Was Here" marking by American servicemen throughout World War II as well as the "Bozo Texino" marking (see Daniel 2005) used by so-called hobos in the mid-to-late nineteenth century are early iterations.

graffiti that remains as vital, interesting, and captivating today as it was in the past, was a signal that the process of applying one's name to a wall with spray paint had reached a pivotal moment of heightened abstraction very far from its modest origins.

By disguising one's name beneath the crisscrossing and seemingly incomprehensible markings characteristic of wild-style, graffiti's emphasis on legible typography begins to wane. If wild-style was the first indication that an easily and widely understandable tag was becoming less and less prominent, then street art takes its cue from wild-style by dispensing with graffiti's reliance on typography entirely. Street art, for the most part, abandons this reliance on typographic forms of inscription or at the very least begins to experiment with their combination alongside much more iconographic or pictographic forms. According to Luke Dickens, "the core component of graffiti writing, is increasingly being replaced by 'street logos'; a shift from typographic to iconographic forms of inscription" (2008, p. 474). While many of the arguments made below can be equally applied to the manifold styles emblematic of graffiti, for the sake of conceptual clarity and precision, this chapter makes specific and particular reference to street art and not to graffiti.

The second qualification requiring further explanation is the central difference between the sanctioned or legal form of street art and that is unsanctioned and illegal. The "art vs. crime" debates have dominated the scholarly discourse regarding graffiti and street art, and thus, they will not be rehashed here (see Halsey and Pendrick 2010; Halsey and Young 2006; McAuliffe and Iveson 2011; Young 2012). The central goal of this chapter is to better understand the influence of digital technologies on a form of artistic expression that is resolutely reliant on the physical qualities of the street. One of the many paradoxes that characterizes this influence, and one that escapes the boundaries of this chapter, is that the profusion of digital photographs of street art online has transformed the practice from one that is resolutely illegal in nature to one that has been embraced by certain jurisdictions due to its capacity to solicit tourism and tax revenue. In the absence of the digital camera and the Internet at large, this transformation would not have taken place.

In short, because of digital technologies, street art has become very popular and, hence, has the capacity to drive tourism and the municipal revenue streams associated with it. Street art festivals are held annually and around the globe in urban spaces as diverse as Perth, Australia (see FORM 2014); Hawaii, USA (see PowWowHawaii 2014); and New Delhi, India (see St. ART Delhi 2014), to name but a few of the more contemporary instances. These festivals designate particular walls throughout the city space as legal canvasses upon which some of the most talented artists are invited to create their work.

This kind of legal street art is not the focus of this chapter. Instead, the present chapter trains its critical lens on illegal forms of urban inscription created in the absence of municipal approval. While the evolution of the art form from one that catalyzed the aforementioned "Wars of Graffiti" in the late 1970s and early 1980s to one that is actively being promoted by municipal authorities for its capacity to generate tourist tax dollars is interesting in its own right, a detailed analysis of what

can be roughly described as the "political economy of street art" is forestalled until a later time when it can be adequately assessed on its own terms.[4]

On first blush, the third and final qualification that requires clarification is one that is seemingly too obvious to mention. The present chapter considers only those instances of street art that are created and found in public space. While the "street" is obviously a fundamental component of street art, once again due to the popularizing impact of digital technologies on the art form, there has emerged a thriving market for street art prints and other forms of art created by "street artists" that are not be found in the street. Dickens' work focuses particularly on "the unique range of ways street artists are able to translate their edgy, exciting work on the street into commodity form" (2010, p. 63). Thus, consideration of this dimension of street art is not present in what follows. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, the following pages are concerned exclusively with illegal or unsanctioned "street art" that occurs in the public and on the street. However, they are also focused on an element of street art that has up until this point received scant attention in the scholarly literature.

The pivotal role occupied by the digital camera, the Internet in general, and blogs and social networks more specifically in the documentation, preservation, dissemination, and popularization of street art has never been given the critical attention it merits. As much as street artists rely on the brick, concrete, and stone that constitute the backdrop of the urban canvas, due to the inherent ephemerality of their works, they are also equally if not more reliant on the hardware and software of digital and networked modes of communication that serve to document, preserve, and archive these eminently fleeting works of art. That is, by extending the parameters of the central research question offered above, this chapter argues that as much as street artists can and should be considered as such, they should also (and at the same time) be considered digital artists, albeit digital artists that go to great lengths and put themselves at great risk in the preparation of their compositions.

Up until this point, the pivotal place of the digital camera and the Internet in the creation, preservation, and dissemination of one of the most "concrete" art forms to have ever influenced mainstream culture remains all but unexplored. This chapter, then, seeks to fill in this lacuna by providing a corrective reconsideration of what it means to create inherently ephemeral art that relies on the stochastic qualities of the urban environment with the aim of somehow preserving that which will undoubtedly disappear in the near term. In order to do so, it will make its way through three main sections. The first section will explore the underlying causes of street art's ephemerality. The second examines the importance and incorporation of very particular elements of quite specific locations into the creation of works of street art. When a handful of examples are considered, the locations chosen to create a piece of street art are anything but random and lead to the conclusion that the canvas upon which these works are placed constitutes an important ingredient in the overall work itself. When combined, then, the inherent ephemerality of the works of art as well as the importance of location in their creation leads to consideration of

[4]For an interesting assessment of legal graffiti walls, see Kramer (2010).

the third and concluding section of this chapter. Succinctly, street artists that make use of the concrete, brick, and stone characteristic of the urban environment can and should also be equally regarded as digital artists.

The Five Causes for Street Art's Inherent Ephemerality

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a "war" was being waged on the streets and subways of New York City. In response to the rapid proliferation of graffiti "tags" on subway cars, New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) launched an all-out offensive dedicated to eradicating the profusion of tags on its charges. As detailed in the documentary film *Style Wars* (Silver 1983), this offensive included a litany of measures meant to prevent and discourage the application of spray paint to the fleet of subway cars and stations that make up the system. Police officers, dogs, razor wire, criminal records, public advertising campaigns, and harsh chemical removers were all employed to either discourage or destroy the products of a then thriving subculture that made use of the urban environment as their primary canvas. For the most part, New York's "Graffiti Wars" were won by the MTA in that the subway system was eventually "cleaned up" with tags becoming less of an aesthetic nuisance, paving the way for the commercial appeals that now dominate.

Shortly thereafter, in 1984, photographers Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant published *Subway Art* (1984). The book is one of the few documents of the era that serves to preserve the artifacts of this then fledgling subculture. Photographs of the tags taken by Cooper and Chalfant document the work of such "kings" of the subculture such as Dondi, Blade, Futura 2000, Skeme, Iz the Wiz, Seen, among others. In essence, this important moment in the history of unauthorized urban art would have been lost forever in the absence of Cooper's and Chalfant's cameras. The role of recording devices has from the very beginning been an important one in preserving the past and present of the art form. Graffiti and its artistic progenitor street art are, then, inherently ephemeral in that the artifacts created by the artists are destroyed very soon after they are created. They are for the following five reasons.

In a seminal treatise in the history of urban criminology, George Kelling and James Wilson argue their "broken windows" theory (1982). Schematically, Kelling and Wilson argue that if left unfixed, broken windows in a city building or neighborhood block of flats have the effect of signaling urban disorder and moral decay and that these signals will over time prompt other criminals to break even more windows and exacerbate the conditions that lead to the decomposition of the city's moral, law-abiding fabric. While the article itself makes scant reference to graffiti, the aesthetic disorder put on display by overt flouting of the terms of the social contract is easily applied to the art form. Much like the "wars on graffiti" of the 1970s and 1980s waged by the city of New York, its anti-graffiti units, and the MTA, most municipal councils around the world continue to aggressively eliminate any sign of aesthetic disorder that might result in further decomposition of the moral integrity of the urban fabric.

Known among writers and artists as "the buff," municipal authorities devote vast amounts of human and financial resources to the task of fixing these "broken windows" by painting over, pressure washing, or air-blasting the surfaces upon which the works are created. In London, England, for instance, "In 2005, the total cost of London graffiti was at least £23 m per annum. However, if damage to economic development and loss of capital value to people's homes was included, this figure rose to over £100 m" (Keep Britain Tidy N.D.). One of the key aspects of the process of fixing broken aesthetic windows that will be examined in more detail below is the fact that due to the vigilant efforts of most municipal councils, among other elements, street artists are fully aware of the fact that their work will disappear in the near future. They operate and go to incredible lengths in creating their art, under this very assumption.

In a particularly playful example that makes this fact explicit, a British street artist that goes by the name of Mobstr (the missing vowel an allusion, perhaps, to the photo-sharing social network Flickr) painted with the aid of stencils "Is This Shade of Grey Acceptable" on a wall in Newcastle, England. Very soon thereafter, as expected, the piece was painted over or "buffed out" by Newcastle's municipal authorities. The next day, Mobstr returned and painted in a different hue of gray: "Obviously not, HOW ABOUT THIS SHADE?" Once again, the piece was quickly buffed out. Mobstr responds the next day: "OR THIS ONE?" Again, the buff occurs. Finally, Mobstr's last salvo, painted in black this time, "I GIVE UP" (Mobstr 2010). Most municipal councils go to great lengths and devote vast sums of financial and human resources to eradicating street art from the environment under their charge.

The second central cause for graffiti and street art's ephemerality is private property owners. When municipal councils take too long to remove the offending tag or image, property owners will often step in and remove it themselves. Using many of the same methods used by the authorities, private property owners will paint over, wash off, or blast away the graffiti or street art from the building or structure in question. Often the kind of home one resides in has an influence on the kinds of graffiti or street art one encounters. In an apartment building with many individual units, the likelihood of a writer or tagger choosing its walls, instead of those of a single-family home, is greater. This predilection for surfaces that will be seen by a large number of individuals can be traced to graffiti's early history where the point of the art form was to get one's name in front of as many people as possible. Single-family homes, then, are not all that attractive to writers or artists because they provide very little exposure and will most definitely be buffed in the very near term. The particular facets and importance of some walls or surfaces to the exclusion of others is something that will be addressed in much greater detail below; for now, it suffices to acknowledge the fact that private property owners who see graffiti and street art on their property will remove it very quickly so as to maintain the aesthetic integrity and economic value of their home and/or the structures attached to it.

The third central cause that helps to explain the inherently ephemeral nature of street art is other artists, writers, or taggers. For street artists, the urban canvas is a contested domain where aesthetic battles between individual artists or affiliated groups of artists known as "crews" or "teams" are fought out on a nightly basis.

Street art has none of the protections afforded to other forms of socially sanctioned art. There is no lacquer or varnish applied to the finished canvas. There are no frames with coated glass that protect the works from ultraviolet rays. There are no velvet ropes cordoning off the work from the physical presence of others. There are no security guards keeping watch over the pieces themselves. There are none of the taken-for-granted assumptions of the gallery, where the works themselves are automatically granted cultural or economic significance and, hence, accorded their due respect, as a result of their presence within these socially sanctioned confines. Quite simply, if another artist wants to deface, cross out, or paint over the work of a rival artist, all he/she has to do is walk up to the piece and deface it by applying another layer of paint to the ever-changing palimpsest, that is, the city street.

One of the most infamous accounts of the battles waged by warring street artists is that to have taken place between King Robbo[5] and Banksy on the streets, canals, and alleyways of London, England (see: Preston 2011). In the early-to-mid 1980s, King Robbo was one of the founding figures of the then burgeoning graffiti scene in London. His prolific and accomplished pieces were at one time displayed in all of the usual places: underground trains, tube stations, and of course in various locations around the city. In a testament to the inherently ephemeral nature of graffiti and street art, the vast majority of his pieces have long since been destroyed. There was a single piece, however, whose faded outlines and all but indecipherable content survived in much degraded form.

Titled “Robbo Incorporated,” the piece was placed underneath the British Transport Police Headquarters in Camden on a wall adjacent to a landing bordered by a canal accessible only by boat. The piece was largely regarded as the oldest remaining example of early graffiti in London and was ostensibly accorded a certain amount of respect for its place in the history of the subculture in this particular city. In reality, however, the piece had been tagged over numerous times with those tags being tagged over again by other writers and artists. To say that the original piece created by Robbo was degraded in some way, shape, or form would be to understate the amount of damage done to it over the years.

In 2009, Banksy committed the ultimate act of disrespect by creating a piece of his own over the ragged remnants of King Robbo’s original. The fact that in 2009, the original piece created by Robbo bore very little resemblance to that of the original is often downplayed by those wishing to cast Banksy’s act in an even more disparaging light. The act of painting over “Robbo Incorporated” brought King Robbo out of “retirement” and set off a turf war that reverberated around the alleyways of London for more than 2 years. Every time Banksy would put up a new piece in London, Team Robbo was there very soon after to destroy it. This high-profile example of the battles that ensue when one artist tags over the work of another serves to illustrate the ephemerality of the art form in that when it is left to wither on the street, one of the central causes that underlies its eventual demise is other artists or taggers.

[5]“King” is a term of respect bestowed upon those individuals who have proven themselves particularly adept at creating a large number of pieces that are artistically accomplished.

The fourth central cause underlying the inherent ephemerality of street art is, quite simply, the elements. As alluded to briefly above, works of art left on the street are offered none of the protections that other more traditional forms of art enjoy. Meticulously monitored humidity controls, UV protection, prohibitions against flash photography, and the like simply do not exist on the street. Once created, the artist abandons the work of street art, leaving it to wither on the very spot where it was originally created. Depending on the media chosen by the artist, the rate at which this decomposition will occur varies.

Wheat paste, one of the more common media used to create street art, is instructive in this regard. Depending on the artist, wheat paste is the combination of flour or some kind of starch and water applied to the surface of the wall with the aid of a brush or broom. Similar, yet far less resilient than wallpaper paste, wheat paste is a quick and relatively easy way of applying a creative work to the uneven surface of a city wall. It is, however, by no means archival. Shepard Fairey, the artist responsible for thrusting the "Obey" (Fairey N.D.) moniker into the mainstream, as well as the individual responsible for creating one of the most iconic images of Barack Obama in his historic ascent to the presidency of the United States,[6] has made a very successful career of pasting large-format photocopies on city walls with the assistance of wheat paste. Swoon (N.D.), one of the few female street artists to have gained some kind of public notoriety, also makes use of wheat paste in the application of her intricate and detailed works of art. Due to the media chosen by these artists, however, the half-life of their work is very brief.

The paper upon which their images are created is fragile and decomposes easily, and the adhesive, often applied with a broom, inconsistent in its coverage. Once again, there is no impermeable lacquer or varnish applied to the surface of the image in any way that might preserve it for the months or years to come. Depending upon the climate of the city in which the work of street art is created, the elements begin to deteriorate the artistic integrity of the work as soon as it is completed. The harsh summer sun, beating rain, penetrating frost, billowing snow, and gusting wind are inauspicious conditions for a work of art to survive unscathed. Whether made of paper and wheat paste, spray paint, or both, the elements will, over time, break down the work of street art to the point that the original bears very little resemblance to the piece created by the artist himself/herself.

The above four causes for street art's inherent ephemerality have been a consistent feature of the art form from the very beginning. Overzealous municipal councils seeking to assert their ideological and spatial authority over "their" city by buffing out any form of dissent that might provoke discomfort or anxiety, property owners seeking to maintain the aesthetic integrity of their dwellings, other taggers or writers seeking to make a name for themselves while others looking to save face, and the natural force of the elements have always influenced what survives of art

[6]In a telling indicator of the paradoxical nature of street art, a copy of the image of Obama placed on the street illegally by Fairey now resides in the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery of the United States alongside the works of Gilbert Stuart, Edgar Degas, Irving Penn, and Paul Cézanne.

forms created in the public and on the street. The fifth underlying cause of street art's ephemerality is a relatively new addition to this list and is intimately, though perhaps paradoxically, tied to place of the digital camera in the preservation, dissemination, and, hence, popularization of the street art form. Due to the contemporary valence of this fifth cause for street art's ephemerality, it will be examined in more detail than the previous four.

In the contemporary art world, it is not uncommon for increasingly large and cumbersome walls made of concrete or cinder block to be placed under the gavel on the auction block. In May 2012, on the eve of Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, a piece by Banksy that depicts a toddler hunched over a sewing machine was created on the side of a "Poundland" store. After being placed behind protective Plexiglas so as to encourage tourism to this struggling area of London, the piece was removed by the legal owners of the wall. Using masonry saws, this entire section of the wall was removed and, depending on your perspective, either preserved, saved, or destroyed. As will be addressed in the next section of this chapter, the specific location that this piece (and many other pieces created by street artists) was placed is an incredibly important element in the overall meaning of the piece itself, and to extract it from the exact location within which it was created is to alter the work as the artist created it and intended it to be seen. What merits emphasis for the time being, however, is that the fifth underlying element for street art's inherent ephemerality is its monetary value on the open market or its cultural significance to institutions seeking to "preserve" these fleeting works of art.

In June 2013, the aforementioned piece created by Banksy on the exterior wall of a shop in London was sold to a private and anonymous collector for roughly $1.1 million (USD). Another piece created by the same artist, entitled "Kissing Coppers," first placed on the exterior wall of a pub in Brighton, England, in 2005, was sold in February 2014, reportedly for $575,000.00 (USD). In 2008, another of Banksy's pieces was sold via eBay to a private collector for $407,000 (USD) – plus the costs associated with extracting it from the wall. The seller indicated at that point in time that "this shouldn't cost more than 5,000 pounds" (Reyburn 2008). It merits mention that a very select number of street artists have the subcultural capital required to command this kind of attention and sums. For the most part, and, quite simply, unless your pseudonym is Banksy, street art does not attract that much attention from collectors or preservationists.

Returning to the beginning of this chapter, the piece created by Banksy at the Packard Plant in Detroit in May 2010 is interesting in this regard because it too was extracted from the wall upon which it was created, but this extraction neither was undertaken or accomplished by the legal owners of the wall nor was it initially extracted from its location with the intent of profiting from the sale of the piece. Instead this piece was "stolen," "saved," and/or "preserved" by a local not-for-profit art gallery in the city. Gallery 555 is a "nonprofit gallery and studio [whose] mission is to strengthen communities with the arts" (Gallery 555 N.D.). The struggling not-for-profit has moved locations on four different occasions in the past decade or so

but seems to have found a relatively stable home in an abandoned Detroit Police Department precinct on the west side of the downtown core in what is commonly referred to as Mexicantown.

In May 2010, when news of Banksy's visit spread, individuals associated with the gallery packed up their tools and went to the Packard Plant. Armed with shovels, masonry saws, acetylene torches, and a backhoe, the volunteers at Gallery 555 set about trying to "save" the piece from its inevitable demise. According to Carl Goines, executive director and cofounder of the gallery,

> It's about preservation for us (. . .). We're watching this beautiful city crumble around us and we can't do anything to stop it. So with this fine-art piece – and it's not just everyday graffiti that you might whiz by – here was our opportunity to do something. It would have been destroyed if we didn't make the effort. (Stryker 2010)

The distinction made by Goines between the Banksy as a "fine art piece" and the "everyday graffiti" that one might "whiz by" is disingenuous. The walls of the Packard Plant are festooned with graffiti and street art that is, in some instances, much more artistically accomplished than the piece by Banksy. This is a derelict location where local writers and artists have been honing their skills for years on walls that are replete with exemplars of skill, passion, and commitment. To dismiss all of the other pieces within the factory so swiftly, at the same time as canonizing this relatively quotidian example of Banksy's work, is the first inkling that the stated intentions of the gallery are less than genuine.

This act of "preservation" sparked a fevered controversy within the subcultural confines of the street art world in general and that of Detroit more specifically. There were those that argued the piece should be left to wither and suffer its inevitable demise, those that praised the gallery for their efforts in preserving this important example of contemporary street art, those that questioned the actual motives of the gallery, and finally those that wanted to determine the true owner of the wall. A legal battle ensued with the gallery taking legal ownership of the wall in late June 2011 (Stryker 2011). On numerous occasions, Goines, along with other spokespersons for Gallery 555, claimed that their intention was not to sell the Banksy but to put it on display in their gallery so that the public could enjoy the piece. However, in March 2014, the gallery announced (Stryker 2014) that it was going to sell the piece so as to expand its capacity and ability to support the local arts community in Detroit.

This chapter is not interested in passing judgment on the actions of the gallery. Rather, it is focused on better understanding the underlying reasons for street art's inherent ephemerality and the role that the digital camera and the Internet play in its creation, preservation, popularization, and dissemination. In the last instance, the piece created by Banksy was removed from its original location by a group of individuals with the ostensible goal of saving it from its eventual destruction and putting it on public display for the citizens of Detroit to enjoy and contemplate. Thus, the fifth and final underlying cause of street art's inherent ephemerality is the cultural and/or economic value of the works themselves and the propensity of the

owners (actual, assumed, or otherwise) of these works to extricate them from their very material foundations so as to sell them on the open market.

When considered in sum, the five elements detailed above constitute the underlying causes for street art's inherent ephemerality. The fact that these works of art are often made on or in stone, therefore, should not be equated with their durability or their permanence. 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 disappear or be destroyed over 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 and material qualities of cinder block, concrete, wood, and steel to exercise their creative vision, they are equally reliant on the immaterial, virtual, digitized, and distributed hardware and software characteristic of the contemporary era, to document that which will disappear forever. What merits emphasis at this point, however, is the street artist's appreciation of the eminently ephemeral nature of his/her work. When an artist makes the decision to create works of art on the street and in the public, he/she is aware of the fact that once completed, the work will eventually deteriorate for one of the five reasons listed above. If there were any inclination or desire on the part of the artist to create art that would exist beyond the immediate future, then they would not have created it on (and left it in) the middle of the city street. Street artists operate, therefore, in full knowledge of the fact that for one of the five reasons enumerated above their work will be destroyed.

However, under no illusions regarding the durability or permanence of their work, before turning their backs on their pieces and walking (or running away), street artists accomplish one last act of artistic creation. They step back from their piece, frame it within the viewfinder or screen of their camera, and capture a picture. This final act of artistic inspiration has garnered very little critical attention in any of the scholarly texts dedicated to furthering our understanding of this subcultural form.[7] Understandably, the emphasis is traditionally placed on the works themselves. Their political message; the skill, daring, and courage required to create them; the work's (il)legality; and the color, scale, and scope of the piece have all historically dominated the discourse on street art. However, the digital camera is not a passive recording device that serves only to document the works of art themselves. Instead, it has become an ever more important tool in the street artist's field bag.

In some cases, as a result of the digital camera, the audience presumed to be on the other end of its lens is in fact the intended audience for the work. This final act of preservation, then, not only documents that which will disappear, but it also alters

[7]For a rare exception, see the work of Gregory Snyder (2006). Snyder argues that the process of capturing photographs and publishing them in physical form, primarily via underground "zines," was an important element in writers honing their skills and being inspired. He argues, "Photographs made ephemeral graffiti pieces permanent, allowing writers to view the work of others without attachment to a specific place or time. The inclusion of these 'flicks' in magazines created a space where graffiti pieces from all over the world could come together to be judged, critiqued, and offered as instruction" (Snyder 2006, p. 93).

the intended audience of the work and by doing so transforms the street artist into a digital artist. The important place of the digital camera in the process and practice of creating street art requires further unpacking.

Location, Location, Location

By framing a piece of graffiti or street art with the lens of a camera, the camera cannot help but capture fragments of the broader contexts[8] within which the piece was created. The urban canvas, of course, bears very little resemblance to the traditional canvases of more traditional artists. It is anything but blank or empty. Its surfaces uneven, cracked, covered in dirt, and full of "content" before the artist arrives to create his/her work. These blemishes or found details have become pivotal to the work of many street artists in that they are ever more woven into the works of art themselves. The idiosyncrasies of particular walls, the very specific location of these same walls, and the appreciation and importance of this broader context to the works themselves have therefore come to play a much more important role in street art than has been previously acknowledged.

In October of 2013, for instance, Banksy embarked on an ambitious project in the streets of New York City. "Better Out Than In" was a relatively unique artist's residency in that the artist was not invited to, or stationed "in," a particular gallery but rather took it upon himself to create his work "out" on the streets of the city. The plan was to create a single piece of street art every single day throughout the month of October and was accomplished, except for a single day where a message to the artist's Instagram account used to document and authenticate all of his offerings during this period announced: "Today's art has been cancelled due to police activity" (Banksy 2013). The fact that Banksy made use of a digital camera and a social network as the media through which he captured, documented, authenticated, and communicated his work is, in and of itself, a telling indicator of the importance of the digital camera to contemporary street art but will become much more so when the details of a select number of pieces are considered.

While a comprehensive list of all of Banksy's works created throughout his residency is beyond the scope of this chapter, there are two pieces in particular that merit further examination.[9] The first is the image used to announce and promote the

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[8]This was one of the central differences between the work of early graffiti photographers Chalfant and Cooper. Whereas Chalfant focused his lens as tightly as he could on the tag itself, Cooper framed her subject much more expansively so as to include the broader cityscape in the frame of the photograph.

[9]Though plentiful and easily retrieved online, none of the images referenced herein are included in this chapter. This was an intentional decision on the part of the author in that it further reinforces the archival and documentary dimensions of the digital camera and Internet and underscores one of the central arguments made throughout. It merits mention, however, that Banksy has a rather ambivalent relationship with copyright protecting his right to his creative work in some instances,

"Better Out Than In" residency in the streets of New York. Resembling a traditional flyer announcing a prototypical gallery show, though never printed and only ever distributed online, the image depicts the stenciled figure of a boy, roughly 10 to 12 years old, hunched at the waist, holding a can of spray paint at his side, and in the act of vomiting. However, in an element of Banksy's work that is becoming ever more prominent, rather than the vomit being rendered in spray paint, the artist chose to weave very distinct elements of the urban fabric into the work of art. Spewing from the mouth of the little boy is a cluster of wild flowers and foliage growing out of the cracks in the wall's surface that mimics the spread of the would-be vomit. Portions of the "canvas" upon which this piece was created are elemental ingredients of the work, and any attempt to remove it from this location would also destroy it. The various surfaces upon which street art is created are therefore anything but neutral and influence the creation of the artwork in a direct manner.

The second is commonly known as "Hammer Boy" and once again depicts a small boy, but this time, he is holding a carnivalesque hammer that is about to be brought down on an actual fire hydrant connected to an actual fire alarm. Once again, the boy is the only element of this piece created by the artist. The hydrant, alarm, and conduit connecting the two were there long before the artist arrived and will surely be there long after the work is destroyed. In this instance too, Banksy incorporates elements of the urban fabric into the composition of his piece in such a way that its extraction would destroy the piece as the artist created it. Therefore, both of these pieces and many others made by the artist (including to a lesser extent that made at the Packard Plant in Detroit, Michigan) are noteworthy not because they are particularly accomplished, intricate, or provocative in their message or detail but because of their incorporation of found elements of the city fabric into their compositions and, as a result, the emphasis placed on very particular locations, the digital camera, and the Internet in their creation.

Put simply, Banksy is well aware of the fact that much of his work has been either destroyed by councils, property owners, and other taggers or extracted from its original location and put up for sale via private auction houses. By incorporating elements of the urban fabric into his works, he is making the task of extracting these works from their locations much more complicated than it would be otherwise.

In the first example, a stencil of a boy hunched over at the waist, holding a can of spray paint, and in the act of vomiting was used as the promotional image to announce the artist's residency. This piece is particularly noteworthy because of the importance of the urban fabric in its composition. The image of the boy vomiting could have been created solely with the use of spray paint and stencils. However, the artist regards the cityscape as an important ingredient in the overall piece and

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then claiming in one of his books: "Trademarks, intellectual property rights and copyright law mean advertisers can say what they like wherever they like with total impunity. Fuck that. Any advert in a public space that gives you no choice whether you see it or not is yours. It's yours to take, re-arrange and re-use. You can do whatever you like with it. Asking for permission is like asking to keep a rock someone just threw at your head" (2005, p. 160).

one that is vital to its appreciation and meaning. If the piece were buffed out and destroyed by municipal councils or private property owners, then a photograph of its creation remains as evidence. If another tagger destroys it, then once again, the photograph remains. Without question, as the seasons shift, the flowers which are a core component of the work will wither and die, thus rendering the meaning of the piece incomprehensible over time. Finally, if the property owner were to extract the piece from the wall, the flowers would die. This and in addition to the fact that if it were placed behind Plexiglas so as to preserve it, the flowers, pressed between the wall and the Plexiglas, would undoubtedly die. When this example is considered indicative of a particular strain of street art, the awareness of the artist regarding the inherently ephemeral qualities of his/her work is thrust to the fore, so too, therefore, is the importance of the digital camera and the argument being made throughout this chapter. Due to the fact that the artwork will eventually wither and fade for one of the abovementioned reasons and the fact that the piece loses all meaning if moved from the very specific location within which it was created, the street artist is better thought of as a digital artist even if he/she does not regard himself/herself as such.

This piece in particular was not created for the passerby who might happen upon it while browsing the shops in a retail district but for an audience that might happen upon it while browsing around online. It is this shift in the intended audience of so-called street art that signals the evolution of this subcultural form from one exclusively concerned with “getting up” (see Castleman 1982) on the street to one much more enamored with intentionally creating much more durable works of art for a much larger audiences online. The archival qualities of the online environment compensate for the inherent ephemerality of the physical works. This compensatory function has had a lasting influence on the physical works themselves in that artists weave seemingly random elements of the urban fabric into their creations in such a way that privileges the virtual audience over the physical. The digital camera and the Internet are not simply documentary tools used as an afterthought to preserve that which will eventually disappear but influence the process of creation in the first place. A close reading of our second exemplar will help to make this point more forcefully.

“Hammer Boy” is a simple stencil that with adequate preparation could have been painted on the street in very little time. The crux of the piece is much more dependent on the found elements of the urban environment for its semiotic force. In the absence of the hydrant and alarm, the piece itself would be nonsensical. By incorporating these found elements of the city space into the piece itself, Banksy is guarding against the commodification of his work via its extraction and sale on the open market. Cutting this piece from the wall and removing it from its original context would destroy the piece entirely. Alternatively, the stencil absent the hydrant and alarm would make little sense to anyone who sees it in the “white cube” (Austin 2010) of a gallery. Similar to the boy vomiting flowers referenced above, the exact location at which this piece was created is pivotal to the work itself. Once again, it is at this moment that the role of the digital camera and the Internet, not only in the

preservation of these ephemeral pieces as an afterthought but also as the intended medium via which the artist communicates with his/her audience, comes to bear on the discussion.

These pieces, as well as the one created in the Packard Plant in Detroit and many others, are inextricably linked to the exact locations they were created and photographed in. To remove them from these locations is to change the work of art from something created by the artist to something else entirely. The social and political relationships that undergird these alterations are incredibly interesting in their own right,[10] but a critical examination of the political economy of street art will have to be tabled for another time and place. What merits emphasis at this juncture is threefold. The importance of location; the incorporation of infrastructure, found detritus, and/or details of the wall itself into the work of art; and the inherent ephemerality of the works force a reappraisal of the characteristic undervaluation of the digital camera and the Internet in the street artist's aesthetic arsenal.

The Street Artist as Digital Artist: A Conclusion and Provocation

It is not only the idiosyncrasies of particular walls that come to influence the kinds of art created on and for the street but also those stochastic elements of the urban fabric that sit alongside, up against, within, or adjacent to them that also interweave the importance of the digital camera into this subcultural art form. Once again, Banksy's work is informative in this regard. If we return to Detroit for a moment and consider the act of applying a stencil of a young boy to a wall in a derelict industrial facility and then captioning that image with the sentence "I remember when all *this* was trees" (emphasis added), the central argument made by the present chapter becomes clear.

It is this "this" in Banksy's caption that emphasizes the importance of this very particular location to the meaning of the piece and the intention of the artist that created it. When extracted or removed from *this* exact place for whatever reason, the artwork itself may continue to be interesting or noteworthy because of its providence and/or history, but it should no longer be thought of as a work by Banksy. The work as the artist envisioned and created it is fundamentally dependent on the exact location within which it was placed. To change that location is to change the work of art into something other than that created by the artist himself/herself. It is, therefore, to destroy the work of art in the misguided hope of preserving it. Whatever the piece becomes once extracted from the location that serves as one of its primary referents and elements of composition, it is no longer a Banksy. Similar to the destructive

[10]See Luke Dickens' article (2008) on the "journey" of the Peckham Rock for an excellent take on how the manifold interests involved in street art fundamentally alter the work of the artist himself/herself.

process of carving out a small corner of a painter's canvas with a scalpel, to carve out this section of wall from the derelict location that is as important to the semiotic integrity of the work as the spray paint itself is to destroy the piece the artist created.

Once again, the urban fabric is not a blank canvas upon which street artists exercise their creative vision, but one that is always already loaded with content and meaning. This content is being used not only as inspiration for the creation of particular pieces but also is being interlaced into the works themselves. Therefore, to remove this small section of the street artist's "canvas" is to destroy it in such a way that it becomes something other than that created by the artist. In other words, to extract the "street" from the work of "street art" is to transform it into something other than that created by the artist. In this way, then, the object that more faithfully represents the intentions and/or vision of the artist is not the physical work itself, removed from its original context or extracted from the broader urban canvas that is elemental to its composition, but the digital representation thereof that captures this contextual urban canvas and the intentions of the artist more faithfully than the tattered remnants housed in a gallery. It merits reemphasis that artists are aware that their work will be destroyed. Therefore, much better at depicting the creative intentions or artistic vision of the street artist is the digital photograph of the work as he/she envisioned it within the location it was created. This leads to the conclusion that as much as these individuals can and should be regarded as street artists, they can and should also be regarded as digital artists, albeit digital artists that go to great lengths in the preparation of their compositions.

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