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**“DARLING LOOK! IT’S A BANKSY!” VIEWERS’  
MATERIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH STREET ART  
AND GRAFFITI**

Street art and graffiti are now a ubiquitous part of many contemporary cities and these urban practices have captured the interest of scholars from across the social sciences and humanities. Young (2014: 161) urges a focus on “the affective nature of the spectator’s encounter” rather than a more straightforward object-centred approach to the image. However, viewers’ aesthetic encounters with graffiti and street art are complex and not well researched. Community based approaches designed to assess people’s experience of their urban environments offer us some insights into viewer’s aesthetic responses to unauthorised street art (e.g.: Andron 2014) and graffiti (e.g.: Vitiello, Willcocks 2011); whilst Gralinska-Toborek and Kazimierska-Jerzyk’s (2014) street based surveys of city dwellers examine their aesthetic responses to the murals commissioned by the city as part of an attempt to regenerate the city through attracting art-tourism. An affective divide appears to exist for viewers, in that responses to graffiti appear more commonly marked by revulsion and outrage at work “forced onto others”, which diminishes the value of a community, whilst responses to street art are often more positive, with some describing it as an unexpected pleasure yielding “delight upon discovery” (Waclawek 2011) or as work that “brightens up the city”. Yet these are not mutually exclusive repertoires of response, and indeed the newer category of street art seems still vulnerable to appropriation within the older, more stigmatised category of graffiti, for some viewers, as a form of abject vandalism.

Indeed, the policing of graffiti and street art may act to discourage aesthetic engagement with works on the walls. Iveson (2014: 96) asserts that the policing of graffiti on city walls is accomplished not just by its wholesale removal by authorities, but also crucially via the discourses used to categorise work as “vandalism” or as indecipherable nonsense, which results in “the reduction of graffiti writers to people who write but have nothing to say [...]

[and thus have] no place/part in the city”<sup>1</sup>. The operations of the “police” refer here not (just) to the actions of uniformed authorities, but rather to the broader operations of the “symbolic constitution of the social” which encourages people not to stop and look at that which should not be seen. For Rancière (1999: 29)

the police is [...] first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that these bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.

The police represent, for Rancière, the institutional form of the division of the sensible. He uses the term “division of the sensible” to refer to the “system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made or done” (Rancière 2004: 89). Rancière argues that what is capable of being apprehended by the senses, in turn provides for possible forms of participation (or exclusion from participation).

A traditional understanding of the ways in which viewers make sense of art assumes the reception of a trans-historical singular meaning identical with the artist’s intention. Rancière refers to this as a model of stultification, which regards meaning as conveyed via the logic of cause and effect, with the transmission of the artist’s intention to the spectator positioning viewers as passive recipients. Joswig-Mehnert and Yule argue that there is an unchallenged assumption in the graffiti literature that the meaning of graffiti is “relatively straightforward and shared by all” – even if the consensus is that it is meaningless and indecipherable (1996: 123). However, some have argued that graffiti and street art accord the viewer radically different possibilities in terms of their active participation and engagement with the work. Waclawek (2011) goes as far as to assert that the viewer of work in the street, in the act of encountering it, achieves the work’s “transitory completion”, and that the authorship of street art is thus a “community affair”. Of course, the notion that the act of reception and interpretation implies a form of participatory authorship is not unique to street art and graffiti. Indeed, the literature on contemporary art also makes use of this

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst newer commissioned mural-based street art accords artists a place in the city, in practice this may be depoliticised through various means, including the process of obtaining permissions from local authorities, and consultations with residents, for the approval of the content of planned works.

notion, with Buskirk (2004: 22) arguing that a work of art is created through the viewer's "experience of the work as a series of unfolding encounters"; Becker (2001) claiming that a work's completion is continually determined anew by its reception; and Bourdieu (Zolberg, 1990: 92) maintaining that the plurality of re-readings inherent in the reception of an art object engenders its recurrent recreation; whilst Rancière (2009: 17–22) asserts that viewers are not passive and thus do not need to be encouraged to actively engage with a work, as they are already involved in an active process of interpretation and appropriation:

being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation [...] we have to recognize [...] the activity peculiar to the spectator [...] (which) requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the "story" and make it their own story (Rancière 2009: 17–22).

Beyond this form of immaterial participation through reception, aesthetic experience and interpretation, it may be argued that street art and graffiti offer viewers a more active role in prompting viewers to consider materially engaging with the work on the wall. This too has a parallel in the contemporary art world, in the literature on audience participation and viewer interaction (e.g.: Brown 2014). Bourriaud's (2002) influential framework of relational aesthetics presents a utopic reading of the possibilities inherent in work that aims to encourage the interaction of viewers. He asserts that this may provide for the formation of new micro-communities, novel social experiments and enriched interpersonal relations. However, critics charge that the institutional context of the museum closes down the likelihood of such emancipatory principles translating into democratic practice, as these "new micro-communities" are in fact dialogues occurring within the established networks of the communities of practice peculiar to the art world (Bishop 2004); and further that such sweeping claims neglect the specificity of local art and cultural creation, and overlook political disputes within and between communities (Kester 2004).

By contrast, others have argued that graffiti and street art's distinct aesthetic of display encourages viewers to interact differently to the ways in which they might engage with art in institutional contexts. Vaughan (2011) notes that Derrida described graffiti's "aesthetic of the outside" as "an aesthetic of touching" which stands in contrast to the regulated interactions permitted in museums, where touching the exhibits is forbidden, or in the case of "interactive" works, highly circumscribed and monitored. For Derrida (1993), graffiti breaks the "law of untouchability" in that it invites viewers to touch (and we would suggest, also to leave one's own trace on the wall). Yet the act

of making uncommissioned marks on a private wall remains illegal, as a form of criminal damage. Indeed, the penalties for so doing (if caught in the act, and if prosecuted rather than warned) are potentially as high as those faced by those who deface the valuable protected masterpieces held in galleries and museums. However, graffiti writers are more likely to be apprehended and face punishment than are street artists, whose work appears to be increasingly recognised as visually pleasing, if unauthorised – an aesthetic socio-moral judgement that gains strength from its opposition to the visual “blight” of the criminal damage caused by graffiti<sup>2</sup>.

From outwith the fields of aesthetics, critical theory and art history, scholars working within political sociology and sociolinguistics assert that graffiti is a form of political participation that is inherently dialogic, in that it is always open to textual challenge, amendment and support by other writers as part of an ongoing dialogue between writers “talking back” (Adams, Winter 1997; Klingman, Shalev 2001; Nwoye 1993; Obeng 2000; Waldner, Dobratz 2013). However, this body of research has a focus on graffiti as a textual endeavour, and is yet to come to terms with the primarily visual form taken by contemporary street art, or the visual-textual amalgams co-produced when viewers interact textually with existing visual works on the wall. Young’s (2014) call for a criminological aesthetics whereby scholars focus on the “affective nature” of the viewer’s encounter with street art and graffiti (rather than on the image in isolation) provides one fruitful avenue for work that might more comprehensively investigate viewers’ responses to unauthorised images and text, while the participatory (and political) potential of such aesthetic encounters may be examined further via the critical framework provided by Rancière’s notion of the division of the sensible as that which determines the unexamined consensus that informs our practices of engagement (and exclusion); looking (and not looking) at street art and graffiti.

In particular, Rancière’s (2004) thoughts on dissensus may be helpful here. Rancière (2004) argued that aesthetic protest can create dissensus, or ruptures in common sense, and a gap in the sensible, which works ultimately to show that what we see, according to our usual division of the sensible, could be otherwise – thus demonstrating the “contingency of the entire perceptual and conceptual order” (May 2011: n.p.). Here, Rancière extends the reach of aesthetics to encompass all those practices that make possible new commonalities of sense, and sense-making practices, created by breaches in common sense itself. This

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<sup>2</sup> When Vladimir Umanets added his signature to Rothko’s *Black on Maroon* at Tate Modern in 2012, he faced public censure and a lengthy period of imprisonment.

is political, he argues, as politics is located in "disputes about the division of what is perceptible to the senses" (Rancière 1998: 176). Thus, as May (2011: n.p.) explains, "politics is itself aesthetic in that it requires a sharing of sense in common; art is not the exemplary site of sensory pleasure or the sublime but a critical break with common sense".

## LOCAL VISUAL RESPONSES

The implications of such a stance cannot be fully explored by surveys of viewers of street art and graffiti designed to capture, post hoc, their aesthetic responses to works in the street. Instead, here we restrict our focus to the idiographic, the local and the particular by documenting viewers' material responses to a series of works that appeared on, and then were erased from, a London city wall over a period of 18 months post the removal for auction of Banksy's (2012) *Slave Labour* from the same site. In confining our focus to just one city wall, we aim to allow the temporal, site-specific and participatory elements of graffiti and street art to become more visible as a form of communication, or visual dialogue. Following Rancière (2009), this approach understands viewers, or spectators, as competent cultural members capable of understanding, appropriating and interacting with the work in various ways, and resists a discussion that would assimilate the experiences of particular viewers to the singular category of "the viewer" in passive receipt of the artist's intentions as transmitted through the work. Through a series of examples of everyday appropriations of the work that appeared on the wall, we argue that viewers' material responses demonstrate visually their engagement and active interpretation.

Elsewhere, we analyse the full series of 19 works that appeared on the wall from February 2013–September 2014 (Hansen, Flynn 2015a). Here we focus on the reception of just two pieces from this larger sequence. These works are of particular interest here as they provoked visual responses from members of the public, which we examine as everyday instances of active interpretation and appropriation, as part of the ongoing dialogue on the wall. The logic of this local approach to analysis is holographic. Sacks (1996) asserts that cultures will demonstrate "order at all points", and thus that even relatively small fragments of a culture may display the order inherent in the whole. Therefore, the fine-grained analysis of the marks appearing on just one wall over a restricted period of time may in turn – like a fragment of a hologram that projects the whole – show us something important about how street art

and graffiti, as a part of our everyday culture, operate. Here, then, we examine street art as a complex form of in-situ communication and resist an approach which would analyse street art as an “object”, thus neglecting the lifeworld of the works in context (for more on this methodological approach, see Hansen, Flynn 2015b).

Banksy's *Slave Labour* (photo 6) was stencilled onto a wall on the side of a discount store in Turnpike Lane, North London in May 2012, during the lead up to the 2012 London Olympics, and at the height of the UK's nationwide celebration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, marking 50 years of her reign as monarch.

In February 2013, *Slave Labour* was removed from the wall for private auction leaving the outline of the space occupied by the original work visible as a raised rectangular seam. Protests were held at the site of removal, with residents brandishing signs that read “Bring back our Banksy”. These protests were grounded in the community's originally recognised claim over the work as belonging in – and to – its community of origin. However, as Young (2014: 128) points out, while communities' experiences of, and belief in, “public space” persists, the reality is that in many cities, apparently public spaces are legally comprised of a grid of privately owned spaces. This community protest, which attracted significant media coverage, was initially successful, and on February 23, 2013 *Slave Labour* was withdrawn from auction in Miami, but the work eventually resurfaced in London where it was auctioned on June 1, 2013 by the Sincura group, representing the building's owners, for £750,000.

The Sincura group inflamed community affect further by claiming that the work they excised had not been appreciated in situ, and that it was in need of protection and preservation. In public discussions, this claim was hotly contested by many members of the community, others agreed, however, that the proper space for art was in a museum and appeared resigned to “never seeing the original”. The implication that the proper appreciation of street art could only occur in a sanctioned gallery space or a museum seems extraordinary, given that street art's very existence, as such, has been argued to be dependent on its in situ nature and ongoing dynamic relationship with the community it exists within (Young 2014). Indeed, this deterministic and realist discourse – of the need to remove street art in order to ensure its “proper” appreciation – reinforces the division of the sensible which would refuse everyday inner city citizens the capacity to hold an “aesthetic attitude” or even the ability to contest the estimation of their capacities (in this case, as being incapable of appreciating street art in situ).

The community protest against *Slave Labour's* removal was also registered on the wall itself. These initial responses provide a visual cacophony of protest and loss (photo 23).

Much of this work appears an index of community grief at the loss of *Slave Labour*. This is a self-governing multiparty conversation. The contributors include both locally recognised street artists and unknown writers. Unlike a curated gallery space, the extramural space of the city wall positions the viewer as an interlocutor with the right to "talk back". As with any "public" conversation with multiple contributors, some of the "talk" appears "off topic" and made for the sheer sake of being a part of the conversation and making one's mark; some delight in being ostentatious or crude and shocking (one writer's contribution was a giant penis spray painted in lurid pink); some are hurried and scrawled; others are planned and articulate. However, the vast majority of marks on the wall made here appear site and topic specific, and designed to be received as evidence of the force of the people's outrage at the removal, without consultation or warning, of *Slave Labour*.

After a period of three weeks, all of the initial visual protests were buffed, or whitewashed over, by the local council, and the wall remained blank for several months. The only piece that remained was the small stencilled rat to the right of the site of extraction, which having been attributed to Banksy, was protected from erasure by a Perspex shield. However, in April 2013, another stencil appeared, positioned directly over the space where *Slave Labour* had been (photo 24).

This new stencil is a variation of the iconic Bad Panda stencil commonly attributed to Banksy but in fact created by French designer Julien d'Andon. This stencil differs from d'Andon's original design in that a pipe has been added to the panda's mouth, as has a signboard reading "This is not a Banksy". If located within the context of gallery space, the image of the pipe alone may have effectively provided a clear reference, for viewers from within this community of practice, to Magritte's (1928–1929) *The Treachery of Images*. However, as street art located in public space, this overdetermination of signifiers (the image of the pipe in addition to the text on the signboard) makes the upshot of this apparent intertextual reference to Magritte's critical observations on the persuasiveness of representation (or what we count as "real" or authentic) potentially more available to a relatively socially deprived community likely not versed in art history, creating a ripple in the division of the sensible (Rancière 2004).

This piece introduces a note of doubt as to the certainty with which a work by Banksy can be identified and problematises the objectified, commodified

notion of “a Banksy”. It engages the viewer with a puzzle: It is a representation of a Banksy. It appears to be signed by Banksy. Yet it claims it is not a Banksy. These claims mark the potential repercussions of attributions of authorship to the survival of work in situ. If it were a Banksy, it would likely be immediately marked as of value (through the protection provided by a Perspex shield on the same site to the rat stencil attributed to Banksy) and might be thus vulnerable to removal for profit (as was *Slave Labour*). However, if it were not a Banksy, it would, along with the majority of unauthorised street art and graffiti, likely be subject to imminent removal via buffing by the local council.

On the morning after the Panda stencil appeared on the wall, a viewer scrawled “Take me to America” in a speech bubble above the Panda’s head – a plea, or perhaps a challenge, added hurriedly to the stencil by a passer-by (photo 25). This request has particular resonance in the relatively socio-economically deprived context of Turnpike Lane, in North London, where few members of the neighbourhood would have the means to travel to America, thus marking the apparent injustice of *Slave Labour*’s cross-Atlantic journey by contrast to the projected aspirations of the Panda who appears destined to remain on the wall only until its erasure. This material engagement with the work demonstrates visually the affective nature of the viewer’s encounter with the image.

A process of active interpretation is also evident here in further additions to the work made by members of the public, which demonstrates the capacity of viewers to appropriate and translate the work on their own terms. Other modifications made to the stencil (photo 26) include a single question mark linked with a stroke of ink to the panda’s head, perhaps marking uncertainty as to the panda’s identity, or the “clueless” status of the viewer as to the resolution of the “puzzle” posed by the work; a tiny starred halo drawn between the panda’s ears, perhaps mocking its status as a work to be revered, or marking the stupefying force of a recent blow to the head, comic book style; and the block-lettered demand, “FREE ART NOW!” along the length of the panda’s right arm, adopting the form of a political slogan to perhaps refer to the wrongfully “captured” Banksy and/or to the problematic commodification of the “free gift” of street art through the attempted private auction of *Slave Labour*.

These everyday appropriations of the work are carefully positioned, such that they do not cover, or “cap” the Panda stencil, or compromise its aesthetic integrity. However, these material marks on the wall do make a claim of sorts, to render the work one’s own, and to actively contribute to the conversation. This is a material form of active interpretation, a form of engagement that according to Rancière (2009: 17) is akin to the creative performativity of “making art”, and which verifies:

the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else. [This] involves active interpretation and translation – we link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed.

The Bad Panda stencil remained on the wall for a period of five weeks before it, and the various modifications and additions made by viewers, was whitewashed by the local council, restoring the blank wall (save for the Perspex protected rat). In January 2014, nearly one year after the removal of *Slave Labour*, a new stencilled piece appeared on the wall (photo 27). In common with many of the other works that appeared on this site, this new stencil also references prior popular stencils by Banksy. a series of stencilled pieces of a similar scale and design appeared on various city walls in London, and in other European cities, in 2005. Perhaps the most widely disseminated of Banksy's variants on the cut here stencil was the giant version stencilled on the West Bank Barrier that received worldwide media attention when it appeared. The simple scissors and dashed lines of the cut here stencil offer an invitation to "cut here" of the kind more commonly seen on "cut out and keep" sections of magazines and consumer packaging. This appears a clear reference to the removal for profit of *Slave Labour*, which was, quite literally, cut off the wall. This stencil positions this act of removal within the sphere of consumption and the profit economy. However, its consumer friendly design also provides a link to the apparent "gift" or "bonus" (to the keeper) of a "cut out and keep" coupon – an unexpected supplement which operates to expose the lack in the completeness or satisfaction provided by the original item. The viewer is positioned as wanting what they did not know they lacked until they received the "gift" of something for nothing.

Four months later, in May 2014, a further stencilled work was added to the wall (photo 28). This piece is by the street artist Mobstr, produced in advance of his first solo gallery show in East London. Nearly 18 months post the removal of *Slave Labour*, discussion of the work on Twitter now described the location simply as #thewallwhereabanksywas. This very large piece covers the entire stretch of the wall with painted lettering that animates the public's imagined reactions to the work on the wall, though which of the works it references – the authenticated Banksy rat, the Banksy-style cut here stencil, Mobstr's own piece, or indeed the many works beneath since erased as vandalism – is undetermined. This work does not obscure Banksy's rat, which remains fixed under Perspex to the wall, nor does it interfere with the cut here stencil, which was now beginning to fade and flake without any level of protection against the elements.

The text on the wall arrests the viewer with a breathless exclamation and an injunction to look: "Darling look, it's a Banksy!" However, this is followed by

the dismissive and patronising retort, “Don’t be silly my dear, that’s just some vandalism”, to which the first speaker accedes, “Oh right. Yes, of course”. This work provides satirical commentary on mundane evaluations of the status, or worth, of street art and graffiti. Like the prior works on the wall, it offers a critique of the objectification and commodification of street art, however unlike prior works, it effects a sharp division between “a Banksy” worth exclaiming over and looking at and “some vandalism” not worthy of viewers’ attention. This is accomplished by adopting the perspective of the imagined consumer-viewers of the work, who, as it turns out, are not looking at the work at all, but are simply concerned with categorising it crudely as “a Banksy” or as “vandalism”, in order to determine if it is worth their attention. Mobstr thus creates a rupture in common sense by making visible the workings of the very consensus that holds together the division of the sensible (Rancière 2004) that informs our practices of looking.

In September 2014, an amendment was made to Mobstr’s piece. A small paint roller has been used to crudely white out some of the letters in order to change the dialogue presented on the wall (photo 29).

The modified dialogue now reads, “do be ill” rather than “don’t be silly”. This selective erasure translates the mocking middle class admonishment, “don’t be silly”, into urban slang which contests the dismissiveness of the original aesthetic appreciation, then criminalising socio-moral judgement, animated by Mobstr’s work. Wiktionary (2014: n.p.) provides a definition of “Ill” as, “[hip-hop slang] Sublime, with the connotation of being so in a singularly creative way”. It thus follows the form of other items of urban slang in inverting the original sense of a conventionally negative term (other examples include “sick” and “wicked”) to provide a highly positive assessment. Whilst the original phrasing of Mobstr’s piece provided satirical commentary on the viewer who is persuaded not to look at work once it has been positioned as vandalism, this new appropriation of the piece encourages the inner city viewer to instead “be ill” – and to actively engage with/in street art (and perhaps even vandalism) as a sublime and creative aesthetic activity, further disrupting the stultifying practices of looking exposed by Mobstr’s piece.

To the far right of the wall, just past the Perspex shielded rat, and barely distinguishable from the abject grime of the street are a series of hand marks pressed low down on the wall (photo 30). These handprints are the same colour as the paint used to modify Mobstr’s piece, implying perhaps that the writer wiped their hands on the wall after painting, or representing a more deliberate form of mark making akin to the earliest surviving forms of graffiti, which used parts of the body to print directly from or to stencil with by blowing pigment around the fingers placed on the cave wall. These handprints mark the wall as a territory, in lieu of a signature or a tag, and parodically invoke the gravity of an originary

authorship of archaeologically appreciated status to the crude modifications made to the polished work on the wall.

This chapter has followed Young's (2014) call to extend the focus of our analysis beyond the isolated unauthorised image as object to encompass the affective facets of viewers' encounters with street art and graffiti, with attention to Rancière's (2004) critical framework. Rancière's (2004) work suggests a means to investigate our aesthetic practices of participation (or exclusion) and looking (or not looking). Viewers' material engagements with work on the wall here present a disruption of the expectable order which demonstrates that what we see, according to our usual division of the sensible, could be otherwise – thus revealing the "contingency of the entire perceptual and conceptual order" (May 2011: n.p.). This small-scale examination of the visual dialogue evident on just one city wall highlights the temporal, site-specific and participatory elements of graffiti and street art as a form of dynamic communication, or visual dialogue. As this series of worked examples show, viewers of street art are not passive recipients of the artist's intentions. Rather, they are most profitably regarded as competent cultural members more than capable of understanding, appreciating and indeed actively and materially engaging with the work on the wall.

A wall on the side of a discount store in Turnpike Lane, North London, May 2012 – September 2014, for large photos see the pages given below:



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