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Reclaiming Cities and Spatial Citizenship: Contemporary Street Art as a Form of Political Aggravation and Protest

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Introduction

People have been writing on walls as long as the human race has existed, from the caves of Sulawesi to the streets of Pompeii to the subways of New York.[1] Street art and graffiti culture as it exists today, however, originated in Philadelphia in 1967 before spreading to New York City by train.[2] From here, the rest of the world caught on, and the movement reached every urban corner of the planet. By 1990, graffiti was normalized in cities, and became an intrinsic part of hip-hop and outsider culture. Since then, artists have used street art as a tool for sending a message, reaching an audience, reclaiming cities, and mocking systemic political and social issues. So why, then, is graffiti not considered a more legitimate form of art?

The beauty of street art is its unregulated nature. Unfortunately, this often means that the works of art do not last, covered up by landlords, business owners, and law enforcement – particularly if the graffiti is criticizing one of these establishments. Depending on the location, however, in today's day and age graffiti might be photographed hundreds or thousands of times before it is removed. Therefore, the geographic location of an artwork is often vital both to reach audiences and to understand the message of the work. As art historians, it is our job to seek out these works of art, document them, and analyze them as best we can.

Every culture has had different ways of restricting access to art, typically reserving it for the most wealthy and notable members of society. Today's world, though it is in many ways more culturally egalitarian, is no exception. Most household names got to where they are due to a

[1] Marchant, Jo. 2016. *A Journey to the Oldest Cave Paintings in the World.* January. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/journey-oldest-cave-paintings-world-180957685/.

[2] Novak, David. 2017. "Historical dissemination of graffiti art." *Street Art & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal* 29-42.

number of privileged experiences, whether it be education, connections, wealth, a combination of these, or something else. While the experiences and artwork of these people is entirely valid, a big piece of art history is missing if the only art that historians examine is that residing in museums and galleries. Street art, and particularly illegal street art, can give insight that institutional art cannot, since it is unregulated and uncensored.

Audience is a crucial aspect of both visual history and traditional art history. Historically, the intended viewers largely decided how an artist approached a work. Analysis and documentation of works is what allows future historians to continue examining art over a long period of time. Though art is always in danger of being destroyed, stolen, or otherwise lost, most art housed in galleries and museums do not have to face mortality the same way that street art does; street creations are usually destroyed or damaged within only one or two years, unless they are preserved in some way, such as Banksy's *Hammer Boy* or Keith Haring's *Crack is Whack.* Because of this, if street artists are trying to send a message or make a statement, there are many important factors to be considered. What demographic will be mostly exposed to this art? Who needs to see this message? How long is this piece expected to last? Location and size are two of the most important qualities of street art that artists must consider.

Some artists, instead of creating a single piece to spread their message such as *Close Rikers* (examined in later chapters), instead opt for methods of graffiti that allow repetition, such as stenciling. Artists like Blek le Rat, who is known as the father of stencil graffiti, gained their fame through this quick, low-maintenance method of painting.[3] This style allows artists to create the exact same piece many times over, reaching many different audiences in many different

[3] Reiss, Jon. 2007. *Blek le Rat.* http://archive.li/wS9q9.

areas. Depending on the message of the piece, this method is sometimes more desirable for artists. It tends to be very popular for labeling art, slogans, building the artist's brand and street credibility, and underground organizations. It is just as important in analyzing graffiti as a tool for protest, activism, and spatial reclamation.

Due to the transient and obscure nature of street art, and since the graffiti analyzed in this essay was created within the past few years, no academic texts exist on the works used in the following case studies. Because of this I've used numerous sources from the internet about the artists, if any information exists, and relied heavily on data taken directly from interviews and webpages belonging to each artist. That said, graffiti has become well-received in academic communities in recent years, and works have been cited on greater ideas surrounding the practice of graffiti and street art, including the few high-level research projects have been published in the last ten to fifteen years.[4] This includes the *Street Art & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal*, which publishes a new edition every year with numerous essays by scholars well versed in many fields, including art history, philosophy, sociology, architecture, cultural studies, and political science. This journal was particularly useful for preliminary research, including learning about the dissemination of street art and graffiti's motifs that are commonly used in today's commercial and pop culture. Books used during research include: *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (2001), which provides an in-depth history of graffiti's social and political status during the 1970s and 1980s; *The History of American Graffiti* (2010), used to research American graffiti culture in New York City; *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (2016), used to research the social acceptance or lack thereof outside of

[4] Block, Stefano. 2016. "Challenging the defense of graffiti, in defense of graffiti." In *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, by Jeffrey Ian Ross, 440-451. New York: Routledge.

the graffiti culture and in direct correlation with neighborhood demographics; and *Graffiti and Street Art* (2011), which is relied upon probably the most heavily, and provides excellent analyses of graffiti culture, the evolution of street art, and its effects on street culture, visual culture, and contemporary media.[5] Some authors of these books include: Anna Waclawek, a doctor and professor of art history at Concordia University; Roger Gastman, an art historian specializing in graffiti art and the producer of the Oscar-nominated documentary *Exit Through The Gift Shop*; Caleb Neelon, an artist and writer who studied at both Brown and Harvard Universities; and Joe Austin, a doctor of American studies and professor at the University of Wisconsin.[6] All of these authors are highly regarded scholars in their fields, and these books provide the groundwork for much research conducted on graffiti today. [7] Waclawek's comprehensive text gives a fuller understanding of graffiti and street art as a whole, providing the reader with need-to-know lingo and popular styles and, most importantly, analyzing graffiti's relationship with its urban environment, and conversely with the commercial art world which often rejects it.

Using several case studies, this essay examines the importance of street art in the contemporary moment, and the external factors that contribute to this culture. Following an introduction to the history of contemporary graffiti, each chapter will focus on works of art

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[5]Waclawek, Anna. 2011. *Graffiti and Street Art.* New York City: Thames & Hudson.
Gastman, Roger, and Caleb Neelon. 2010. *The History of American Graffiti.* New York: Harper Design.
Austin, Joe. 2002. *Taking The Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City.* New York: Columbia University Press.
Ross, Jeffery Ian. 2016. *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art.* New York: Routledge.

[6]Concordia University. 2018. *Department of Art History Staff.* Accessed 10 9, 2018. https://www.concordia.ca/finearts/art-history/about/staff.html.
Gastman, Roger, and Caleb Neelon. 2010. *The History of American Graffiti.* New York: Harper Design.
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 2018. *College of Letters & Science: History.* Accessed 10 9, 2018. https://uwm.edu/history/people/austin-joe/.

[7] WorldCat. 2018. *OCLC WorldCat.* Accessed 10 9, 2018. http://www.worldcat.org/title/graffiti-and-street-art/oclc/711052010.

located in New York City that demonstrate this thesis's argument: that attention to street art and graffiti is vital to a complete understanding of contemporary art. These works not only demonstrate how street art can be used to provide unique insight on the affairs of the country and the world, they also showcase the currency of street art's style, form, and composition. Each piece could not exist without today's political and social climate, or without the foundation provided by artistic movements such as Pop Art. Furthermore, they could not exist without graffiti-writing predecessors, and are certain to inspire future generations of artists, making their place within an art historical context one of crucial importance.

Chapter One: A Brief History of Street Art

The uprising of graffiti and illegal street art in New York City was at its prime in the mid to late 1970s, near the close and during the aftermath of the Vietnam War.[8] Despite the fragmentation of society at this time, the majority of documented graffiti was contained within a subculture. Though citizens had varying opinions on major issues surrounding politics, society, and economics, the artists who took to the streets rarely illustrated these feelings. Politically charged street art became more popular during the late 80s and early 90s, and during this time was when influential names like Banksy, Keith Haring, and Blek le Rat rose to fame.[9] But until this time, tagging and 'piecing' was the name of the game.

Using the media as its mouthpiece, the city of New York promoted the idea that street art was a nuisance. The president of the City Council at this time, Sanford D. Garelik, was so offended by the presence of graffiti that he went as far as proposing waging a 'war' against it – he dubbed this the 'War on Graffiti' – an idea which was quickly picked up by the mayor, John Lindsay.[10] He attempted to pass laws to make the practice as difficult as possible, including one law that states that anybody discovered carrying open markers or cans of paint can be arrested.[11] This only encouraged the practicing artists at the time, most of whom were between the ages of 15 and 19.[12] These artists had constructed a culture of their own that was near impossible to infiltrate, and some of the laws imposed by the mayor, which will be explored a little later on,

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[8] Gastman & Neelon. *The History*. 86-113.
[9] The Keith Haring Foundation. 2019. *Bio*. http://www.haring.com/!/about-haring/bio#.XFNvL1xKhPY. Reiss. *Blek le Rat.*
[10] Austin. *Taking the Train.* 75-106.
[11] Ibid.
[12] MacDonald, Nancy. 2002. *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York.* 63-93. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

only made it easier for them to connect and share ideas.[13] The graffiti subculture, in fact, had its own 'rules' to which most participants adhered. At the time, this wasn't well known, and the general public viewed the art, scrawls, and names that began to appear across the city as isolated moments of lawlessness and vandalism. Their purpose and history, however, were much more complicated than generally assumed.

The two elements of graffiti writing, which will henceforth be referred to 'writing,' consist of 'tagging' and 'piecing.' What most people do not know, is that the masterful illustration of one's name in large spaces was usually practiced only after the artist in question had decorated the city with their 'tag' hundreds of times—a practice known as 'bombing.'[14] Bombing events typically took place overnight and would elevate the status of an artist within the graffiti community. An artist's tag typically consisted of their name, either a chosen name or nickname, and a number, which was usually their street number or street name. For example, one of the most famous writers of this time was Taki 183, 'Taki' being the nickname of an artist with the first name Demetrius, and 183 because Demetrius lived on 183rd street and Audubon.[15] Once an artist had developed their personal tag, they needed to make a name for themselves among other artists. To gain the recognition of fellow writers, the artist would usually go on a bombing spree, taking the trains throughout the boroughs of New York and plastering the tag on every subway car and in every nook and cranny they could find. These types of tags could appear overnight, taking the city by storm. By participating in these bombs, artists secured a name for themselves within the subculture.

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[13] Austin. *Taking the Train.* 75-106.
[14] MacDonald. *The Graffiti Subculture.* 63-93.
Gastman & Neelon. *The History*. 54.
[15] Ibid.
183, Taki. 2017. *Taki 183.* https://www.taki183.net/.

In the event that an artist was caught, there was one form of punishment that city would inflict. Due to the majority of graffiti writers being underage, the city administration knew that these youths would not necessarily receive reprimanding in the home. Instead of relying on the parents of the artists, the city would sentence them to a day of cleaning the very subway cars they had been vandalizing. Much to the dismay of the city's administration, this plan backfired on them entirely. Young graffiti writers and artists did not have many ways to get in touch with their fellow writers, and by rounding them up and putting them in one place at the same time, the city allowed young writers to come into contact with one another. This connection led them to share ideas, techniques, and methods of escaping law enforcement. Often, writers would even plan bombing events during these punishments.[16] Once an artist could successfully travel to every borough, and recognize a tag that cropped up everywhere, they would earn a certain amount of respect as a writer.[17] This recognition would allow artists to move on to the next stage of writing – piecing.

"Piecing," a shortened version of "masterpiecing," took writing to the next step. This type of writing is what the average person typically recognizes as "graffiti" today. It inspired the numerous styles of graffiti-based fonts, including bubble-letters and Wildstyle. To an everyday passer-by, the writing is almost entirely illegible. Part of the point of piecing was to develop a way of writing unique to the artist, beautifying the letters so that the font was aesthetically pleasing. Another goal was to demonstrate the skill of the artist within the writing community, gaining further respect from fans and artistic contemporaries.[18] Typically, if an artist was to create a 'piece' without first practicing tagging, they wouldn't have as much respect in the

[16] Austin. *Taking the Train.* 75-106.
[17] MacDonald. *The Graffiti Subculture.* 63-93.
[18] Ibid.

community as someone who worked their way up from the bottom. Pieces could be on buildings, subway cars, and just about anywhere else. They involved the work of a few days and a few layers of paint: a thick coating to cover up any past graffiti, the initial outline or design of the piece, and the embellishments and color. This was most dangerous on the subway cars, particularly during the early 80s, when the city of New York truly began cracking down on graffiti. If an artist were to create a piece on a subway car, as soon as the design was finished, authorities would paint over the art before allowing the trains to run.[19] Due to this phenomenon, the joy and adrenaline of seeing an art piece travel around the city was lost for artists, and they were deterred from painting on cars. Instead, they turned to the streets.

While many artists began by treating the streets the same way they would treat a subway car by creating pieces that took only a few hours to complete at most, other artists realized the much greater capacity that the streets held for creating art in regard to painting time, size, and content. One such artist was Vulcan, who began creating pieces in what is now known as the Graffiti Hall of Fame in Harlem. Though some questioned the amount of space he took up, wondering why it was necessary, Vulcan recognized this transition as an opportunity to expand his style and hone his practice.[20] Graffiti was becoming wilder, more colorful, and larger than life, and it was this practice that encouraged writers to begin adding characters and motifs to their work. The artists wanted to stand out from the crowd, everybody striving for the title of "king."

This form of graffiti, though not directly questioning the institutions of the city or making political statements, is still intrinsic not only to the history of street art in New York, but to the

[19] Gastman & Neelon. *The History*. 58-77.
[20] Ibid., 232.

history of art and visual culture. Without this culture, built up over decades, the path would not have been paved for later street artists to express themselves. In a way, graffiti writing was a form of protest in itself. Though it didn't question specific institutions directly, the act of plastering one's name or tag on a wall questioned the idea of space and identity in the city. Many of the spaces artists like Taki 183 and Vulcan painted on, particularly subway cars, were and are considered "public" spaces. But what is a public space, really, if it doesn't belong to everyone? To writers, it was clear this was not the case – these spaces did not belong to them. The act of writing was one of defiance. Not only were writers stating to the masses that these spaces were just as much theirs as anyone else's, they were also expressing their identity outwardly. This self-expression is a core element of graffiti writing and street art in general. To feel strongly about any issue on any scale, an individual must have a sense of belonging and identity. Maybe this feeling is tied to their race, gender, or hometown, such as Cabaio Spirito's deep ties to his home of Buenos Aires, or maybe it is tied to the graffiti subculture, like Klops and his criticism of other street artists. Whatever an artist identifies with, this is projected onto the wall along with the paint. Reclaiming 'public' spaces from the city is a way for regular citizens to act as vigilante artists. This spatial reclamation during the 70s and 80s was a way for youths to garner a sense of belonging and feel like they mattered in a city that many felt was crumbling at their feet, or being repossessed by the wealthy and powerful.[21] The reaction that the city and many of the public expressed toward graffiti was also a reflection of the overwhelming negative social atmosphere of the time.[22]

[21] MacDonald. *The Graffiti Subculture.* 63-93.
[22] Austin. *Taking the Train.* 75-106.

There were some, however, who viewed graffiti as a positive phenomenon. Several people saw the brightly colored letters appearing throughout the city as specks of hope, colorful breaks in the otherwise gray concrete jungle. As one pop artist, Claes Oldenburg, put it: "You're standing in a subway station, everything is gray and gloomy, and all of a sudden one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens the place like a big bouquet from Latin America."[23] This mindset was popular among the artists of the day, many of whom were quick to classify graffiti writing as a type of pop-art. Could this new sensation really be categorized into an already existing category of art, particularly when those attempting to classify it knew little to nothing about the culture from which it arose? While it might be easy to see how pop-art and graffiti have influenced each other – for example, creating art in the style of advertisements – they are entirely separate entities.[24] To compare them is one thing, but to say that graffiti writing is pop art is incorrect. Pop art was most popular in the 1950s and 1960s, just before graffiti became widely popular.[25] Their origins could not be more different: pop art comes from the world of high art, and graffiti from the streets and its diverse culture. The bright colors used in both forms of art are comparable however, and later graffiti, such as work done by Shepherd Fairey, draws inspiration from pop art's criticism of advertisements.[26] Graffiti has a rich subculture that greatly plays into how it's presented, and who is 'allowed' to successfully create it. There is a difference, however, between graffiti writing, street art, and murals.

For the purposes of this project, graffiti writing is defined as the practice of either tagging or piecing; in other words, illegally branding a piece of property with a tag or name. 'Graffiti'

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[23] Schjeldahl, Peter. 1973. *Graffiti Goes Legit—But the 'Show-Off Ebullience' Remains.* September 16. https://www.nytimes.com/1973/09/16/archives/graffiti-goes-legitbut-the-showoff-ebullience-remains.html.
[24] Waclawek. *Graffiti*. 65-111.
[25] Osterwold, Tilman. 2003. "Pop Art in America." In *Pop Art*, by Tilman Osterwold, 82-113. Taschen.
[26] Waclawek. *Graffiti.* 73-76.

will always refer to an illegal practice. The term ‘street art’ refers to any art that is present on the streets, whether legal or illegal, and ‘mural’ denotes a specifically legal, likely commissioned, piece. Murals are also typically large works of art, often covering entire sides of buildings, billboards, or underpasses. Graffiti writing is of innate importance to overall history of street art and gave way to the rise of many now renowned artists. As the world began to change, however, so did the art that appeared on the streets. Once artists moved away from working on subway cars and began to expand their practice of ‘piecing,’ they were able to take it a step further.

Most street artists who are household names began as graffiti writers, particularly those who rose to fame through the 90s and early 2000s. One such artist is Banksy, who is known certainly by everyone in the art world, and by many in the general population as well. The mysterious artist began in Bristol, England by bombing walls, and has since created politically and socially charged works have art that have made it off the streets and into renowned galleries around the world. Despite his fame, Banksy has done his best to remain anonymous: hiding behind a paper bag in photos, communicating primarily through email, and establishing ‘Pest Control,’ an organization that authenticates Banksy pieces.[27] The rise of artists like Banksy goes to show the hold that street art has grown to have on people. But would Banksy, or other street artists like Blek le Rat and Keith Haring, be so famous had they not begun their careers by creating illegal and confrontational work?

Some of Banksy’s most influential pieces include: *Rage, the Flower Thrower* (2005), depicting a man – supposedly Banksy himself – throwing a Molotov cocktail in the guise of a bouquet of flowers; *Kissing Coppers* (2004), a large stencil work portraying two police officers

[27] Ellsworth-Jones, Will. 2013. *The Story Behind Banksy.* February. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-story-behind-banksy-4310304/.

kissing; and *Napalm Girl* (2004-05), which uses an image of a young girl from a photo taken during the Vietnam war paired with classic capitalist icons Ronald McDonald and Mickey Mouse.[28] All these paintings contain controversial imagery of various sorts. These and other pieces by Banksy have tackled such contentious issues as racism, sexism, homophobia, capitalism, police brutality, and more, and provoke their viewers to question institutions within their countries. If Banksy had approached a gallery in 2004 with a proposition to display one of these works, would the gallery have turned him away? This would have been a distinct possibility. Instead, Banksy chose to take the illegal route by painting on the side of building, which displayed his art to the world whether they liked it or not. This ensured that people would see his message. His background in street art is what inspired him to do this – without growing up in that immersive culture, these works would not exist today.

These paintings would most likely not exist without the graffiti culture that inspired the artist. But what if these early works of art had not been created on the street, and instead had been exhibited in galleries or museums? If Banksy had been lucky enough to show his art at an established institution, only a handful of people belonging to a specific demographic would have ever seen it. It would exist as food for thought for the privileged, making it to the general public only in the form of remakes, novelty items, and advertisement – the very things Banksy shuns. He once stated about street art: "You don't have to go to college, drag 'round a portfolio, mail off transparencies to snooty galleries or sleep with someone powerful, all you need now is a few ideas and a broadband connection. This is the first time the essentially bourgeois world of art has belonged to the people. We need to make it count."[29] This is exactly why it is so crucial for art

[28] The Art Story. 2019. *Banksy: British Graffiti artist, political activist, and film director.* https://www.theartstory.org/artist-banksy-artworks.htm.
[29] Ellsworth-Jones. *The Story Behind Banksy.*

historians to document street art. Street art reaches a wider audience than traditional art due to its often highly trafficked locations, prevalence in urban environments, and popularization in contemporary media. It has the capacity to make its viewers truly reflect on and question what it may be attempting to discuss by interrupting their daily routines and mindsets. It opens up a greater dialogue than some other forms of art, and by reaching a greater number of people, includes more diversity within the conversation. What's more, the potential immorality of street art is dwarfed by the crimes it is capable of exposing. As Banksy has argued, "The greatest crimes in the world are not committed by people breaking the rules but by people following the rules. It's people who follow orders that drop bombs and massacre villages."[30]

Early activist artists like Banksy, Keith Haring, and Blek le Rat (who is widely considered the "father of stencil graffiti") opened the door for other artists to explore this new territory of street art.[31] In New York, these include Magda Sayeg, Dan Witz, Swoon, and Nick Walker.[32] Each of these artists brings a different approach to the practice, and are good examples of how varied today's street art can be. Sayeg is the founder of a group called "Knitta Please," which was established in Texas, and she explores the gap between 'art' and 'craft' with her practice. She pioneered yarn-bombing, the practice of wrapping or otherwise decorating everyday city objects with knitted fabric. Sayeg incorporates bright colors reminiscent of classic graffiti writing in her patterns and seeks to soften the urban landscape with her work. Since knitting is traditionally associated with women, it appears as a less harsh, somehow less criminal form of vandalism. The graffiti movement in its beginnings was typically viewed as a male youth culture, so using a historically feminine practice to create street art leads viewers to question

[30] The Art Story. *Banksy*.
[31] The Keith Haring Foundation. *Bio*.
[32] Waclawek. *Graffiti*. 65-111.

their assumptions while juxtaposing the harsh gray background that is the city.[33] Yarn-bombing is often placed into the category of 'alternative graffiti,' which also includes non-traditional art forms such as public or guerilla gardening. These types of movements seek to spread their messages through positivity and softness instead of anarchism or civil disobedience.[34]

Witz has a completely different approach to street art that deviates from traditional graffiti writing in many ways. In a *trompe l'oeil* style of painting, Witz creates small, hyper-realistic pictures in nondescript areas of the city that are meant to shock or startle viewers. This is vastly different from the larger-than-life piecing that graffiti writers typically do. While some of his pieces, such as his series of birds from 2000, are delicate and spark happiness in viewers, many are eerie and comfortable, such as *Ugly New Buildings* (2008), a series critiquing the gentrification of the city. One of the paintings from this series was painted on a newly constructed apartment building and features a realistic looking vent with a pair of carefully manicured hands reaching out, attempting to escape. This type of satire is common in Witz's work, who began painting outdoors right as the graffiti movement began to expand in the late 70s and early 80s. Although Witz considered a profession as a mainstream artist, he was dissatisfied with the art world. He once stated: "For me, painting on the street – doing anonymous, free, non-permissible works – was a very satisfying way of expressing my youthful disenchantment with the art establishment. And the lucky break was that there was a lasting humility lesson in it for me: ever since then I've wanted the impact of the work to be felt first,

[33] Ibid., 70-74.
[34] Haveri, Minna. 2016. "Yarn bombing - the softer side of street art." In *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, by Jeffrey Ian Ross, 103-112. New York: Routledge.

and only after that should you begin to wonder who did it and why."[35] Many street artists seem to share this sentiment.

While Witz has a background in street art and was immersed in its culture from a young age, Swoon has a more traditional background. She studied studio art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, though much like Witz, she began to feel disillusioned with the art world and the direction her work was moving in. The art she creates emphasizes the ephemerality of street art by using materials she knows will disintegrate with time, such as paper and linoleum. Also similar to Witz, Swoon prefers to create smaller pieces that a viewer can more easily have an experience with, rather than oversized paintings that take up entire buildings. Her art is meant to comment on the city and its inhabitants, encouraging the small moments that make up a life to occur. She has stated in that past that her work is about "human connection, paying attention, moments of surprise, [and] participation in the creation of your urban environment." In a city, due to its scale and nature, it is very possible for someone to have a momentary human connection with another person he or she will never see again. Swoon hopes to capture that feeling with her art and encourage viewers to participate more actively with their environments.[36]

Walker, on the other hand, creates larger-scale works that are often peppered with humor, and employs a classic style of stencil-based street art, which was popularized by both Blek le Rat and Banksy. Stenciling helps artists to create one image many times over and more quickly than other styles of painting, allowing them a better chance of evading law enforcement. Stenciling has been popular in a significant amount of activist art, and for good reason. Says Banksy: "All graffiti is low-level dissent, but stencils have an extra history. They've been used to start

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[35] Waclawek. *Graffiti*. 86-90.
[36] Waclawek. *Graffiti*. 84-86.
Swoon. 2019. *About Swoon.* https://swoonstudio.org/about/.

revolutions and to stop wars."[37] Walker paints as a form of personal escapism, and hopes to spark emotion in his viewers while focusing on many political subjects. He also frequently employs humor to send a message, as in his 2009 work *Brat*, which features a popular children's doll in a classic Beverly Hills outfit with the caption: "does my head look big in this?"[38] Not only does this piece explore the standards of consumerist culture that push people to constantly be aware of how they are presenting to the public eye, but it questions the message that we are sending to children with the creation of certain products.

All these examples of successful street artists demonstrate the extent to which street art can vary, and the different messages it has the capacity to send. The ways in which graffiti and street art have been created in recent years have dramatically changed even from five years ago due to the presence of social media, and this is an aspect of today's art world that cannot be ignored. In a sense, it ties together amateur and professional artists – both use the same platforms to promote their work. Street art might critique this usage while relying on it, and even though many street artists attempt to differentiate themselves from high art, their use of social media ultimately connects them to it. It's true that many street artists prefer to stay off the grid, simply focusing on creating art, but many choose to document their pieces through social media, expanding the already broad audience street art reaches. Several of the artists mentioned later in this thesis choose to use social media to reach a broader audience, and the effect of this decision will be explored.

For this project, I was able to explore the city of New York firsthand, and witnessed some excellent examples of the type of street art described in this project. The next several chapters

[37] Ellsworth-Jones. *The Story Behind Banksy.*
[38] Waclawek. *Graffiti*. 107-111.

will dive deep into a handful of these pieces, exploring their messages and initial reactions, intents, artists, locations, and audiences. We will begin with Pleks's satirical and scathing criticism of American government in *American Chief*, complemented by a brief examination of Allie Kelley's *No Borders, No Walls.* Following this is an analysis of social activism through street art using works from Klops, Raf Urban, and Blanco Tsagaan. Cabaio Spirito's *Progreso* and *Across That River* are utilized to take a closer look street art's function as spatial reclamation and visual experience, and in chapter five works from Captain Eyeliner and Sac Six investigate questions of branding and signature style that exist in street art and graffiti culture.

Chapter Two: *American Chief* and Opaqe

In the heart of Bushwick, Brooklyn lies a graffiti haven where artists from around the world come to display their work. Bushwick is a neighborhood with well over 100,000 residents, and even more visitors who come for its bars, restaurants, music, and art, both in galleries and the streets.[39] Though graffiti can be found throughout this neighborhood, a highly concentrated amount resides near the corner of Flushing and St. Nicholas Ave, known as the Bushwick Collective. Joe Ficalora, a Bushwick native, grew up in a crime-ridden and gloomy time, and after the death of his mother in 2011, decided to attempt to transform his neighborhood through art. Ficalora coordinated local artists, and Bushwick's first large-scale painting was created in 2011. Following this success, he encouraged other artists to follow in their steps. Now, the neighborhood in Brooklyn attracts artists from around the world, including the renowned French artist Blek le Rat and Chilean native Dasic. Artwork continues to pop up throughout the year, and every summer Ficalora holds a block party to celebrate the movement.[40]

The Bushwick Collective is a great example of street art that is illegal but socially accepted and celebrated. While most murals are typically commissioned by a business or organization, those that exist in Bushwick are not. Despite this, the community members do not view the graffiti here as a disturbance, but instead as an asset. For many locals, the fame of the

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[39] King, L, K Hinterland, KL Dragan, CR Driver, TG Harris, RC Gwynn, N Linos, O Barbot, and MT Bassett. 2015. *Community Health Profiles 2015; Brooklyn Community District 4: Bushwick.* Community Health Profile, New York: The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.
StreetEasy. 2019. *One Block Over: Bushwick.* Accessed February 15, 2019. https://streeteasy.com/neighborhoods/bushwick/.

[40] Stavsky, Lois, and Houda Lazrak. 2014. *Google Arts & Culture; Street Art NYC: The Bushwick Collective.* Accessed February 15, 2019. https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/gRPwr3J5.

Bushwick Art Collective brings them pride, and contributes to boosting their economy by drawing in tourists and new businesses. Interestingly, though the art in Bushwick is not legal, those who enjoy its presence typically do not lump these works of art into the category of 'graffiti.'[41] This mindset continues to demonstrate the stigma surrounding graffiti as a word and an idea.

Because the art in the Bushwick Collective is not commissioned, artists who choose to paint there can express themselves freely without worrying about censorship or adhering to pre-set rules and regulations. Ficalora originally expressed his desire to keep the street art family-friendly, not political, and not explicit, but since the artists are neither paid nor invited most do not abide by his wishes.[42] In fact, since the Bushwick Collective was started eight years ago, it has only grown more famous and drawn in more artists, who do not always know of the history behind the movement. Because of this, the area is filled with blocks of unique, thought-provoking, and skilled paintings, each of which brings color to the gray landscape and encourages passers-by to stop and take a second look. One such painting I've dubbed *American Chief*, created by an artist who goes by 'Pleks.'[43]

Pleks, born in 1983, is an artist originally hailing from Cannes, France who has always rejected the traditional and commercial art world, preferring to exhibit on the streets. He attempts to convey the urgency of expression and support urban environments as a space for creation through his work.[44] He shares his art through social media, specifically Instagram, using the

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[41] Detres, Christian. 2015. *Bushwick Daily; Getting Deep About The Bushwick Collective Mural Massacre in The Name of Fight Against Gentrification.* February 6. Accessed February 15, 2019. https://bushwickdaily.com/bushwick/categories/arts-and-culture/2842-getting-deep-about-the-bushwick-collective-mural-massacre-in-the-name-fight-against-gentrification.

[42] Detres. *Bushwick Daily.*

[43] Figure 2.1

[44] Galerie Du Pharos. n.d. *PLEKS.* Accessed February 17, 2019. http://thepainting.com/projects/pleks/.

Figure 2.1: American Chief, *Pleks, 2018, Bushwick. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

handle "pleksbastard." His personal maxim is *"mon art a les moyens d'enflammer les sens,"* which translates to "my art has the means to blow minds," or, more literally, "my art has the means to inflame the senses."[45] After finishing a painting, he typically posts an image of the piece with a number of hashtags, and sometimes a location.[46] *American Chief* was posted to his Instagram page on October 28th, 2018, which leads me to believe this was around the time the painting was completed. Pleks posted the image with the caption "American Chief?? American Chief?? American Nightmare," which clearly illustrates Pleks' dismay with the current political atmosphere within the US.[47] As is common with street art, by the time I got to it this painting had

[40] Pleks. 2011. *FATCAP; Artist: Pleks.* Accessed February 17, 2019. https://www.fatcap.com/artist/pleks.html.
[45] Pleks. 2018. *Burn the wall- brûlez le mur.* September 14. Accessed February 15, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExzimB3tn0E&feature=youtu.be.
[46] Pleks. 2019. *Instagram.* February 18. Accessed February 18, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/pleksbastard/.
[47] Pleks. 2018. *Instagram.* October 28. Accessed February 18, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/BpejwOCBpz-/.

already been desecrated with a large red tag by "Opaqe." Though, this was not part of the original artwork, its function within the overall work will be examined after the analysis of the original work.

Instead of painting directly on the surface of the wall, Pleks instead elected to create *American Chief* on a large wooden panel before fastening it to the wall. The background of this piece that is not left bare is white and decorated with red stripes, a clear reference to the American flag. The majority of the panel is taken up by the face of Donald Trump, who wears a collar to signify his position of political power, as well as a wide and exaggerated frown. The expression is not one typical of Trump. Though there are a handful of images in which he wears a similar expression, he is typically more expressive than he is depicted in *American Chief*. In the painting, Trump's eyes seem relatively relaxed, with only tension in his lips. The corners of his mouth, however, are turned too far down for this to signify his resting face. His expression is reminiscent of another famous leader, though – Adolf Hitler. Physically, Hitler was known to use body language that expressed power and asserted dominance, and his resting face that appears in most photos included a frown.[48] Trump's expression in *American Chief* has the same relaxed dissatisfaction. If comparing Trump to Hitler is indeed the artist's intent, it would make sense, as it is

Figure 2.2, Celebrity Apprentice, *courtesy of Nate Beeler.*

[48] Pease, Barbara, and Allan Pease. 2004. *The Definitive Book of Body Language: The Hidden Meanings Behind People's Gestures and Expressions.* 37. New York: Batam Dell.

Figure 2.3

Figure 2.3: Adolf Hitler. Courtesy of trove42.com.

not an uncommon thing to do.[49] Many qualities that Trump has expressed publicly have been compared to Hitler's views, such as his disdain for immigrants and particular groups of people, shutting down the government to demand funds for building a wall to prevent Mexican immigrants from seeking asylum, his use of white supremacist language, and his suggestions to "tag" American citizens who practice the religion of Islam.[50] Non-Americans around the world

[49] Figure 2.2

[50] Beorn, Waitman Wade. 2018. *It's not wrong to compare Trump's America to the Holocaust. Here's why.* July 16. Accessed February 18, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/07/16/its-not-wrong-to-compare-trumps-america-to-the-holocaust-heres-why/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.455c6542196b.

Hillyard, Vaughn. 2015. *Donald Trump's Plan for a Muslim Database Draws Comparison to Nazi Germany.* November 20. Accessed February 18, 2019. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/trump-says-he-would-certainly-implement-muslim-database-n466716.

Herf, Jeffrey. 2019. *Emergency powers helped Hitler's rise. Germany has avoided them ever since.* February 19. Accessed February 19, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/02/19/emergency-powers-helped-hitlers-rise-germany-has-avoided-them-ever-since/?utm_term=.318b042ddf39.

Inside Edition. 2016. *Can Donald Trump Supporters Tell His Quotes Apart from Hitler's?* March 3. Accessed February 18, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDl5MW3ykhQ.

have been very quick to criticize President Trump and his actions, and French Pleks might be doing just that with *American Chief* in an attempt to open the eyes of his viewers.

Pleks has also added an ornate Native American headdress to the head of the President in *American Chief* that appears as if it could be blowing around in an imaginary gust of wind. These eagle-feathered headdresses, or "war bonnets," are of great significance to Native American Plains tribes and are usually reserved for people of status, such as tribal Elders, the Chief, and warriors. Though there are many different types of headdresses used by different tribes, including the Flaring Eagle Feather Bonnet and the Horned Bonnet, over time the motif of a feather headdress has come to be associated with Native Americans as a group.[51] With this imagery, Pleks might be attempting to demonstrate to viewers the power and influence that Trump has on the country and the world. He could also, however, be communicating that Trump is disrespectful, since only Native American Chiefs, performers, and other high-status figures are meant to wear the bonnet.[52] Alternatively, and perhaps most plausibly, Pleks could be using the headdress to criticize Trump's treatment of indigenous peoples in America, such as his attempts to strip tribes of their healthcare.[53]

Trump is also pictured in *American Chief* with two incomplete blue triangles on either cheek. In most Native American cultures, blue face paint represents the sky or the water, and was traditionally very difficult to come by. Because of its rarity in early days, blue paint was often

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[51] Howard, James H. 1954. "Plains Indian Feathered Bonnets." *Plains Anthropologist* 23-26.
Josephy, Alvin M. 1991. *The Indian Heritage of America.* 8. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
[52] Josephy. *The Indian Heritage.* 30, 144.
[53] Diamond, Dan. 2018. *Trump challenges Native Americans' historical standing.* April 22. Accessed February 18, 2019. https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/22/trump-native-americans-historical-standing-492794.

reserved for figures of status or important rituals.[54] Again, this could signify Trump's preeminent social status. Below the two blue triangles on the cheeks are the faint outline of black triangles. Black is one of the most common colors used in Native American face painting, along with red, and has many uses. It typically symbolizes victory, struggle, courage, death, survival, status, or all of the above. On some occasions, it can also be used as a form of shame.[55] An Oglala Sioux holy man, Nicholas Black Elk, states: "By going on the warpath, we know that we have done something bad, and we wish to hide our face from Wakan Tanka."[56] Pleks could be referencing the violence that many perceive Trump to encourage and exhibit. In Trump's autobiography, he admits that he was an aggressive and assertive child, and during rallies he has openly said that he would like to "punch [a protester] in the face."[57] Perhaps the artist is suggesting that Trump hide his face in shame for his violent actions.

Pleks has included the title, "AMERICAN CHIEF?" in white paint outlined in black in the bottom right corner of the panel, and included his tag in yellow and black. The all capital letters strike the viewer with an immediate sense of urgency, as though the artist is yelling out from the painting. The messy style in which the letters are painted doesn't at all call to mind the elaborately decorated letters typically used in graffiti writing; it brings somewhat of an overall careless element to the painting. This messiness, however, is deliberate. On closer inspection, the black shadow behind the white text perfectly mimics the lettering, and paint even drips in the same places. The dripping paint is significant as well – not only is it present in the text, but it is

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[54] 2013. *Native American Face Paint; Customs, Colors, Designs.* February 9. Accessed February 17, 2019. https://anthropologylover.wordpress.com/2013/02/09/native-american-face-paint-customs-colors-designs/#comments.

[55] 2013. *Native American Face Paint.*

[56] Neihardt, John G. 2014. *Black Elk Speaks: The Complete Edition.* 310. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

[57] Keneally, Meghan. 2018. *A look back at Trump comments perceived by some as encouraging violence.* October 19. Accessed February 18, 2019. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/back-trump-comments-perceived-encouraging-violence/story?id=48415766.

visible underneath the red stripes in the background. The image of Donald Trump contains no drips whatsoever, which tells the viewer that the artist is perfectly capable of avoiding this untidy-looking quality if he desires. The dripping paint, particularly the red, provides the overall image with a somewhat sinister feeling and is reminiscent of fonts and motifs used in horror movies and Halloween advertising. Pleks' use of the word "nightmare" when describing the President reinforces this menacing aspect of *American Chief*.[58] Street art has always been associated with vandalism, anarchism, and other forms of lawlessness. Like their predecessors, contemporary street artists continue to push boundaries with these ideas in mind, and Pleks is no exception.

Although "anarchism" generally has a negative association, it has historically been used to further social activism agendas, including the feminist and Blank Panther movements in the 1970s.[59] Anarchist propaganda was meant to uplift and inspire, and instill the idea of a changed future in the minds of its viewers. As Errico Malatesta explains: "When anarchist ideas were a novelty which amazed and shocked, and it was only possible to make propaganda for a distant future…it could be enough to criticize existing society and present an exposition of the ideal to which we aspire."[60] With this in mind, it's easy to see why Pleks might have been attracted to these ideas during the creation of *American Chief*. Without a doubt, the current state of affairs in the USA has sparked politically wariness, fear, activism, and resistance in American citizens. Conflict and controversy are frequently pushed by the greater media in pursuit of monetary gain, and technology and confirmation bias have led to many people only being exposed to news

[58] Pleks. *Instagram.* 2018.
[59] Woodcock, George, Martin A. Miller, and Franklin Rosemont. 2019. *Anarchism in the Arts.* Accessed February 19, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/topic/anarchism/Anarchism-in-the-arts.
[60] Malatesta, Errico, and Vernon Richards. 1977. *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas.* New York: Freedom Press.

sources that align with their views.[61] *American Chief* captures this fear with its eerie text and Trump's frown, and the theme of resistance with its use of strong, bold colors and provocative message.

Although the symbolism in *American Chief* is interesting on its own, it provides a fuller understanding of the painting when analyzed as a whole. *American Chief* seems to be dripping with sarcasm – literally. President Trump has been painted to look like a stereotypical Native American Chief and scowls out at the viewer. Pleks has taken a symbol of status – the bonnet – and transformed it into a way to ridicule America and its president. The text appears to mock the viewer in this sense. It seems to be asking: is this who you want to represent you, America? Is this your "American Chief?" The dripping stripes of the American flag in the background seem to indicate that the country is melting or otherwise falling apart. Regardless of what symbols are employed in this painting, Pleks' contempt for President Trump is evident.

Although the "Opaqe" tag graffitied on top of Pleks' original work was added after its completion, it adds an entirely new and interesting dimension to *American Chief*. Opaqe's choice of location, color, and design for the tag were not coincidental. He/she purposefully wrote the letters of the tag largely and directly over the face of Trump, underlined the title, and even painted a jagged border around the letters. The intent was clear: to cover up Trump's face. Not only this, but Opaqe's choice of red paint expresses feelings of anger; paired with Trump's ruddy complexion in the original painting, it even seems to create the illusion that his face is bleeding. This retaliation seems as though it is a direct response to Pleks' message. While *American Chief* alone asks, "is this who you follow?" Opaqe's addition answers, "no it is not."

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[61] Pierre, Joe. 2018. *Why Has America Become So Divided?* September 5. Accessed February 19, 2019. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psych-unseen/201809/why-has-america-become-so-divided.

Additionally, Opaqe's addition to *American Chief* asserts the presence of the graffiti subculture against the institution. It shuns the face of the government's front-man as it reclaims a public space through illegal writing.[62] Anti-graffiti practices benefit capitalist ventures that seek to maximize the profit of a given space, and in contrast, illegal graffiti furthers the anarchist agenda that pushes back against capitalism.[63] As a whole, *American Chief*, including its addition from Opaqe, functions as an excellent example of the kinds of conversations that street art can bring about. Not only did Pleks impose a question on his viewers, but he received an answer from one of them. This is a dialogue that can only exist with street art. Were *American Chief* exhibited in a gallery, all Opaqe could have done was write a letter, or a blog post, or some other indirect form of expressing his or her feelings about the painting. Since Pleks' painting was on the street, however, Opaqe was able to confront the painting – and consequently, the artist – directly. Moreover, he or she unwittingly contributed to Pleks' message of resistance. By painting over Trump's face, Opaqe could be expressing his or her refusal to accept the current policies. If Pleks said, "go, resist!" the other artist responded with, "I will." The dual messages of resistance and mockery at play in *American Chief* between these two artists demonstrate the complexity of street art and its motives. The possibility of other artists contributing to a work opens up an entirely new world of possibilities that art in galleries or museums does not have.

The geographic location of street art is of vital importance not only to its meaning in many cases, but also to its elicited response. In the case of *American Chief*, it had been up for about two and a half months by the time I got to it, even though Opaqe painted on it at some

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[62] MacDonald. *The Graffiti Subculture.* 63-93.

[63] Malatesta & Richards. *Errico Malatesta*.
Kramer, Ronald. 2016. "New York City's moral panic over graffiti." In *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, by Jeffrey Ian Ross, 404-415. New York: Routledge.

point during that time. For street art to stay up for any amount of time, the residents who see it every day must, on some level, approve of it. Should a work offend or negatively affect a community, it is likely to be removed quickly either by authorities or "shadow buffers" – vigilante citizens who remove street art of their own accord for the benefit of the community.[64] Bushwick is a community of 65% Hispanic and Latinx people, and as of 2018, 5.8 million New York City citizens were registered as Democrats, making up approximately 72.5% of the city's population.[65] Were these demographics different, *American Chief* might not have stayed up longer than a few days; controversial works are typically the first to disappear.[66]

Not only does location often determine the lifetime of a painting, but some street art responds directly to the environment in which it is created. A light-hearted example of this phenomenon is a work by Allie Kelley that I'm calling *No Borders, No Walls*.[67] It is a paste-up featuring the character Horton from Dr. Suess's *Horton Hears a Who,* who is an elephant. This paste-up is located in Dumbo, Brooklyn, and if one recalls the classic story of Dumbo the circus elephant, the viewer's mind immediately can draw the connection of two famous fictional elephants. *No Borders, No Walls* connects with its environment as well as functioning as activist street art. Horton appears on a black background that is decorated with a design of faceless people holding hands, blooming flowers, and other vegetation. A text bubble coming from

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[64] Ross, Jeffrey Ian. 2016. "Responses to graffiti/street art in the US." In *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, by Jeffrey Ian Ross, 393-403. New York: Routledge.

[65] King, et al. *Community Health Profiles.* 2015.
NYS Board of Elections. 2018. *Board of Elections.* Accessed February 18, 2018. https://www.elections.ny.gov/NYSBOE/enrollment/county/county_nov12.pdf.
Hicks, Nolan, and Carl Campanile. 2018. *New York Dems crush GOP in new voter registrations.* November 1. Accessed February 18, 2018. https://nypost.com/2018/11/01/new-york-dems-crush-gop-in-new-voter-registrations/.

[66] Ross. *Routledge Handbook.* 393-403.

[67] Figure 2.4
Kelley, Allie. 2018. *Instagram.* August 9. Accessed February 18, 2018. https://www.instagram.com/alliekelleyart/.

Figure 2.3, No Borders, No Walls *(2018), Allie Kelley. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

Horton reads: "No Borders! No Walls! No kids in cages! Family reunification now!" The message of this artwork is straightforward: everybody should accept each other and spread feelings of unification and togetherness. The message Horton appears to be speaking is quite literal, and if one recalls the story of Horton, his message is simple: "a person is a person, no matter how small."[68] *No Borders, No Walls* and *American Chief* exhibit how graffiti interacts with its environment – and how the environment interacts with graffiti.

Street art functions as an important punctuation in the everyday gray beat of the city. It encourages viewers to open up to their surroundings and interact more purposefully with their environments while questioning establishments and even inciting resistance. Graffiti has the

[68] Suess, Dr. 1954. *Horton Hears a Who!* New York: Random House.

Figure 2.4, No Borders, No Walls *(Detail), (2018), Allie Kelley. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

power to open eyes, minds, feelings, and speak on behalf of those who have no voice. If street art isn't documented it can be lost quickly, both to the elements and its enemies, whose anti-graffiti rhetoric serves to keep the voices of minorities and marginalized groups muffled.[69] As seen with the Bushwick Collective, street art has the power to uplift a community, spread positivity, and even boost local economies if used correctly. Its many purposes, as well as the reactions it evokes, are worth examination, investigation, and scholarship.

[69] Kramer. *Routledge Handbook.* 404-415.

Chapter Three: *Culture Vultures* and Social Activism

Although many different works of street art focus on national or international political figures and policies, not everything in street art culture falls into this category. Frequently, the acts of protest or activism committed by artists relate to issues that are more socially oriented. These issues can include anything from widespread problems to small local situations, and everything in between. Many artists focus on abstract social causes such as racism, feminism, and immigration, to name a few. Artworks tackling these issues typically crop up in relatively public or traffic-heavy locations so as to reach the maximum number of viewers to spread the message that artist is trying to portray. Because of this, it is no surprise that a number of these pieces have appeared in Bushwick, which is a very popular location for graffiti artists around the world. Three paintings will be analyzed in this light: *Culture Vultures* (Klops, 2017), *Aretha* (Raf Urban, 2018), and *Close Rikers* (Blanco Цагаан (Tsagaan) and Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, 2017).

As with all street art, the ways in which artists choose to handle their messages vary significantly from artist to artist. Some add humor and satire to lighten the mood, others take a more severe path to emphasize the seriousness of a situation. Klops opts for the former, utilizing icons from pop culture and video games such as the two Nintendo series *Pokémon* and *Mario Brothers*, and frequently making social or political commentary.[70] Originally from Queens, New York, Klops is relatively new to the street art scene; he only began painting in the late 2000s, as opposed to many of his contemporaries who began painting in the 1990s or sooner. Klops, a

[70] Street Art SF Team. 2017. *Klops: Seen On The Street.* March 8. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.streetartsf.com/klops/.

derivative of the word 'cyclops,' was inspired by the street art he saw every day.[71] This exposure, as well as graffiti's popularity in pop culture and films such as *Style Wars*, led to Klops practicing his artwork on abandoned areas of the New York train system. He has stated that he paints for himself and for anyone who enjoys his art, and that the message an artist can convey through their painting is the purest form of graffiti there is.[72] He has also stated that "revolution is not in aggression but in the mind," and that true rebellion can be expressed through creative outlets.[73] According to his business partner James, who refuses to disclose his last name: "Klops easily merged traditional letter-based graffiti and street art. Very few who do 'street art-esque stuff' get respect from traditional graffiti writers. He is truly someone to watch in terms of traditional graffiti, character inspired artwork, and his amazing graffiti-based political cartoons."[74]

Klops' painting in Bushwick, Brooklyn, was created on one of the sliding metal garage doors that are so common for protecting stores in New York City, meaning it can only be seen when this door is shut. Its background mimics the red brick wall on either side of the image and the gray sidewalk in front of it, giving the viewer the feeling that the characters are standing next to them in a three-dimensional space.[75] Half the space is taken up by the words 'Culture Vultures,' with the 'T' in 'vultures' ending in a bloody bone, making the body of the letter appear to have been eaten. The graffiti writing seen here is a tribute to the culture and to Klops' roots as a tagging and piecing artist and is meant to blend into the painted brick background as if 'Culture Vultures' was graffitied before the characters in the scene arrived. In a seemingly literal

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[71] Cheverri, Fernando. 2015. *The Queens Graffiti Phenomenon: Klops.* May 7. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://magazinewritingqc.wordpress.com/2015/05/07/artist-profile-klops/.
[72] Susak, Eni. 2017. *Klops.* May 9. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.widewalls.ch/artist/klops/.
[73] Susak. *Klops.*
[74] Cheverri. *The Queens Graffiti.*
[75] Figure 3.1

Figure 3.1: Culture Vultures, *Klops 2017. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

visualization of this phrase, Klops depicts two birds below the letters enjoying the remains of a black man's body, which lies on the sidewalk.

The characters depicted in *Culture Vultures* are much more significant than one might assume at first glance. They are clearly vultures, indicated not only by the text above them but also their pinkish, bald heads and large black wings, which double as arms and hands in this case. In fact, the vultures depicted are what is known as Rüppell's griffon vultures and, although there are many different subspecies of vultures, are the most commonly portrayed in popular

culture and media, including Disney's 1967 animated film *The Jungle Book*.[76] This is due to their highly sinister appearance and reputation; with hunched shoulders, huge talons, small beady eyes, and bald heads designed to allow the birds to stick their heads into the ribcages of carcasses, griffon vultures make the perfect villains. Klops' characters' feathery collars further demonstrate that these birds are griffon vultures, leading the viewer to believe that they are committing some heinous act.[77] Klops may have drawn inspiration not only from wildlife and villainous American visual history, but from the culture of the early 20th century as well. With their dark, squat bodies and cartoonish rendering these characters may have also been inspired by picaninny imagery: the racist depictions of black children that were popular in America from the 1850s to as late as the 1940s or 50s. These children were frequently portrayed as animals or natural simpletons, and their features were exaggerated in an attempt to be comical for white viewers.[78] Klops could be referencing this history. One of the vultures has its wing/hand over its mouth with flecks of red around its beak, as though it had been eating the corpse in front of it. Both of the vultures are painted wearing wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses, and one vulture has a black beard, wide smile, and a cigarette hanging from its teeth. This vulture on the right is meant to be Thierry Guetta, a graffiti artist known as Mr. Brainwash.[79]

Guetta is a French immigrant who moved to the USA with his family and settled in Los Angeles before becoming a protégée of renowned graffiti artists Shepard Fairey and Banksy. During his pre-graffiti days, he owned a thrift shop where he scammed the fashion-obsessed LA

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[76] Smithsonian. 2019. *Ruppell's Griffon Vulture.* Accessed March 11, 2019. https://nationalzoo.si.edu/animals/ruppells-griffon-vulture.
IMDb. 2019. *The Jungle Book.* Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061852/.

[77] Smithsonian. *Ruppell's Griffon Vulture.*

[78] Pilgrim, David. 2012. *The Picaninny Caricature.* Accessed April 22, 2019. https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/picaninny/homepage.htm

[79] Brooklyn Street Art. 2017. *BSA Images of the Week: 07.09.2017.* July 9. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.brooklynstreetart.com/2017/07/09/bsa-images-of-the-week-07-09-2017/.

masses into buying fake designer clothing; he reveals this during interviews in the 2010 film on Banksy entitled *Exit Through the Gift Shop*.[80] Guetta had a fixation on filming everything in his life and he was first drawn to street art after filming his cousin, the street artist Space Invader, in France. Afterward, he followed the infamous Fairey around for months filming his work, learning many tricks and tips along the way. Shortly after, he connected with Banksy, who encouraged him to pursue painting of his own instead of film. He threw himself into putting on street art exhibitions, the first of which, 'Life is Beautiful,' was well received.[81]

Although the vulture on the right in Klops' *Culture Vultures* appears to be wearing a brown shirt with white sleeves, a closer inspection reveals that the brown paint was added after the original image was created and is covering up letters beneath. In an older photograph of this same work, the viewer can see that the concealed words read "Life is Beautiful."[82] Knowing this, an immediate connection can be drawn between Mr. Brainwash and the vulture in Klops' painting. To solidify this connection, the black beard, sunglasses, and wide-brimmed hat are characteristics of Guetta's appearance. Even the flat top on vulture-Guetta's hat suggests that it is him, since this artist is typically seen wearing a trilby with a large brim.

In 2011, Guetta faced a lawsuit that would inspire Klops to create *Culture Vultures*. Photographer Glen Friedman sued Guetta for using his copyrighted photograph of the rap group Run-DMC in one of his artworks. Guetta ultimately lost this case, but the resulting buzz surrounding him served to prove that he was his own artist and not a character fabricated by

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[80] 2010. *Exit Through the Gift Shop.* Directed by Banksy. Performed by Banksy, Mr. Brainwash and Space Invader. Neu, Robert. 2017. *Mr. Brainwash – Biography of "street artist" Thierry Guetta.* November 23. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.stencilrevolution.com/blogs/profiles/mr-brainwash.

[81] Neu. *Mr. Brainwash.*

[82] Brooklyn Street Art. *BSA Images.*

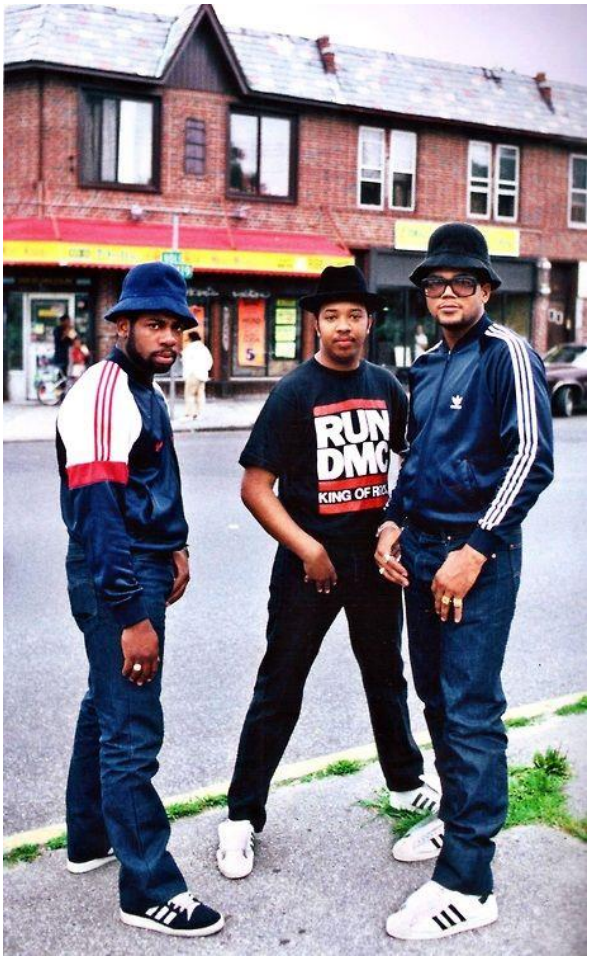

Figure 3.2: Run-DMC: (From left to right) Jason Mizell, Joseph Simmons, Darryl McDaniels. Photograph courtesy of Pinterest.com.

Banksy as a prank, which is what many people believed at the time.[83] After learning this information, the identity of the corpse depicted by Klops is evident: Darryl "DMC" McDaniels, one third of Run-DMC. McDaniels, along with Joseph "Run" Simmons and Jason "Jam Master Jay" Mizell, formed this group in Queens, New York in 1982.[84] Quickly rising to fame throughout the 1980s, this influential group was an inspiration to the next generation of rappers and its members were fashion icons of their time.[85] They released several hit singles, one of which was 'My Adidas,' the song that kicked off 'bling' and sneakers as an intrinsic aspect of hip-hop culture.[86] Klops references this song in *Culture Vultures*. The single shoe residing next to McDaniels' lifeless foot bears the Adidas logo that is so recognizable today. Run-DMC were also known for wearing hats – they were rarely photographed without them – and although the

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[83] Neu. *Mr. Brainwash.*
Weaver, Cat. 2013. *Mr. Brainwash's Brain-dead Copyright Defense.* May 3. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://hyperallergic.com/70326/mr-brainwashs-brain-dead-copyright-defense/.

[84] Tate, Greg. 2019. *Run-DMC.* Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Run-DMC.

[85] Johnson Jr., Billy. 2014. *Run-DMC, Hip-Hop's Greatest Trio, Was Almost a One-Man Show.* March 26. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/run-dmc-hip-hops-greatest-trio-was-almost-a-one-man-show-174798/.
Figure 3.2

[86] Mellery-Pratt, Robin. 2014. *Run-D.M.C.'s 'My Adidas' and the Birth of Hip Hop Sneaker Culture.* July 18. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/video/run-d-m-c-s-adidas-birth-hip-hop-sneaker-culture.

group members wore different hats throughout the years, McDaniels often sported a tall rounded hat similar to the one Klops has painted. He was also the only member of the group to wear glasses.[87]

Klops' cartoon rendition of Guetta is holding a can of paint that he sprays on McDaniels' body, a gesture which is mimicked by the other vulture. This is a direct reference to Guetta stealing his image for an art piece, as if the artist killed McDaniels to turn his body into a commodity. As for the vulture on the left, it bears no features distinguishable enough to recognize it as a specific artist. Its hat and glasses appear to be a vague copy of vulture-Guetta's, and even its gold chain is the same one that the other bird wears. The one unique feature of the left vulture is its shirt pattern, which is made up of a dollar sign ($) repeated many times over. This bird might be read as a personification of capitalism. The dollar signs present an obvious connection to the theme of money, and the fact that the bird is eating McDaniels' corpse exemplifies the consumer culture that exists today. Plainly, it appears as though 'capitalism' is benefitting from Guetta's stolen artwork, eating the result of his theft happily and willingly. Further reinforcing this idea, it is noteworthy to mention that the copyrighted image of Run-DMC that Guetta used was printed on the hundreds of invitations for his exhibition "Life is Beautiful," which resulted in the artist making over a million dollars.[88] After learning this information, it is easy to see how *Culture Vultures* is a social commentary on how big-name artists benefit and profit from stolen artwork, while the original artists go uncredited.

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[87] Figure 3.2

[88] Weaver. *Mr. Brainwash's Brain-dead.*
Bonner, Sean. 2011. *Thierry Guetta, aka Mr. Brainwash sued for copyright infringement over Run DMC image.* January 26. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://boingboing.net/2011/01/26/thierry-guetta-aka-m.html

While *Culture Vultures* is readable as an artist's commentary on the art world, as many artworks are, one can glean an alternate meaning from it as well. Appropriation of black culture has been widely discussed in the past few years, though it has existed for decades. One most controversial aspect of appropriation is the way different races are typically treated for sporting the same styles. These styles can range from large hooped earrings to cornrows and even to cosmetic surgeries. Even though many styles originated within black communities, black people are often still demonized for utilizing these, whereas white people are frequently either praised for the same style or not mentioned at all. For example, actress and musician Zendaya was wildly criticized in 2015 for wearing dreadlocks to the Oscars red carpet, but Johnny Depp, who is a white man, has made hundreds of millions of dollars off a character whose signature look is dreadlocks.[89] Similarly, the Kardashians – a white family and pop culture titans – popularized trends and features that black women have pioneered for ages, such as boxer braids and full lips.[90] Klops' *Culture Vultures* could be seen as commenting on this phenomenon – one vulture grins and grabs the body of the black man on the ground, and the other consumes it. This could be interpreted as a commentary on people who steal and profit off black culture, not only the lawsuit between Guetta, Friedman, and Run-DMC.

While Klops is focusing on these types of specific social and political events in his artwork, Raf Urban, a French artist who grew up in the Parisian 70s, instead focuses on larger themes and overarching messages. Most of his work belongs in one of his series, and *Aretha* is

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[89] Guerrasio, Jason. 2017. *Johnny Depp made $650 million but couldn't pay for his lavish lifestyle, ex-manager says.* May 10. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.businessinsider.com/johnny-depp-spending-habits-financial-trouble-2017-5.

Bryant, Taylor. 2015. *Zendaya Responds To Rude Comments About Her Dreadlocks.* February 25. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2015/02/82786/zendaya-giuliana-rancic-dreadlock-comment.

[90] Cassius. 2017. *The Thing About Culture Vultures: Big Brains Explain.* May 4. Accessed March 11, 2019. https://cassiuslife.com/1801/culture-vulture-definition/.

no exception.[91] Urban has created many different stencils of different figures, all with the text 'Diversity is Hope,' which he has pasted all around the world.[92] On this series, he has stated: "Diversity is hope, not a danger. The stencil is my priesthood."[93] Urban focuses on stenciling and paste-ups in his work for the purposes of efficiency, repetition, and its many possibilities. His aim with this series is to spread a message of hope and acceptance, and to question our ability to live harmoniously as humans. To do this, Urban utilizes images of famous and influential women of color to remind viewers of the amazing feats that can be achieved when equal opportunity is given. Some of the women he has used to exemplify this are Aretha Franklin (pictured above), Angela Davis, Pam Grier, and Erykah Badu among others.[94]

Figure 3.3: Aretha, *Raf Urban, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

While Klops uses tools such as shock value and gore to get his message across, Urban focuses on capturing viewers' attention in a more positive fashion. By using images of well-known activists, musicians, actresses, and politicians, he asks the viewer to recall the messages

[91] Figure 3.3
[92] Urban, Raf. 2019. *Instagram.* Accessed March 16, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/raf_urban/.
[93] WeNeedArt. 2018. *Raf Urban.* Accessed March 16, 2019. https://www.weneedart.com/en/street-artists/artiste/20-rafurban.
[94] WeNeedArt. *Raf Urban.*
Urban, Raf. 2019. *Raf Urban.* Accessed March 11, 2019. https://www.rafurban.com/artist.

spread by these people. For example, Aretha Franklin's 1965 album "Yeah!!!" provides the image used in *Aretha*. Not only is this image powerful in its own right – Aretha confidently meeting the viewer's gaze over her lowered sunglasses – but the iconic musician played an important role in the feminist and civil rights movements. She used her music to make political statements, such as in "Respect," where she reclaimed the song for the feminist movement and demanded respect on behalf of women everywhere. Though Franklin used her platform to this positive effect, she worked behind the scenes as well. When Angela Davis – another one of Urban's subjects – was jailed in 1970 for political activism, Franklin offered to pay her bail, and was vocal in her support of Davis's cause.[95] Urban aims to bring these ideas to the viewers' minds with *Aretha*, reminding them of the positive outcomes having a diverse society can yield. By posting works like *Aretha* all over cities around the world, Urban hopes that the inculcation will inspire viewers to reconsider their stances on immigration and diversity in general.

Similar to Urban, artist Blanco Tsagaan has elected to spread his message through the use of paste-ups, which he places all over New York City. Unlike Klops and Urban, Tsagaan is not attempting to shed light on a specific practice or encourage viewers to change their way of thinking. Instead, he is protesting for a local cause that has sparked a significant amount of controversy in New York throughout the past several years. Tsagaan collaborates with different artists for each paste-up, and his 2017 piece I've called *Close Rikers* was created in collaboration with artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh.[96] The circular piece features a man with his arms raised as he makes eye contact with the viewer, as if he is surrendering. A motif of locked handcuffs creates a

[95] Watson, Elwood. 2018. *Aretha Franklin, feminist and activist.* August 19. Accessed March 16, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/08/19/aretha-franklin-feminist-and-activist/?utm_term=.b0fb97f1ae3b.

[96] Figure 3.4

Figure 3.4: Close Rikers, *Blanco Tsagaan and Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, 2017. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

border around the outer edge of the piece, and Arabic lettering turned on its side fills some of the white background. Above the figure's head reads six words: "JUSTICE REFORM, POLICE REFORM, CLOSE RIKERS." Like other works discussed above, this piece has had additions made to it by other artists, and these will be examined later on in this essay.

Close Rikers is a response to the movement occurring in New York City to close a local prison on Rikers Island. The prison has faced backlash in response to several events over the years, namely from the relatives and loved ones of inmates who have faced abuse and neglect

within its walls. The catalyst to most of this activism, however, was the death of Kalief Browder, who had been held at the prison for three years after being accused of stealing a backpack when he was only 16. Browder was never found guilty, nor did he stand trial during this time. While in prison, he dealt with many beatings by both prison guards and other inmates and spent about two out of his three years at the prison in solitary confinement. Upon his release – the charges were dropped after the prosecutors lost contact with their only witness – Browder dealt with serious mental health issues as a result of his solitary confinement and harsh beatings and hung himself in 2015.[97]

After these events, Browder became a kind of martyr for prison reform, and an example of how broken the American justice system is.[98] It was around this time that Rikers began to deal with serious protests, and that Tsagaan began creating his series of "Close Rikers" paste-ups. He uses images of different people related to events at Rikers, and in *Close Rikers* he appears to be using the image of Steven Pacheco, an activist and former inmate who now works at the Vera Institute of Justice. Pacheco, who served time for dealing drugs and was released around the same time as Browder's suicide, knows firsthand the issues surrounding prisons and prison reform in America. He now uses his platform to speak on incarceration and rehabilitation of inmates.[99] By using images of people like Pacheco, Tsagaan reminds viewers that change is possible through mobilization and that inmates are human beings with lives, loved ones, and the potential to change the world for the better. By using images of Browder and others who have

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[97] Schwirtz, Michael, and Michael Winerip. 2015. *Kalief Browder, Held at Rikers Island for 3 Years Without Trial, Commits Suicide.* June 8. Accessed March 16, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/09/nyregion/kalief-browder-held-at-rikers-island-for-3-years-without-trial-commits-suicide.html.

[98] Schwirtz & Winerip. *Kalief Browder.*

[99] Kim, Eun Kyung. 2018. *Former inmate, now a college student, says prison 'made me ready for everything'.* October 19. Accessed March 16, 2019. https://www.today.com/news/former-inmate-now-college-student-says-prison-made-me-ready-t140036.

been lost due to their suffering within the system, Tsagaan asks viewers to recall the trials that inmates are often forced to go through, and to speak on behalf of those who have no voice.

Tsagaan's initial message that has been printed on *Close Rikers* is relatively straightforward, calling for the reform of the justice system and to close Rikers Island Federal Prison. The Arabic lettering is more difficult to decipher, but from what I can understand the three separate phrases translate to roughly: "for the United States," "we grow," and either "deny" or "declared." Since I'm not certain that this is correct, I will not do any further analysis into the Arabic phrases. The additional graffiti, however, provides an interesting addition to the original artwork. The two uses of "reform" have been crossed off, and this new artist added the words "there is no" and "fuck the" to the original lettering, leaving the new phrase to read: "THERE IS NO JUSTICE, FUCK THE POLICE, CLOSE RIKERS." These additions add a sense of anger and urgency to the piece that wasn't present before. This demonstrates the transient and participatory qualities of street art, how its interactive nature allows for viewers to project their own changing emotions onto a piece. In fact, the addition to *Close Rikers* likely sums up many people's anger toward the situation more succinctly than Tsagaan's calmer call to action, particularly in more recent months. During this past harsh February, many places were forced to deal with extreme bouts of cold weather, and Rikers Prison was left with no heating or electricity. Instead of moving the inmates to a nearby location with plenty of space and functioning utilities, prison guards let the prisoners suffer, and even opened windows to exacerbate their painful conditions. A video surfaced of people pounding on the windows of the prison, begging the people outside to notice their struggle, and the infuriated population of New

York responded with a series of protests.[100] Even though *Close Rikers* was created in 2017, it remains relevant today.

The artist who added "there is no" and "fuck the" to Tsagaan's paste-up didn't stop there, but also added the symbols of anarchy and communism, as well as the German word for "lightning war:" Blitzkrieg. Blitzkrieg is an intense style of war that intends to bring a rapid victory for its user and was invented during the second world war.[101] These additions not only change the tone and urgency of Tsagaan's piece, as the mystery artist had originally done, but ask the viewer to consider radical options to bring about a change in the American justice system. From the graffitied symbols, one can conclude that the artist likely feels as though opportunities are unequal and that those who exist on the bottom of society are forced to remain in that class tier. To change this, the artist suggests a shift to anarcho-communism – a society in which the state, private property, and capitalism would be dismantled in favor of common ownership with voluntary maintenance – by means of a Blitzkrieg.[102] In other words, Tsagaan calls for action and protest, whereas the new artist uses Tsagaan's work to call for a revolution.

Street art activism encompasses many different issues, and uses art as a platform for sending a powerful message or calling viewers to action, as the works analyzed above have demonstrated. It is clear why these artists have elected to use the streets as their gallery as opposed to a traditional space: galleries and museums do not have the same kind of accessibility

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[100] Bellafante, Ginia. 2019. *How a Brooklyn Jail Without Heat Inspired So Much Outrage.* February 7. Accessed March 16, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/nyregion/brooklyn-jail-no-heat.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FRikers%20Island%20Prison%20Complex&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=c.

[101] History.com Editors. 2018. *Blitzkrieg.* August 21. Accessed March 17, 2019. https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/blitzkrieg.

[102] New World Encyclopedia. 2016. *Anarchist communism.* March 17. Accessed March 17, 2019. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Anarchist_communism.

or energy. The most important difference in the case of social activism is that having a separate space for artwork removes the viewer from his or her surroundings. The viewers choose to enter the art space and allow themselves to process what they see in a designated place. Also, more often than not, when viewers enter a gallery they already know what they will be seeing. With street art, one can never be sure what statement or artwork could crop up around each corner. Viewers experience these works in their natural environment, which can be either disrupting or enlightening. No matter which, however, the viewers are more likely to carry the message of the art with them wherever they go next. For the average museum-goer, once one leaves the museum, he or she snaps back to "everyday life" and most of the artwork seen becomes mentally compartmentalized. Street art has the power to lift viewers out of their everyday monotony and inspire or enrage them due to the many issues it illustrates, whether they be local, worldwide, social, political, or anything in between.

Chapter Four: Santiago "Cabaio" Spirito and Spatial Reclamation

Street art activism comes in many different shapes and sizes, often focusing on broad or specific topics, as discussed in previous chapters. While many pieces focus on important aspects of social, political, or economic structure, others seek to incite change through beautification and aestheticization. In some cases, the only motive is to provide a beautiful image which viewers can gaze upon and enjoy. In others, street art seems to fight the various images that city people are exposed to on a daily basis. Advertisements, grungy alleyways, and urban structures provide an experience that could seem mundane, unappealing, or downright scary for some. Many street artists reject this through their work; one such is Shepherd Fairey, who is well known for his anti-capitalism paintings of the 80s and 90s, which were aesthetically similar to advertisements but sent an opposing message.[103] By focusing on the artistic qualities of street art instead of a specific message, artists are able to reclaim public spaces and send a positive message to their viewers.

Santiago Spirito (b. 1974), better known by his street name Cabaio, is one of the artists who incorporates this idea into his work. Although his recent work tends toward artistic qualities rather than activist ones, his roots in street art are deeply tied to activism, and he still uses it as a vessel to inspire change.[104] He founded the collective Vomito Attack in 2001, when he first

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[103] Banksy, Brainwash, & Invader. *Exit Through the Gift Shop.*
Waclawek. *Graffiti.* 73-76.

[104] Litzinger-Drayton, Lisa. 2019. *Assembling the Onion: The Artist Behind the Cover.* Accessed March 28, 2019. https://www.lebow.drexel.edu/news/artist-santiago-spirito.
Stavsky, Lois. 2014. *Speaking with Argentinian Stencil Artist Cabaio.* May 21. Accessed March 28, 2019. http://streetartnyc.org/blog/2014/05/21/speaking-with-argentinian-stencil-artist-cabaio/.

began painting on the streets.[105] This collective was formed shortly after the September 11th attacks in New York City as a response to its aftereffects in Latin America, and to the century's most important social and economic crisis occurring in Argentina.[106] They used street art as a platform to comment on corruption in politics and capitalism and the consumerism that seemed to be taking over the world at this time. Working out of Buenes Aires, Vomito Attack targeted not only specific companies and the local Argentinian government, but also worldwide organizations. Some of their most notable moments included a fake political campaign and their practice of ad-jamming. The political campaign, entitled *Poder, Corrupción y Mentiras (Power, Corruption, and Lies)* used street art to 'advertise' their message across the city, and employed many strategies that politicians used during their official campaigns.[107] The motifs they used were primarily propagandistic posters and large solid block letters meant to catch the attention of passersby. Ad-jamming on the other hand is the practice of covering up advertisements such as posters, billboards, and bus-stop signs. Vomito Attack was dissatisfied with companies constantly trying to push their products and services on people during an economic crisis, expressing their distaste by covering up the advertisements with art.[108] In an interview, Cabaio stated: "In the midst of an economic crisis, there were too many ads in

Figure 4.1: Poder, Corrupcion, Mentiras, *courtesy of Graffitimundo.*

[105] Herrero, Mirta, Osvaldo Bettachini, and Tamir. 2016. *Cabaio presents his exhibition "Geografía interior" at The Brick Hotel Buenos Aires.* January 7. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://pandorama-art.blogspot.com/2016/01/cabaio-presenta-su-muestra-geografia.html.

[106] Marc. 2006. *Vomito Attack Hits New York.* April 21. Accessed March 28, 2019. http://www.woostercollective.com/post/vomito-attack-hits-new-york.

[107] Figure 4.1

[108] Graffitimundo. n.d. *Vomito Attack.* Accessed March 28, 2019. https://graffitimundo.com/artists/vomito-attack/.

public spaces. They seemed to be everywhere. And I didn't like looking at ads. I saw my artwork as an alternative way of using public space."[109]

Vomito Attack is an illuminating example of the ways in which street art can be used to reclaim a public space. The members of this group, particularly Cabaio, felt that a space meant for everybody was being violated by those trying to profit off the people who traverse it. By responding to this with street art, Vomito Attack was giving the space back to the citizens and residents. They replaced the bombardment of capitalistic greed and incitement with art. Sometimes these were images that were pleasing to look at it, meant to distract from advertisements and allow pedestrians to exist in peace, and other times they were direct messages to those who originally placed the advertisements. In this case, Vomito Attack acted as the voice of the people, telling advertisers and companies that this space was inhabited by others who deserved respect. Their work resonated with the people who appreciated its dark humor and satire, and in 2006 they were even invited to New York to the Institute of Latin American Studies to give a lecture on the economic crisis and how they were able to make art in such a trying time.[110] Since the artists couldn't afford most materials, they used recycled materials such as newspapers and magazines to cut stencils for their work. This is how Cabaio began stenciling, a technique he continued to use throughout his career.[111]

In 2005, Cabaio left Vomito Attack to pursue independent work.[112] Since he and his artist colleagues in Vomito Attack had been forced to scavenge for their materials, Cabaio already had

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[109] Stavsky. *Speaking with Argentinian.*

[110] Marc. *Vomito Attack.*
Tufariello, Jen. 2014. *Graffiti and the broken Argentine Economy.* December 16. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://medium.com/@jentufariello/graffiti-and-the-broken-argentine-economy-ad6f4710de85.

[111] Sobrero, Nicolás. 2011. *Interview with Cabaio Stencil.* November 7. Accessed March 28, 2019. http://www.bkmag.com.ar/bkmag.php?seccion=3&contenido=467.

[112] Graffitimundo. *Vomito Attack.*

experience using non-traditional media, and he continues to use collaging techniques with aerosol paint, latex, and fabric, as well as wheat paste-ups.[113] His layering techniques and bright colors make his art easy to identify. I discovered two pieces of his painted in Brooklyn, New York, which I've called *Progreso* and *Across That River*, taken from the most prominent words on each painting. For both of these images, Cabaio used extensive layering with many different stencils on a black background, giving a viewer the feeling that the images are popping out of the wall. Created eighteen years after he first started painting on the streets, these paintings exhibit how far Cabaio has come as an artist, and the change in his style of activism.

Progreso features the close-up face of a man, disembodied, who gazes directly at the viewer with what appears to be a calm, pleasant smile.[114] He appears to be relaxed, not confrontational. Cabaio uses bright yellow, blue, pink, purple, and red to create different designs across the man's face in an amalgamation of smaller text and imagery. Some of the writing is illegible due the black shading that makes up the face of the figure, but much of it can be deciphered. The largest legible text on the man's face is a word in yellow in red font: '*progreso*,' the Spanish word for 'progress.' This word's bright colors and clarity allow it to stand out the most; whether the artist intended this or not is unknown. Regardless, when a word like 'progress' is heavily emphasized, it can evoke different sensations, depending on how it is interpreted. The most likely option is that one could consider it a positive message, particularly paired with the smiling face of the man the text appears on. In this case, 'progress' could be read as an uplifting message of hope, proclaiming that progress has been made over time, or that progress is on its way. Alternatively, 'progress' is also a word closely associated with capitalism and the advance

[113] Herrero, Bettachini, & Tamir. *Cabaio presents.*
[114] Figure 4.2

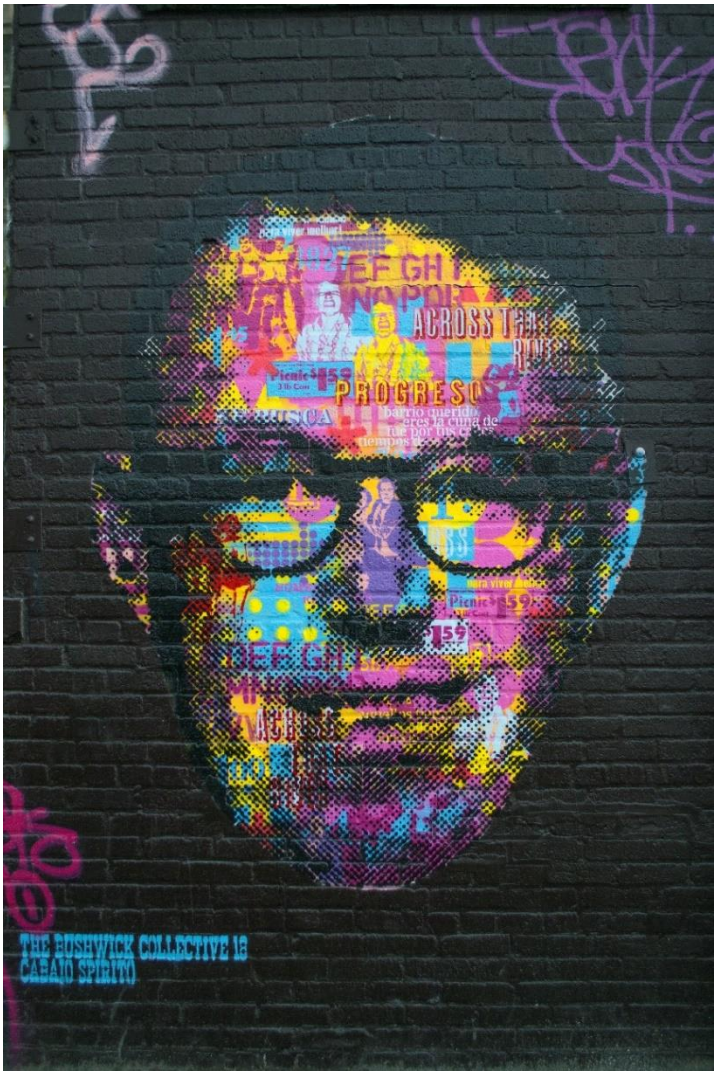

Figure 4.2: Progreso, *Cabaio Spirito, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

of technology and industry, particularly during the industrial revolution and the boom of capitalism as we know it today. Before this time, everything was made by hand, and the new inventions during the 1800s and early 1900s allowed companies to begin the practice of mass production. Consumers were able to own more material goods than ever before, and commodity fetishism became widespread, informing the development of modernist art.[115] In this context, *Progreso* could be seen as a satirical commentary on today's capitalist tendencies and consumer culture.

A small phrase in white text reads almost like a poem and contains what seem to be four sentence fragments: *'barrio querido,' 'eres la cuna de,' 'fue por tus calles,' 'tiempos de.'* Each

[115] History.com Editors. 2019. *Industrial Revolution.* Accessed March 28, 2019. https://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution/industrial-revolution.
Benjamin, Walter. 1935. "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." In *The Arcades Project*, by Walter Benjamin, 3-13. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

of these translate to: 'beloved neighborhood,' 'you are the cradle of (depending on the dialect, it could also mean 'you are the birthplace of'),' 'it was on your streets,' and 'times of.' These are fragments of a 1930 song written by Iván Diez and recorded by Vicente Ronca (better known by his stage name, Vicente San Lorenzo), and later popularized by Carlos Gardel.[116] The song is named *Almagro,* after the Almagro district of Buenos Aires in Argentina, where Cabaio grew up. This is a classic Argentine folk song. The verse that Cabaio quotes from translates as follows:

How I remember, beloved neighborhood,
Those times of my childhood,
You are the place where I was born
And you are the cradle of my honesty.
Neighborhood of the soul, it was by your streets
Where I have enjoyed my youth.[117]

These lyrics are meant to evoke a feeling of nostalgia and witfulness in the listener. The average New York passerby likely wouldn't recognize this song, but Cabaio has stated that his recent work uses art primarily as a form of personal expression and emphasizes its aesthetic qualities.[118] With this in mind, it appears that Cabaio is expressing his longing for home and childhood with these words, and acknowledging his love for his city.

Visually, Cabaio's ad-jamming history comes through in *Progreso.* The use of stenciling, repetition, and color are reminiscent of the brightly colored advertisements that often permeate

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[116] Gobello, José. 1997. *Tangos, letras y letristas.* Volume 5. Austin: Plus Ultra.
[117] Polito, Antonio. 1930. *Almagro.* January 5. Accessed March 28, 2019. http://www.hermanotango.com.ar/LetrasTangos/ALMAGRO.htm.
[118] Graffitimundo. n.d. *CABAIO.* Accessed March 28, 2019. https://graffitimundo.com/artists/cabaio/.
Stavsky. *Speaking with Argentinian.*
Sobrero. *Interview.*

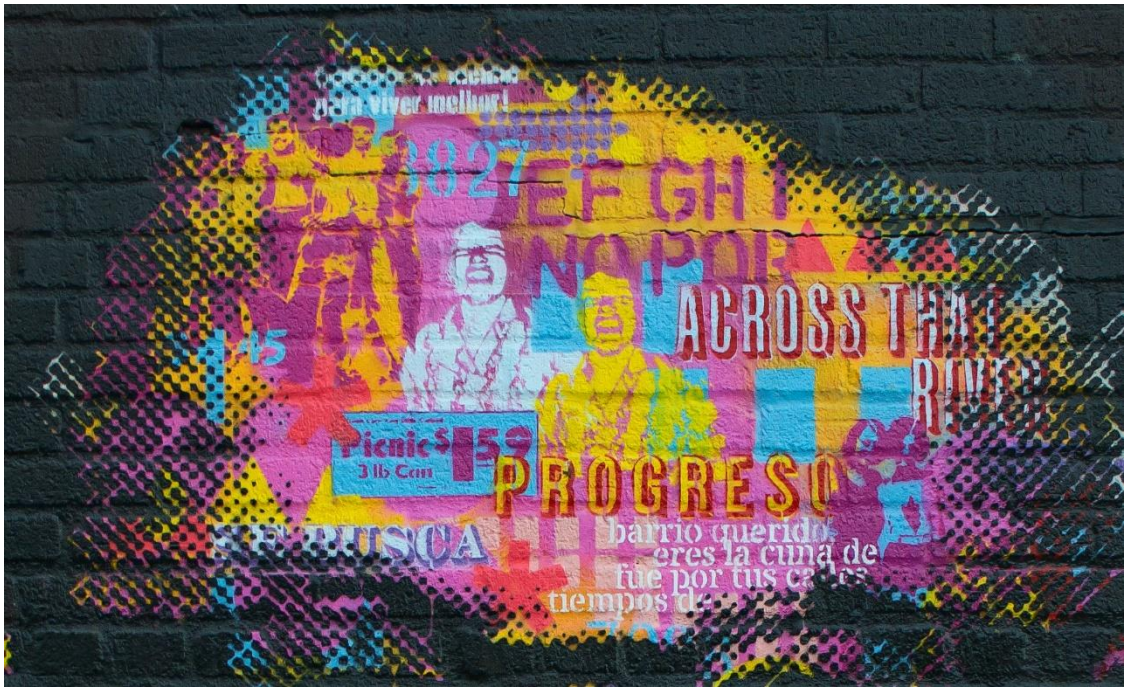

Figure 4.3: Progreso (Detail), *Cabaio Spirito, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

city streets. Motifs like the '1\underline{59}$' in a box following the word 'Picnic,' which can be seen more easily in the detail of this image, could be a nod toward Cabaio's days in Vomito Attack in that they represent the consumer culture that we exist in and the exposure to advertisements that people experience on a day-to-day basis. [119] Another legible phrase visible in the detail includes the words *'para viver melhor!'* This translates from Portuguese as 'to live better!' Although there are words painted above these, they are not discernable enough to give the viewer a better picture of the overall statement. The accumulation of varied imagery that makes up the body of *Progreso* is only visible once the viewer approaches and observes the painting closely. Because of this, these smaller visuals that make up the larger face are likely to be more abstract representations of experiences and stories that exist in the person's mind, and that make up who the man pictured is as a person. In interviews, Cabaio has stated that he hopes if he expresses his emotions and thoughts through artwork he will be able to reach different people who are

[119] Figure 4.3

likeminded.[120] He is influenced by his personal, spiritual, and political surroundings, which is reflected in this piece, as well as elements of his home in Buenos Aires.[121]

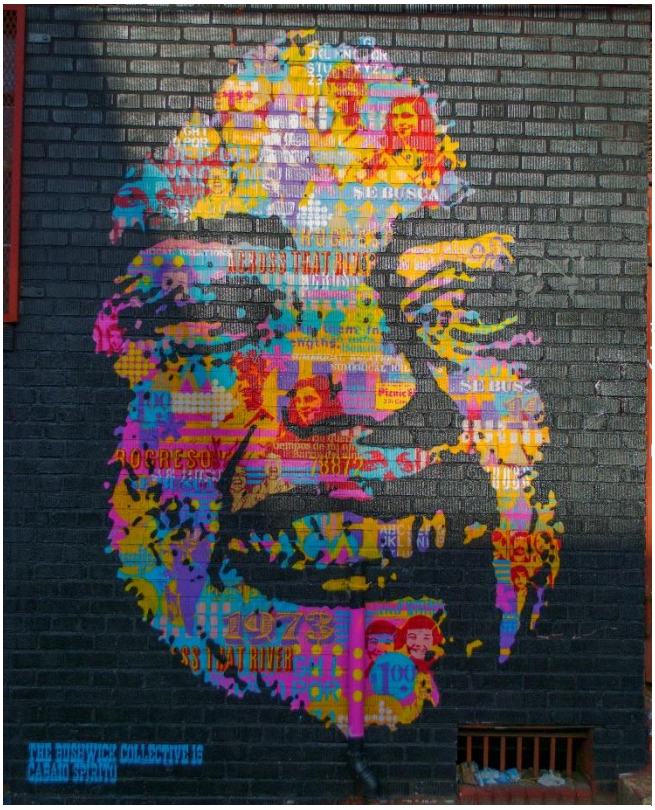

Figure 4.4: Across That River, *Cabaio Spirito, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

Across That River goes hand-in-hand with *Progreso* and Cabaio uses much of the same imagery throughout the face, though in this painting different words and phrases are legible, and some different images are included.[122] The most notable difference between the two pieces are the faces of the figures. In this one, the disembodied face belongs to a female figure, who is smiling widely. The colors are predominantly the same. The largest pieces of text in this painting are above the character's right eye, reading 'across that river,' and under her lip, reading '1973.' It's difficult to tell whether '1973' has any real significance for the viewer, as there is not much context surrounding the number. In 1973, however, Isabel Martínez de Perón rose to the position of vice president of Argentina, as well as first lady, since she was married to Juan Perón. The next year, which was also Cabaio's birth year, Juan Perón died due to illness, and Isabel became the first

[120] Sobrero. *Interview.*
[121] Fabio, Dianne. 2018. *All Public Art Featured Artist: Cabaio Spirito.* Accessed March 28, 2019. https://www.allpublicart.com/art_news_details/328.
[122] Figure 4.4

female president in the world. Unfortunately, neither Perón was a particularly beloved president, as both were exiled at different times in their lives, and Argentina attempted to arrest Isabel in 2007 for crimes against humanity. She was living in Spain at this time, and not extradited.[123] There is a possibility that Cabaio is referencing these events in *Across That River*, although it does not seem to fit in with the overall message of the work. Even so, it could still be a reference to his native land.

Argentina is bordered on one side by rivers, which create its barriers between Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil. The text 'across that river' in *Across That River* is likely referring to this.[124] It seems to be a scathing commentary on the current politic climate of Argentina, which has received criticism in recent years. In 2017, President Mauricio Marci of Argentina announced highly restrictive immigration measures, not too long after President Trump created similar legislation. Immediately, Argentine residents began comparing the two and going as far as to suggest collusion between the two. Many felt as though these measures were too severe, considering that, like the US, Argentina is a country that was built on immigrant labor.[125] Cabaio could be referencing this action. When coming into Argentina from any of its three northern neighbors, immigrants are made to cross the river in some way. He could also be referring to illegal immigration in the US that occurs over the Rio Grande, which borders Texas and Mexico. This could be a criticism of either Argentina or the United States, and paired with the woman's

[123] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2019. *Isabel Perón.* January 31. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Isabel-Peron.

[124] Figure 4.5

[125] Romero, Simon, and Daniel Politi. 2017. *Argentina's Trump-Like Immigration Order Rattles South America.* February 4. Accessed March 28, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/americas/argentinas-trump-like-immigration-order-rattles-south-america.html.

Figure 4.5: Across That River (Detail), *Cabaio Spirito, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

smiling face and other joyful imagery, a commentary on the positivity that immigrants have the capacity to bring to a country.

Cabaio incorporates high contrast in both *Across That River* and *Progreso*. This gives the figures in these paintings somewhat cartoon-like appearances, somewhat reminiscent of pop art. Like the pop artists, Cabaio is inspired by comic books, namely those of Japanese origin.[126] This is evident particularly in the stippling utilized in *Progreso* to create the illusion of shadow. Another inspiration for this artist is South American aboriginal culture.[127] Influences from these cultures are present in Cabaio's choice of bright color, which is very similar to that of traditional Andean wear.[128] He admires the street art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Banksy, and Blek le Rat, influences that present themselves through his use of stenciling and overwhelming, motif-driven

[126] Stavsky. *Speaking with Argentinian.*
Sobrero. *Interview.*
[127] Ibid.
[128] Threads of Peru Editors. 2019. *Traditional Andean Clothing.* Accessed March 29, 2019. https://threadsofperu.com/pages/traditional-andean-clothng.

patterns.[129] Both paintings are part of a larger series entitled *'Geografia Interior.'* In this series, Cabaio says he is exploring human uniqueness, and the relationship between people and their context: "I used figurative images to make an abstract world at first sight, but if you see more deeply you will see other things…" He is interested in what makes up the inner 'geographies' of individuals, comparing people's personalities to the complexities of the natural world.[130] Each phrase Cabaio has stenciled into both *Progreso* and *Across That River* makes up a different aspect of the character's dynamic personality and what makes them who they are, as does each dot, image, and color. From a distance, these large-scale paintings appear to be nothing more than colorful portraits, but upon closer inspection, viewers can identify the distinctive qualities of each piece. Cabaio intends this work to reflect living people – what is seen on the surface is not necessarily the same as what exists in deeper layers. The external and internal forces that shape a person's thoughts, feelings, and motivations exist unbeknownst to others. It is for these reasons that Cabaio did not intend these faces to be recognizable. He is attempting to shed light on individuality, and by using images of well-known people, he would encourage viewers to see his work with preexisting notions already in mind. This would defeat the purpose of his message, so the portraits remain anonymous. In my communications with the artist, he stated that he pulled the man's face in *Progeso* from an old magazine advertisement, and the woman's face in *Across That River* is from a family photo belonging to Cabaio's mother.[131]

When Cabaio first began working with Vomito Attack in 2001, his ultimate goal was to intervene in the chaos of the street and provoke moments of joy.[132] Overwhelmed by the

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[129] Fabio. *All Public Art.*
[130] Arts, Wally. 2018. *Instagram.* July 2. Accessed March 29, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/BkuptuzhBJa/?utm_source=ig_share_sheet&igshid=17rii48jqkp6j.
[131] Spirito, Cabaio, interview by Mo Quigg. 2019. *Interview with Cabaio Spirito* (March 30).
[132] The Brick Hotel. 2015. *Colectiva.* Buenos Aires: The Brick Hotel.

onslaught of advertisement and propaganda that was appearing in the streets, Cabaio felt a desire to provide people with something nicer to look at. This is when he first began to use street art as a form of spatial reclamation. As the years went on, he still felt a need to intervene in the public sphere and create moments of disruption and joy.[133] This practice begs the question: to whom do 'public spaces' truly belong? If they were 'public' by definition, they would belong to everybody, and people would be free to use the space as they please. This is not true, however, since street art is frequently removed from public walls and other spaces. Cabaio challenges the idea of public spaces by creating art within them, sometimes with a message, sometimes without one. The way he sees it, art for the sake of art should not be a crime. Beautifying a city and spreading positivity and joy should be accepted. This mindset leads Cabaio to create his signature dense, kaleidoscopic paintings.

With his use of bright, eye-catching color, it is clear that Cabaio is not trying to hide his artwork. Reclaiming a public space calls for action, and he attempts to create this action. His art can be many things – political, personal, sensational, emotional – each of which is meant to elicit a different reaction from the viewer, even though he ultimately creates his work for himself, saying it 'cleanses' him. Cabaio hopes that everyone who views his art finds their own meaning in it, not claiming to think that people should all feel the same emotions when observing his work. He continues to be experimental, working to not get stuck on one particular way of creating art.[134] Although his work these days is less overtly political than it used to be, he still makes politically charged works from time to time to show his personal interpretations of the turmoil he has witnessed in his country.[135]

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[133] Sobrero. *Interview.*
[134] Fabio. *All Public Art.*
[135] Litzinger-Drayton. *Assembling the Onion.*

As Cabaio has demonstrated, street art is so much more then people often make it out to be. Its function as a form of activism and protest is equally important to its function as a visual experience. Street art can add to an urban landscape in a beautiful way, creating a more positive and dynamic environment for residents of an area. It can be used to muffle the screaming of consumerism that plagues the streets, instead replacing advertisements with thought-provoking imagery and visual enrichment. It can change the entire history of an area and those within it and incite change, as seen with Vomito Attack. Without a documented history of street art, historians will experience gaps in knowledge that can only be filled by the ephemeral artworks that have been lost to time. These artists make powerful statements right on the streets, calling citizens to action, criticizing institutions, and inviting self-expression and introspection into the public sphere. And as Cabaio has proven, sometimes to make a statement art doesn't need to say anything, it just needs to exist.

Figure 4.6: Santiago "Cabaio" Spirito creating Across That River, *2018. Photo courtesy of Miranda Levingston.*

Chapter Five: Freeman Alley, Signature, and Public Spaces

The urban environment in today's society is a backdrop for advertisements, PSAs, and promotions. A contemporary person living in New York City is likely to be exposed to thousands of advertisements every day, and most of us fail to question this stimulation on a regular basis.[136] The very essence of illegal street art is rooted in rebellion and subversion, as is its visual culture, and its often anti-establishment motives frequently employ the same commercialization methods as advertising, subsequently reclaiming public spaces through the very practices it condemns. This counter-advertising, however, serves to analyze the ways in which an urban environment is experienced visually, providing an alternative to capitalist representations of everyday life.[137] Street artists, however, are still selling something: concepts, intentions, and their personal brand. To aid them in this objective, street artists use tools such as stencils, paste-ups, stickers, and social media.

One of the most frequented spots in New York City for paste-up artists is Freeman Alley, located in Nolita in lower Manhattan. Over the years, this dead-end alley has become a popular spot for graffiti due to its secluded location and history of artistic activity. Despite the fact that streets around Freeman Alley are heavily trafficked, since the alley leads nowhere but a well-hidden restaurant, most people have little reason to enter this space other than to peruse the art. Many artists understand that this is a hotspot for street art tourism and take advantage of that fact by pasting up their stickers, logos, and other artworks. Two of the artists represented there

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[136] Sanders, Bryce. 2017. *Do we really see 4,000 ads a day?* September 1. https://www.bizjournals.com/bizjournals/how-to/marketing/2017/09/do-we-really-see-4-000-ads-a-day.html.

[137] Waclawek. *Graffiti.* 102-111.

include Captain Eyeliner and Sac Six. These artists primarily deal with the small, easily reproducible variety of graffiti mentioned above, though Sac Six also dabbles in legal artmaking. The messages sent by both artists disrupt the sphere of commercial visual culture, in addition to functioning as reflections and criticisms of contemporary society. Not only do the motifs and pictorial symbols used in repetition throughout these artists' works send coded messages to the informed viewer, they also act as a signature.[138] Once an artist recreates the same image in enough places, it becomes recognizable, and acts as an envoy for the artist's brand and message. In other words, it becomes its own kind of paradoxical, often anti-capitalist, advertisement.

Captain Eyeliner works primarily in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and her colorful and distinct paste-ups are sure to mark her past presence in any location. The primary image that Eyeliner recreates in her paste-ups is a multi-colored cat whose skeletal face appears as if an X-ray image were placed over its head. She makes use of shades of pink and blue most frequently to create aesthetically appealing images. These cats are known as *PSA Kitties* by Eyeliner, and typically come with a message of social awareness or protest such as "Dead Men Don't Cat Call" and "Publicly Shame Racists."[139] Another common motif used by Eyeliner is *Rosie-the-Shark*, her personal adaptation of Rosie the Riveter, in which she replaces the woman's head with that of a great white shark and pairs the image with the phrase: "Smash the Patriarchy."[140] In the early days, Eyeliner added the shark head to other famous characters as well, including Uncle Sam and one of Degas's ballerinas.[141] Each of these figures is associated with different, specific, and powerful messages and traditions. Rosie the Riveter, though originally designed as a symbol

[138] Ibid., 157-189.
[139] Figure 5.1
[140] Figure 5.2
[141] Eyeliner, Captain. 2018. *Captain: Instagram.* Accessed April 9, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/captain_eyeliner/.

of patriotism and domesticity during World War II, was reclaimed in later years by the feminist movement. Today, Rosie is commonly seen as a feminist icon by most Americans.[142] Uncle Sam, on the other hand, is seen as a visual representation of American patriotism for many, and for others, a manifestation of American war-time propaganda and capitalism. His image grew to popularity just in time for the first world war, when the government utilized him to recruit soldiers.[143] Degas's dancers provide an entirely different context for the shark head to piggyback on. Although many view the impressionistic dancers as beautiful, elegant, and graceful, their images have an unsettling history. Degas frequented dancer's studios and brothels to draw inspiration for his paintings, in which his voyeuristic tendencies were displayed. His internalized androcentrism and misogyny led him to depict women as slaves of whichever activity they were painted performing, reducing their value to a sexual object for the consumption of the men within his society.[144] In the context of Eyeliner's creations, each of these characters is reclaimed for the purpose of pushing her own agenda: smashing the patriarchy. Degas's dancer as Eyeliner portrays her refutes the original artist's intentions; the character not only reclaims her femininity and sexuality, she also seizes power. Shark-Uncle Sam provides a historical example of *why* Eyeliner desires to "smash" the patriarchy by acknowledging his own toxic masculinity. *Rosie-the-Shark* seeks to give power to the feminine voice, transforming the already powerful feminist icon into an even more powerful creature in the form of one of the most feared predators on the planet.

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[142] Kimble, James J., and Lester C. Olson. 2006. "Visual Rhetoric Representing Rosie the Riveter: Myth and." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 533-569.

[143] Capozzola, Christopher. 2008. *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen.* 3-20. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[144] Bernheimer, Charles. 1987. "Degas's Brothels: Voyeurism and Ideology." *Representations* 158-186.

Figure 5.1: Publicly Shame Racists, *Captain Eyeliner, 2018. Photo taken by Mo Quigg.*

Figure 5.2: Smash the Patriarchy, *Captain Eyeliner, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

These all began as stickers for Eyeliner when she first started creating street art, which she loved long before she began to participate in it herself. Over time, she turned 'Rosie-the-Shark' and 'PSA Kitties' into wheat paste-ups and began to create additional works that featured her style without including the social messaging.[145] These new, solely pictorial creations had a handful of different functions; since Eyeliner's work was gaining popularity in artistic communities, they served to represent her brand on the streets, remind viewers of her messages, allow more creative expression on the part of the artist, and capture the attention of her audience. Says Eyeliner: "It's got to have a twist, or no one is going to look twice at it.

[145] Calabro, Kristy. 2019. *Street Trek with Captain Eyeliner.* March 29. Accessed April 9, 2019. https://www.soldmagny.com/single-post/2019/03/29/Street-Trek-with-Captain-Eyeliner.

Finding the twist is half the fun of making the work."[146]

Eyeliner uses social media to post and promote her work through an Instagram page. This type of interactive platform allows viewers to tag the artist when they see her paste-ups out in the world, as well as offering an opportunity for fans to go find Eyeliner's art. Not only does this mobilize advertisement-like promotional techniques, but it allows the artist to garner awareness about her practices, and thus further expand the reach of her social messaging. Eyeliner has stated, however, that social popularity is not important to her compared to sending a powerful message: "I just want to keep spreading the good word. Make the art you believe in. Don't worry if anyone else is going to like it. Pretend Instagram doesn't exist. Create what you want to see and glue it everywhere."[147] For Captain Eyeliner, the "good word" includes not only the socio-political messages seen in Figures 5.1 and 5.2, but also moral messages like "Don't Be a Dick," and environmental ones such as "Climate Change Will Kill Your Baby" and "More Science, Less Bullshit."[148] By stating these messages alongside loud disruptive images, Eyeliner hopes to encourage viewers to pay more attention to the related issues, and not be complacent in ignoring these serious matters.[149]

Despite Captain Eyeliner's use of marketing techniques to spread awareness about her messages, the spirit of her work remains true to the heart of graffiti culture in that the only things she is selling are ideas, intentions, and acts of expression.

Figure 5.3: More Science, Less Bullshit, *Captain Eyeliner, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

[146] Calabro. *Street Trek.*
[147] Ibid.
[148] Figure 5.3
[149] Calabro. *Street Trek.*

Figure 5.4: Dead Men Don't Catcall, *Eyeliner, 2018. Photo by Captain Eyeliner, courtesy of Instagram.com.*

Eyeliner has no plan to profit off her artwork anytime soon, worrying that her creations would grow banal, and that she would stop enjoying the artistic process as much as she does. Though Eyeliner is heartily devoted to the spirit of the messages she sends, she is just as devoted to the design and creativity of her animal and humanoid messengers. Both Captain Eyeliner's name and primary imagery of felines are grounded in Egyptian tradition and art history. Cats in ancient Egypt were revered as divine creatures, and commonly were the pets of Pharaohs, who believed the animals had the power to protect them and ward off evils. Human figures appearing in ancient Egyptian art were typically depicted wearing heavy eyeliner to protect the wearer from the "evil eye," as well as to protect one's skin from the desert sun. Additionally, both eyes and cats become godly in the forms of Bast, the cat goddess, and the Eye of Horus, a symbol Egyptians believed to possess healing and protective powers.[150] Eyeliner seems to be channeling Bast herself by using the feline form to spread messages of activism, in a way warding off evils herself.

The image of cats comes from another source as well, not just ancient Egyptian symbolism. The first recorded instance of Eyeliner using the cat skull motif was in late 2018 on a sticker.[151] It was paired with the caption "Dead Men Don't Catcall," and in addition to the macabre feline was a collar and bowtie. This symbolism essentially serves to illustrate the text on the sticker. The cat imagery relates directly back to the "cat" portion of the word "catcall" and

[150] Darnell, John Coleman. 1997. "The Apotropaic Goddess in the Eye." *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 35-48. Calabro. *Street Trek.*
[151] Figure 5.4

Figure 5.5: PSA Kitties, *Captain Eyeliner, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

the skull serves to represent the death indicated by the phrase. The bowtie, traditional in menswear, is a representation of masculinity. Eyeliner's sinister visualization of her message translates the caption rather literally, and the sticker in its entirety functions as a grave warning for viewers. In fact, it almost functions as a threat. The takeaway here is that if a male viewer chooses to catcall a woman, he will surely get his comeuppance. The imagery that stems from the phrase "Dead Men Don't Cat Call" lends itself to Eyeliner's other work, not only as an attention grabber but as the artist's signature. She has become known on the streets of New York for her colorful, skeletal animals and her confrontational messages.

Repetitive motifs and personal style are important methods that street artists use to identify themselves, whether within a neighborhood, city, or country. Even if artists like Banksy choose to remain anonymous throughout their practice, establishing a unique approach along with a series of patterns identifiable throughout their body of work is crucial, as it allows viewers to pick their art out of a crowd. This familiarity is all too important for street art. Although isolated works can still have significant impact on both street art culture and their viewers, backing a visual up with a name creates a certain amount of credibility for a street artist. This is almost identical to the practice of graffiti tagging and writing discussed in Chapter One. By spraying their tags across the city, writers create familiarity with their signature so when they are able to create a full piece, their name is already known by those involved with the subculture.[152] Street artists engage in a similar practice, with stickers and paste-ups working as their "tags." Many artists, Captain Eyeliner among them, also embellish their works with an Instagram handle (e.g. @captain_eyeliner) so viewers can look at their social media pages and further familiarize themselves with the artist's work. When a person can look at a piece of street art and immediately recognize the artist, the work becomes more powerful. This is because the artist will now be able to reach more people, be it through fans sharing art, word-of-mouth, bloggers, or some other means. Not only does this mean that the artist is successful in their self-branding, but it means the message resonates with its audience, and the masses are willing to listen to what the artist has to say. Evidence of this phenomenon can be seen by looking at the histories of many highly popular street artists. Take Blek le Rat – his stenciled rats appeared throughout Paris over

[152] Gastman & Neelon. *The History.* 58-68
MacDonald. *The Graffiti Subculture.* 63-93.

time, garnering popularity for him and acting as his personal signature. Once a painting was validated with his stenciled rat, viewers took its message more seriously.

Sac Six, a Brooklyn based street artist who works both legally and illegally, has also followed this pattern of branding, although he has slightly altered it. Six moved to New York City from Miami in 2006 and was immediately entranced by the city's wealth of street art.[153] He began photographing street art, and when that was no longer enough, he joined the community himself. He glued his first wheat paste-up to the city in 2015 and has since made great strides in the field of street art, including the creation of a permanent mural for Adidas, located at the iconic Macy's store in Manhattan.[154] Six, who had been posting his photographs of other artists' work on his Instagram page prior to beginning his own practice, already had a small following by the time he began pasting his own creations on walls, giving him a slight branding advantage.[155] An avid viewer and researcher of street art, Six knew exactly how to draw attention to his new pieces, and social media was a monumental factor in his success.

Six's first step in successfully reaching a larger audience was social media. He created hashtags on Instagram unique to his brand, such as "#sacsix" and "#sacsixart." To go along with these tags, Six knew exactly what types of artworks would catch viewers' eyes and, better yet, inspire them to take their own photographs of his work. His first pieces were a part of a series that Six continues to work on today, known as *Sidewalks and Icons*, which also has its own hashtag (#sidewalksandicons). He took black and white images of some of the most famous and beloved celebrities, including Biggie Smalls, Michael Jackson, Amy Winehouse, Andy Warhol, and others, and paired them with phrasing and imagery that praised New York. Examples of this

[153] Six, Sac. 2017. *About.* Accessed April 12, 2019. http://www.sacsix.com/about.
[154] Six, Sac. 2017. *SacSix Story.* Accessed April 12, 2019. http://www.sacsix.com/.
[155] Six, Sac. 2019. *Instagram.* Accessed April 12, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/sacsix/.

include Andy Warhol wearing an "I Heart NY" turtleneck, and Ghandi sporting a cap that reads "New Fucking York."[156] This catered to the pride and city-spirit of New Yorkers by connecting their idols to their cherished city.

As Six began to create more and more paste-ups, he experimented more with color and symbolism. He began to regularly include a pigeon with his celebrities, which he dubbed "Mr. Poop" and for which he created yet another hashtag. Over time, Mr. Poop came to be a zoomorphic representation of the city itself, which is known for its number of pigeons. Six's ultimate goal as an artist was and is to connect with viewers and give them something to smile about, so he began incorporating arguably the most popular pictorial code for love known to Americans: the heart.[157] Furthermore, he often depicted these hearts in many various day-glo colors, which served to even more dramatically capture the attention of passersby. As of 2019, Six's most popular – and most pasted – creations in *Sidewalks and Icons* are *Love and Moonwalk* and *King Biggie Jaffe Joffer and #MrPoop*, both named by the artist.[158]

Figure 5.6: Love and Moonwalk, *Sac Six, 2017. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

Love and Moonwalk features Michael Jackson and references the musician's iconic dance move by placing him in an astronaut suit. The day-glo paint functions to draw the viewer's eye, and it performs

[156] Six. *Instagram.*
[157] Six. *SacSix.*
[158] Figures 5.6 and 5.7

Figure 5.7: King Biggie Jaffe Joffer and #MrPoop, *Sac Six, 2017. Photo by Mo Quigg*

successfully in the gloomy lighting of Freeman Alley. *King Biggie Jaffe Joffer and #MrPoop* uses these same techniques. Different from many of Six's black and white pieces, however, Biggie Smalls is depicted in full color. Like Michael Jackson is considered the "King of Pop," Biggie Smalls is considered the "King of Hip-Hop," and the image of him wearing a crown is one of the most iconic hip-hop photos of the 1990s. Mr. Poop the pigeon sits on Biggie's shoulder and wears a smaller crown, as if to vouch for the King's legitimacy. As suggested by the title, *King Biggie Jaffe Joffer and #MrPoop* doesn't just feature Biggie, but also King Jaffe Joffer, the king of a fictional African country known as Zamunda in the 1988 film *Coming to America.* King Joffer is played by James Earl Jones and is seen wearing a crown during the movie, as well as the lion pelt and blue ascot depicted in Six's work.[159] Six's Mr. Poop also wears a small sign around his neck that says "hustle." Not only could this refer to the artist's motto, "Keep on Hustlin'," but it could be a reference to Biggie's song "Everyday Struggles," off of his debut album, in which he raps: *I'm livin' every day like a hustle, another drug to juggle, another day, another struggle.*[160] Six's paste-up also includes two New York street signs that give the viewer a positive message instead of directional information: "spread love, it's the Brooklyn way." The button on Biggie's right breast does what Six's Warhol paste-up achieves in pandering to the New York audience with

[159] 1988. *Coming to America.* Directed by John Landis. Performed by James Earl Jones and Eddie Murphy.
[160] The Notorious B.I.G. 1994. *Everyday Struggle.* Comp. Bluez Brothers.

another classic "I Heart NY" motif. Although not seen in Figure 5.7, Six often pairs this image with a stenciled phrase reading "POST NO HATE."[161]

Unlike many street artists, who feel that staying illegal maintains the morals that align with their messages, Six has participated in many legal art events, including legally curated street art exhibitions.[162] The primary image he uses in these events is *King Biggie Jaffe Joffer and #MrPoop,* and although the work remains largely the same, there are usually some minor changes, as Six's paste-ups are handmade and never exactly the same. After a series of commission requests, the artist took the liberty of offering wheatpastes in floating frames for sale.[163] These elements, along with the handful of celebrities who shared Six's work and his short feature in a Netflix comedy series, helped to boost Sac Six to stardom.[164]

The early paste-ups served to familiarize viewers with Six and his work, just like Captain Eyeliner's stickers. Six, however, has been working since 2015, whereas Eyeliner began her practice in 2018, and the difference is notable: Six has over 15 thousand followers on Instagram.[165] A contributing factor is Six's acceptance of the art world and the mainstream. As stated before, his use of well-known pop culture icons draws attention from viewers who may be unfamiliar with street art or its world, and his self-branding social media strategy works to promote his art on multiple platforms. Both Eyeliner and Six use motifs and visuals as their signature, each with a personal style that allows them to stand out from a crowd. Both of these

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[161] Six. *Instagram.*

[162] Ibid.
MacDonald. *The Graffiti Subculture.* 63-93.

[163] Six.*Instagram*
Six, Sac. 2017. *Sac Sixth Avenue.* Accessed April 12, 2019. http://www.sacsix.com/shop.

[164] 2017. *She's Gotta Have It.* Directed by Spike Lee. Performed by DeWanda Wise, Anthony Ramos, Lyriq Bent and Cleo Anthony.

[165] Six. *Instagram.*
Six. *SacSix.*

artists demonstrate how the influence and practice of street art can be used to further develop signature and personal style.[166]

Unlike other artists who have been examined in this thesis, Sac Six does not have any outright political themes in his work. His work errs on the side of those like Cabaio Spirito, focusing instead on spreading a social message of general happiness and positivity. As with all street art, however, it becomes political the moment it is illegally attached to or painted on a city wall. The very act of creating art in an illegal space – whether the art in question is as small as a sticker or as large as a mural – questions the ownership of urban areas and disrupts the monotony of the gray landscape, as well as counteracting capitalist advertisement and propaganda. Paste-ups, however, often function as advertisements themselves. In Captain Eyeliner's case, they advertise her messages of social and environmental awareness, whereas in Sac Six's case, they advertise his brand. Street art has the capacity to create a break in the everyday visual literacy of a city and counteract the rampant consumerist culture that exists in the contemporary world, and yet at the same time it can contribute to this very culture.

Figure 5.8: PSA Kitties, *Captain Eyeliner, 2018. Photo by Mo Quigg.*

[166] Waclawek. *Graffiti.* 159-169.

Conclusions

Street art has changed dramatically since the invention of modern graffiti writing in the 1960s, and many new facets of the practice have stemmed from the original subway-writers in New York City. From paste-ups to murals to yarn bombing, each form has its own unique intentions that have the ability to change the dialogue about contemporary art. Its function as a reclamation of public space is just important as its contributions to visual culture, and its accessible and unregulated nature makes it a valuable component of political and social activism in a way that museum and gallery art cannot be.

Since street art is rarely created in restricted spaces, any general passerby can view it for free. This inherent accessibility allows any person to absorb its visualizations and messages, highly different from the often-restrictive traditional art spaces, such as museums and galleries. Street art especially flourishes in communities like that of Bushwick, where its practice is encouraged. In these areas where graffiti and street art are abundant, the daily commute is punctuated by creativity, disrupting patterns of thinking and offering a distraction from the quotidian and mundane. The function of street art in spaces that reject its practices, however, is just as important as it is in places like Bushwick. Even more so, in these unwelcoming places street art has the power to confront its viewers, asking them to be reflective and more deeply consider *why* they think about street art in the way that they do. In this way, the location of street art has significant power over its interpretation, meaning, and influence.

Size is also a considerable factor in how a work might be received. Take Spirito Cabaio's paintings, for example – they stretch across a whole section of a wall, larger than life. In

Cabaio's works, the viewer is meant to see one thing from a distance, and an entirely different one once approaching the work and inspecting it more closely. The use of bright colors and repetitive motifs make it aesthetically pleasing for viewers. But since Cabaio only has these two large pieces in Bushwick – *Across That River* and *Progreso* – they fail to act as a signature for him and reach only those who traverse those streets. Creating a small amount of larger paintings makes it so that the artist is not usually recognized on a mass scale, which can inhibit an artist's ability to spread his or her message and brand. The relevance of this hinges on the artist's intentions, however, and for Cabaio, notoriety is not important. Sac Six, on the other hand, elects to create many smaller pieces instead of only a few large ones, allowing him to expand the reach of his artwork, and by default, his signature and brand. By pasting his pieces around the city in multiple areas, Six is also able to attract the attention of a more diverse audience. Additionally, these smaller pieces require less effort than larger pieces, and thus if they are vandalized or damaged by the elements, it takes less effort for the artist to further spread his message. Different benefits exist for artworks depending on their size, location(s), and intentions. Social media is also an important tool for street artists: not only does it assist them in promoting their personal brand and message, resulting in their gaining relevancy in artistic communities, but it allows them to document their artwork before it is damaged. As we've seen in this thesis, Sac Six is a good example of how artists are able to use social media to broaden their viewer-base. His hash-tagging and "Sidewalks and Icons" got him significant attention, as can be attested to by his over 15,000 Instagram followers.

As seen with Blanco Tsagaan's *Close Rikers* and Pleks' *American Chief*, illegal street art has the ability to provide information that legal street art cannot. It has the capacity to criticize the establishments in place in a community, like Rikers Prison, or even in a country by criticizing

the president, and by default the government as a whole. It can make viewers uncomfortable as it questions the preconceived notions that can exist in one's mind and challenges the beliefs of its audience. As seen in both *Close Rikers* and *No Borders, No Walls,* street art also has the ability to give a voice to those who cannot speak, whether it be children in detention camps or inmates in a prison with no heating. Many activist artists prefer the energy of the streets to display their art as opposed to the energy of a gallery, since street art acts as a disruption to routine. Galleries remove viewers from their natural environments and thus allow them to mentally compartmentalize their experience with the artwork, whereas street art often strikes a chord within viewers, encouraging them to let it affect them more deeply. Its interactive qualities also make it a unique form of social participation, allowing viewers not only to absorb what the artist is saying, but to add their own commentary as well.

The demographics of street artists are crucially important to both what messages are sent and how the messages are received through a work of art. Many street artists come from the graffiti culture of anti-capitalist activity and lack traditional artistic training. Because of this, they are often able to connect to and relate to certain communities more authentically than "professional" artists. Cabaio, for example, began his artistic practice during the peak of an economic crisis. Because of his personal connection to the situation and the art he was making, he was able to incite significant changes to his community through Vomito Attack. Those who spread anti-graffiti rhetoric often do so to influence people into disregarding the important messages that street art and graffiti can send, and to silence the voices of marginalized groups who are forced to take to the streets in this way because they have no other platform through which to speak their truth. For these reasons, it is crucial to document their art and encourage open dialogue about the messages they send. What street artists have to say is just as important

and relevant as institutional artists, and due to their lack of classical training, their approaches to style, form, and composition are unlike much of what we see in today's galleries.

Street art must be understood in future art historical contexts as a form of spatial reclamation. By using bright colors and powerful motifs to draw attention to its existence in illegal areas, this art questions the legitimacy of "public" spaces and begs the viewer to consider who the true owners of these places are. Its counter-advertisement practices offer satirical commentary on the acquiescent attitudes of the contemporary consumer, and yet, this anti-capitalist propaganda often reflects the very practices it criticizes. The relationship between stickers and paste-ups and the advertisement culture that we live in today deserves further analysis in the context of visual culture and art history. Street art does not serve viewers only as an anti-advertisement campaign, however; it acts as a visual experience that disrupts the urban landscape and creates enriching additions to public space that work as distractions from the everyday, often encouraging positivity, and even inciting change. Raf Urban's "Diversity is Hope" series is a prime example of this. Urban attempts to inspire moments of positivity throughout the city, but also provokes a change of mindset in his viewers by visually celebrating the benefits of a diverse community.

The influence that past graffiti writers and pop art has had on today's street art can also not be ignored. The use of repetition in the works of many artists of the 60s and 70s – right at the time that graffiti writing began to spread to New York City – helped inspire the practice of stenciling, helped along by artists like Banksy and Blek le Rat. Pop art's critique of capitalism and consumerist culture also translated into the works of artists like Shepard Fairey, who continues to inspire new generations of graffiti writers and street artists. The bright colors of the early graffiti writers like Taki 183 created an aesthetic that many attempted to recreate, and the

inspiration drawn from these artists continues to influence the color and style choice of people who work on the streets today. Street art is a movement in itself; it has expanded monumentally since its beginnings in the 1960s in Philadelphia and will continue expand. It is our job as art historians to document the changes street art provokes, note the influences, and look toward the future of art that graffiti and street art will undoubtably inspire.