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Street Art and the Splasher:

Assimilation and Resistance in Advanced Capitalism

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the thesis

Street Art and the Splasher: Assimilation and Resistance in Advanced Capitalism

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Since 2005, street art has enjoyed rapid increases in market value. Works by Banksy, a notorious street art vandal, regularly fetch in excess of $500,000 at auction. While street artists often turn to the traditional media of painting and sculpture to supplement their illegal activities, budding artists employ street art as a means of gaining recognition in the art and advertising worlds. Street artists like Shepard Fairey, Swoon, and Banksy routinely participate in museum and gallery shows, and their traditional art works command high prices in galleries and at auction. As a response to the current market for street art, the Splasher group began vandalizing street art in late 2006, flinging brightly colored paint over works by Shepard Fairey, Swoon, Banksy, and others, in an attempt to draw attention to (and ultimately destroy) the market value of street art, and their actions raise some interesting questions. To what extent does capital play a role in the production and consumption of illegal street art, and what is the function of capital in the growth of street art as a viable and valuable means of artistic expression. To what extent does the Splasher group's criticism of the phenomenon function as a form of resistance to capitalization of graffiti and street art? In what ways do the Splashers subvert or contribute to the exchange and stratification of capital and art in contemporary society? What potentials remain for art to function as an agent of change in the twenty-first century? Answers to these and other questions can be found through examination of connections between graffiti, street art, the Splasher group, advertising, sanctioned public art, and the art world. Though the Splasher group failed to destroy—or even slow—the street art market, their actions and writings reveal potentials for resistance within commodified cultural practices.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgments

Introduction

On February 28, 2008, at an auction of contemporary art held at Sotheby's New Bond Street branch, a polyptych by Banksy, a notorious street art vandal and art world provocateur, sold for £626,500 ($1,242,179.42).[1] This was not the first sale of Banksy's works at auction: between October, 2005—when Banksy works first appeared at a Sotheby's auction—and April, 2008, Sotheby's New Bond Street and Olympia branches sold 54 works for a total of £4,118,575 ($8,167,889.25); on February 14, 2008, at a Sotheby's sale to benefit (Product) Red held at Gagosian Gallery in New York, three works fetched a total of $2,860,000.[2] Despite (or because of) these impressive sales totals Banksy's popularity and credibility in the world of illegal street art continues. While galleries hold exhibitions of his traditional art works, street art admirers flock to gallery openings and hold scavenger hunts to find new illegal street works.

Though Banksy's art world success is an extreme case, street artists regularly move into successful (and legal) careers in art or advertising. Shepard Fairey, the author of the OBEY Giant campaign and one of the more prolific and popular street artists, operates a successful graphic design studio (Studio Number One), fine art printing and gallery services company (Subliminal Projects), and clothing line (OBEY Clothing), and recently designed campaign posters for Barack Obama. Swoon, another extremely popular street artist and the driving force behind several community action groups in Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan, sold six works to The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 2006 for an undisclosed amount.

In response to the economic and cultural successes of Shepard Fairey, Swoon, Banksy, and other street artists, the Splasher group undertook a series of actions in 2006 and 2007 that were designed to disrupt street art market and draw attention to the complexities and contradictions between illegal, unsanctioned street art and the legal and sanctioned activities that take place in museums, galleries, and graphic design studios. The Splashers sprayed, squirted, and otherwise splashed brightly colored paint over beloved works by numerous street artists and wheat-pasted inflammatory screeds nearby that described street art as a "fetishized action of banality" and "a trough for the gallery owners and critics."[3] The group also infiltrated the opening receptions of several street art exhibitions, where they distributed short marxist- and Situationist-inspired commentaries on the artists and their works and otherwise disrupted the festivities. Popular street art blogs posted analyses of the group's actions that ranged from sympathy and agreement to threats of violence, and coverage of the Splasher group and their activities in the *New York Times, Washington Post*, and *New York Magazine* brought national attention to the group. However, media attention brought little or no sustained discussion of street art, its

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[1] All auction prices include the Buyer's premium. Currency conversions as of April 21, 2008

[2] A complete list of Banksy's works offered for sale at Sotheby's can be found at http://browse.sothebys.com/?sla=1&slaform=1&q=&creator=Banksy

[3] The Splasher Group, "Avant-Garde: Advance Scouts for Capital," reprinted in *if we did it, this is how it would've happened*, short-run newspaper distributed throughout New York City (June, 2007), 12

potential as a resistant force, or its place in contemporary art and advertising worlds. In July, 2007, after several close encounters with police officers and angry hipsters, the Splashers distributed a manifesto that described their activities, explained their motives, and announced the end of their project.

Despite their failure to bring about any long-term changes in the production and reception of street art—since the dissolution of the Splasher group, Sotheby's sold 32 Banksy works in 9 auctions for a total of £3,644,956 ($7,228,615.95) and Shepard Fairey did design work for Virgin, Honda, and other multinational corporations—their assessment of the phenomenon is accurate to a degree. The movement from illegality to economic and cultural marketability entails the (partial) removal of resistant potentials from cultural practices and other social activities. Capitalism, especially in its advanced, global form has a pervasive influence on cultural forms and tends to recuperate resistant and subcultural actions in order to advance and broaden potential profits. The Splasher group's actions and writings, when viewed alongside the history and aesthetics street art, point to the recuperative powers of advanced capitalism and suggest, albeit obliquely, possibilities for continued resistance within assimilated practices.

Despite the success of many street artists, street art remains vandalism and a public nuisance; it is illegal and, in many cases, unsanctioned. This tendency toward illegality leads many admirers to view street art as a form of resistance to economic, cultural, and political hegemonies and see no contradiction between illegal street art and success in the art and advertising worlds. Street artists also see little, if any, inconsistency between their commercial and street works, and tend to claim that their legal and sanctioned activities support their illegal and unsanctioned works. According to this logic, corporations, museums, and other institutions and groups are unwitting partners in the creation and display of works that resist commercialization and commodification. While this is true to an extent, the logic works both ways: illegal street works also add a measure of credibility to the corporations and other entities that employ street artists. On this view, the introduction of street art into the museum and advertising worlds destroys street art's resistant character altogether, and, as the Splashers claim, street art becomes little more than "a bourgeois-sponsored rebellion. . . . both utterly impotent politically and fantastically lucrative for everyone involved."[4]

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[4] The Splasher group, "Interview with Myself: On The Subject Of Street Art And Its Destruction" in *if we did it,* 3

A Brief History of Street Art

From its humble beginnings in train yards, alleyways, and handball courts—what Paul Simon and Art Garfunkle call "subway walls and tenement halls"—graffiti, long thought of as a blight on urban life, became an art world, advertising, and fashion darling during the art market boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Only slightly removed form earlier forms of graffiti—latrinalia (restroom graffiti), messages of love carved in trees, and "Kilroy was Here,"[5] for example—contemporary graffiti, hereafter referred to as 'graf,' contains within it potentials for resistance that are largely unavailable to other graffiti forms and which stem from the simultaneously illegal and unsanctioned nature of graf. While all forms of graffiti are (theoretically) illegal, many are completely sanctioned, by custom, by tradition, and even by states and municipal groups: few school children receive jail time for carving in trees, and carving or writing ones name at places of interest is a common occurrence that is rarely worthy of prosecution. Graf, however, receives a great deal of attention from police departments and municipal groups throughout the world for two important reasons. First, young urban graf writers tend subvert capitalism: graf writers steal virtually all spraypaint and other supplies that they employ in their illegal "bombing" campaigns, and writers pride themselves on their ability to "rack up" (steal) vast quantities of paint from hardware and home improvement stores.[6] Second, graf provides a public voice to individuals and groups that may otherwise go unnoticed by the prevailing social order. According to Norman Mailer, whose *The Faith of Graffiti* is the first serious account of the graf subculture,

> Slum populations chilled on one side by the bleakness of modern design, and brain-cooked on the other by comic strips and TV ads with zooming letters, even brain-cooked by politicians whose ego is a virtue . . . brained by the big beautiful numbers on the yard markers on football fields, by the whip of the capital letters in the names of the products, and gut-picked by the sound of rock and soul screaming up into the voodoo of the firmament with the shriek of the performer's insides coiling like neon letters in the blue satanic light, yes all the excrescence of the highways and the fluorescent wonderlands of every Las Vegas sigh frying through the Iowa and New Jersey night, all the stomach-tightening nitty-gritty of trying to learn how to spell was in the writing, every assault on the psyche as the trains came slamming in.[7]

This sentiment, graf as the struggle against economic and cultural hegemonies, is echoed by numerous graf writers and street artists. For Iz the Wiz, a late 1970s graf writer, "Mr.

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[5] During World War Two, U.S. servicemen carved, scratched, and drew the ubiquitous 'Kilroy was here' throughout the European and Asian theaters to indicate solidarity and proclaim triumph. For more on Kilroy, and for an excellent discussion of historical forms of graffiti, see Robert Reisner, *Graffiti: Two Thousand Years of Wall Writing*, (Chicago: Cowles Book Company, 1971) 13-17.

[6] See, for example, Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: the MIT Press (1982) 46-48; Paul Labonté, "Interview with AMAZE," *All City: the book about taking space*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 2003) 154; and 11. "A Whole Miserable Subculture," *Style Wars*, DVD, directed by Tony Silver (1983; Los Angeles, CA: Public Art Films, 2004)

[7] Norman Mailer, Melvyn Kurlansky, and John Narr, *The Faith of Graffiti* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974) 7

Mobil; Mr. Amoco; Mr. Exxon. They're rich. They can put their name on any sign, any place. Build a gas station and there's their *name.* . . . now you're on a poorer economic level and what do you have? . . . It's all in the name. When you're poor, that's all you got."[8] Graf's ability to give a voice to minority and subcultural groups and provide a platform from which such groups could proclaim identity and express solidarity proved extremely popular among a variety of peoples throughout the world.

The Situationists employed graf to announce plans, rally support, and provide inspiration to the students, workers and others who participated in the wildcat general strike of May, 1968.[9] Hippies and other late-1960s subcultural and radial groups wrote peace signs, flowers, and messages of love to protest social conditions, racism, and the Vietnam war.[10] TAKI 183 and others wrote their names throughout the five Boroughs to proclaim their existence in the face of the cultural, political, and social hegemonies at work in New York City.[11]

Throughout the 1970s, and due to the extreme popularity of graf among youth subcultures, several organizations attempted to bring graf into the mainstream and move young writers into legal careers.[12] Such attempts failed for a variety of reasons until the late-1970s, when advertisers and cultural institutions began to see in graf a potential for new revenue streams. By the mid-1980s, graf-inspired graphic design dominated the advertising industry and traditional art works that employed graf techniques covered gallery walls throughout Western world.[13]

In graffiti, curators and gallerists found a gritty and dangerous art form that appealed to junk bond traders and socialites, and budding artists saw a way to market themselves and their works to the art and advertising worlds. Fashion designers co-opted graffiti styles and colors to create colorful clothes for the burgeoning hip hop and punk cultures. Advertisers employed graffiti forms and techniques in campaigns for soda, blue jeans, tennis shoes, and, interestingly, anti-graffiti programs. By the mid-1980s, Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who began their art careers on the streets of lower Manhattan, had gallery representation on both sides of the Atlantic and enjoyed lucrative careers in the arts.[14] The new forms and techniques that were developed

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[8] quoted in Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: how Graffiti Art became an urban crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 39-40

[9] See Simon Ford, *the situationist international: A User's Guide*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2005) 120 ff.; and Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, revised and expanded edition, (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006) 435-460

[10] For more on a variety of early graffiti forms, see Robert Reisner, *Graffiti*, 92-94

[11] Craig Castleman, *Getting Up*, 53-55

[12] Craig Castleman provides a sustained discussion of two graffiti organizations,—the Union of Graffiti Artists and the Nation of Graffiti Artists—that were active in New York City in the early and mid-1970s. See *Getting Up*, 116-133

[13] For more on the influence of graffiti on graphic design, see Gean Moreno, "Post Graffiti," *Art Papers* 26, No. 6, (Nov.-Dec. 2002) 20-21

[14] See Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996) 461-479

in this period became known as 'street art,' underwent a transformation from illegal vandalism to saught-after commodity, and, by the late twentieth century, became a worldwide phenomenon.

Today, real estate developers feature street art in marketing campaigns for new condominium and loft developments, and cities and neighborhood associations actively protect and promote works by prominent street artists. Given the extreme popularity of street art among advertisers, cultural institutions, art collectors, and auction houses, as well as the continued support for street artists from community action organizations, anarchists, and resistant groups, the commodification of graf through street art seems largely complete. This is the power of advanced capitalism: while auction houses, galleries, and corporations capitalize on the popularity of street art, illegal works continue to spread, though they function more as advertising for legal works than resistance to the museum and gallery system, and resistant groups, who may otherwise avoid mass marketing, purchase clothes, posters, and other mass-produced street art-related objects due to the misguided view of street art as pure resistance.

The state of street art in the twenty-first century suggests a complex relationship between hegemonic forces and resistant groups. At one and the same time, street art resists the exclusivity of the market-driven gallery and museum system while also participating in that system. For street art admirers with little or no excess capital, traditional art works by street artists are largely out of reach: prints by Shepard Fairey start at $400, Swoon's prints, on the rare occasions when they appear for sale, fetch around $2,000, and simple stenciled works and multiples by Banksy sell for close to $20,000 while original paintings and sculptures achieve prices in excess of $200,000. Fortunately, all these artists continue to (illegally) display works on abandoned buildings and rooftops, and in alleys and other out-of-the-way locations. However, and though photographs of works by established and fledgling street artists can be found on a number of easily-accessible websites, many street art admirers will never have the opportunity to see the works firsthand. As Walter Benjamin pronounced in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," photographic reproductions of traditional art works lack at least one major element of the original: "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[15] The same holds true for illegal street art: photographic reproductions remove local sights and smells, and crop out nearby street works that may constitute a conversation between artists. While illegal street art serves to counter the economically exclusive art world and allow access to works that would otherwise be ensconced in museums, galleries, and private collections, it also excludes vast numbers of people who may not have the ability to view street art in its natural environment. Though street artists work to counter this exclusivity—established street artists travel to urban centers throughout the world where they create illegal works for the local population and Swoon works with community action and anarchist groups throughout the United States to bring street art and avant-garde performance works to

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[15] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, ed. *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, New Edition (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) 521

rural populations[16]—original works, whether traditional or street, can only ever reach a highly limited and exclusive percentage of the worldwide population.

In what follows, I examine the current state of street art and its participation in the art market. The first task will be to define street art as both an object and an activity. In general, street art occupies a liminal position between the illegal graf and the art and advertising worlds. However, the complexities surrounding various contradictory and competing definitions of street art need to be unpacked. A brief discussion of the theories that underpin this study follow and provide an understanding of the role of capitalism in the production and reception of street art. An examination of the careers of Shepard Fairey, Swoon, and Banksy help to illustrate the options open to street artists and the function of street art in the twenty-first century, while the Splasher group's actions and writings show point to the (limited) possibilities for resistance within recuperated cultural practices.

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[16] see the discussion of Swoon's work with Toyshop, the Miss Rockaway Armada, and others, below.

Street Art, defined

Street art, as a concept, is highly complex. In one sense, street art can be defined in relation to the people—street artists—that produce it: street artists create appealing objects in an attempt to gain recognition from other street artists, passersby, and the art, advertising, and design worlds. In another sense, street art may be defined by the materials employed to create the works. While there is a some overlap in the materials and techniques employed by street artists and graf writers—spraypaint and markers, for example—street artists tend to experiment with other techniques, new technological advancements, and novel materials. Banksy places sculptures on the street in addition to the more usual and expected spraypaint and stencil works, and Swoon employs ancient and contemporary intaglio print processes. Luis Bou provides an excellent definition of street art that reunites the producers (street artists) with their products (street art).

> Like any evolution, street art or post-graffiti has clearly brought with it new techniques and styles, and the artists use, in addition to the sprays and permanent felt-tip markers, other forms and materials to create their works: stencils, stickers, posters, acrylics applied with paintbrushes, airbrushes, chalk, charcoal, photograph-based collages, photocopies, mosaics, and on and on. At the same time, this evolution has led to many students and professionals in the world of graphic design using street art to make their work known, studying people's reactions, and having no qualms about signing their creations with e-mail addresses, web pages, and even their telephone numbers—a clear departure from the pure "ephemeral and illegal" essence of graffiti.[17]

This definition accounts for differences in materials and techniques between street art and graf, while also acknowledging the relationship between street art, graphic design, and, by extension, the art world. It also places the artists in a relationship with their craft and points to motives that drive the production of street art. However, Bou's claim also equates street art with something called 'post-graffiti,' a somewhat confusing and, as will be seen, largely meaningless term that has been in use since the early- and mid-1980s.

In 1984, the Sidney Janis Gallery presented a show of paintings by CRASH and DAZE, two popular graf writers who enjoyed brief careers in the art world,[18] entitled "Post-graffiti Art." According to the show's catalogue, 'post-graffiti' refers to works on canvas that are no longer transitory or ephemeral and have been recognized as exemplary of a valid new movement in contemporary art.[19] In his 1985 review of this show, Arthur Danto interprets 'post-graffiti' as providing the works (and the gallery) with "a sociological excuse" that invokes "the pedigree and paraphernalia of the culture that formed them," and without which the artists and their works would not be on display at the Janis gallery or any other art world venue.[20] The definitions of 'post-graffiti' by Janis

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[17] Louis Bou, *Street Art: the Spray Files*, (New York: Collins Design, 2005) 6

[18] Paintings by CRASH (otherwise known as John Matos) continue to appear, occasionally, at auction. In April, 2008, an untitled spraypaint on canvas work from 1983 sold for $25,000.

[19] Sidney Janis, *Post-Graffiti*, (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1983)

[20] Arthur Danto, "Post-Graffiti Art: CRASH, DAZE," *The Nation* (January 12, 1985) 26

and Danto seem to be at odds with one another, though there is a sense in which both can be seen as correct.

CRASH and DAZE were accomplished graf writers who found their way into the art world, as many writers did in the 1980s, and it makes sense that their works on canvas would reflect their graf careers. While the art world of the early 1980s embraced some writers, there was a need to justify the presence of graf writers in upscale galleries, especially by the tail end of the art world's infatuation with graf. So, 'post-graffiti' provides an excuse for the presence of graf-inspired works in the gallery system, while also describing the works as coming out of the graf tradition. After all, 'post' is both an object (something that provides support) and an prefix meaning, roughly, 'after' or 'behind.'

A much later definition of street art appears in a review of books about Dondi White, FUTURA 2000, and the influence of graf on graphic design. The author, Gean Moreno, locates 'post-graffiti' in an "aim to highlight the very concrete fact that graffiti artists have moved, in great part, beyond the realm of street art, to squat in the worlds of design and illustration."[21] While this helps to remove some of the semantic ambiguity inherent in the employment of 'post-,' the author seems to equate graf with street art, while also describing graf writers that have moved into the world of professional graphic design, somewhat disparagingly, as 'squatters.' This implies that graf writers and street artists do not belong in design or illustration, and betrays the race and class bias inherent in a great deal of writing about graf and street art.

A return to Bau's discussion of street art finds a clarification of 'post-graffiti,' while also providing one view of the relationship between graf and street art. "Street art, as its name implies, encompasses all artistic incursions into the urban landscape and derives directly from the graffiti painted on Harlem (New York) train cars in the late 1970s. Its philosophy and raison d'être have evolved, as have those of all the arts and artistic movements, as society has undergone sociopolitical and cultural changes, but its essence remains the same (delinquent and antisystem). Many artists call this movement 'post-graffiti.'"[22] Here, it becomes clear that 'post-graffiti' has very little actual meaning in and of itself, and is only intended to show some linkage between street art and graf, a linkage which already exists, in Bau's words, due to the "delinquent and antisystem" nature of the two forms, though, as will be shown, street art is far less "antisystem" than it might appear to casual observers.

The artists at issue here—Shepard Fairey, Swoon, and Banksy—are among the most prominent, popular, and prolific street artists to emerge since the mid-1990s and tend to produce works that differ greatly from traditional forms of graf. As noted above, where graf writers tend to concern themselves with a signature and the act of writing, street artists tend to focus on the reception of their objects. Where graf writers learn their craft through interaction with other graf writers and participation in graf writing, most street artists begin as art students who employ street art to gauge public opinion of their

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[21] Gean Moreno, "Post-Graffiti" *Art Papers* 26, No. 6 (November/December 2002) 20

[22] Louis Bou, *Spray Files*, 6.

works and make a name for themselves after graduation. The differences in age and background between graf writers and street artists, as well as the differences in form and content of their works, suggest that the two groups and their works are entirely different, despite some similarities in the materials and techniques employed by the two. If street art is "delinquent" in the same ways as graf, why does Shepard Fairey perform pro bono design work for the San Diego Children's Museum? If street art is "antisystem," why does the Museum of Modern Art own a number of pieces by Swoon? If Banksy is equally "delinquent and antisystem," why does Bristol, England have a statute that protects his illegal works while continuing to support graf removal programs? Before turning to an examination of street artists, though, it is necessary to explore some theories that help locate street art as both a resistant tradition and a willing participant in advanced capitalism. In particular, the Situationists provide models for the Splasher group, and help explain the simultaneously resistant and assimilated nature of street art.

Street Art, in theory

Techniques developed by Guy Debord and other members of the Situationist International (SI) and its precursor the Lettriste International provide methods for subverting prevailing social conditions and recapturing public space. Psychogeography—"the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals"[23]—transforms public space into an arena for intellectual and emotional play. In general, psychogeography involves an examination of "The sudden change of ambience in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain). . . ."[24] The ultimate aim of psychogeographical work seems to revolve around remaking public space and architecture "to accord with the whole development of the society, criticizing all the transitory values linked to obsolete forms of social relationships. . . ."[25] Though this thorough transformation of public space is extremely difficult for individuals and groups with limited access to economic capital and state power, partial psychogeographical games are also acceptable and available to everyone. Among the partial projects enumerated by Debord, he lists "the mere displacement of elements of decoration from the locations where we are used to seeing them."[26] This seems to correspond somewhat to graf and street art in that both are forms of decoration that occur in unlikely locations and lead to a variety of responses from passersby. Additionally both graf, as an indicator of anarchy and disorder, and street art, as the aesthetic modification of social spaces, influence people as they interact with various neighborhoods and locations: graf and street art affect the "emotions and behavior of individuals" as they wander through the environment. Two other situationist activities, *détournement* and *dérive* also seem particularly applicable to the public reception of graf and street art. Additionally, situationist practices suggest possibilities for resistance to advanced capitalism that apply to the activities of graf writers and, to an extent, street artists, despite the participation of the latter in the development and exchange of capital.

Détournement—the "integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction. . . ."—and *dérive*—"A mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society. . . ."[27]—encapsulate many of the operations performed by street artists as they modify public spaces and, in some instances, as they create traditional art works. Street artists *détourne* alleyways and abandoned buildings,

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[23] Guy Debord,"Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," in Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 8

[24] Ibid., 10

[25] Guy Debord, "Situationist Theses on Traffic," in Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 69

[26] Guy Debord, "Urban Geography" 11

[27] Situationist International, "Definitions," in Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 52

combining past architectural aesthetics with contemporary artistic styles.[28] The result of this melding of architecture and contemporary art results in a construction that, if not strictly stimulating than the original brick or stucco, at least provides a different sort of visual stimulus to viewers. Similarly, street art integrates past and present graffiti techniques (scratching, carving, writing) with technological advancements to form complex works of textual and imagistic art that challenge local hegemonies. As a form of *dérive,* street art, like graf before it, is intimately connected to material conditions that surround life in large urban centers. Where graf writers experimented with new forms of self-promotion in an attempt to counter the reigning economic and cultural hegemony, street artists experiment with artistic styles and aesthetic forms to gauge public response and find new audiences for their works. Where graf writers resist capitalism and consumer society by stealing supplies and vandalizing public and private property, street artists, with their drive to gain recognition from the art world, tend more toward participation in consumer society. Both practices contain a sense of *dérive*, in that both experiment with styles and forms that are clearly linked to the urban environment. Despite its use of *dérive* and *détournement*, and despite its relationship to graf, most street art runs counter to the resistance inherent in SI doctrines and practices, which referred to graffiti as a "radical critique [that] is pronouncing its declaration of war on the old society."[29]

While the SI strove to move away from traditional forms of art and culture, they subsisted partly on proceeds from the sale of paintings by Asger Jorn, a one-time member and avid supporter of the SI. Jorn, who was a founding member of CObRA—a mid-twentieth century European art collective known for violent brushwork and an interest in so-called "outsider" art—collaborated with Guy Debord on two situationist books and created two series of paintings based on the principles of *détournement*. The early situationist books, *Fine de Copenhague* (1957) and *Mémoires* (1959), were made by appropriating photographs and snippets of text from popular magazines and newspapers, combining them in interesting and unexpected ways, and carefully dripping or flinging colored paint on them. This sort of activity was not particularly new in the arts—Picasso added cut-out pieces of newspaper and other objects to paintings in the 1910s, and Warhol converted newspaper headlines and photographs into silkscreened paintings in the 1950s. However, the situationist use of appropriation and collage differs from earlier uses of these techniques in that collage grew out of a commitment to *détournement* and radical critique, rather than a desire to create new forms of art. To create his series of *détourned* works—the *Modifications (peintures détournées)*, of 1959, and *Nouvelles défigurations*, of 1962—Jorn purchased paintings by anonymous artists at flea markets around Paris and added swirls of color and strange figures to form new, semi-collaborative works. Of his

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[28] For more on Vaughn Bode's influence on graf, see James T. and Karla L. Murray, *Burning New York* (Corta Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2006) 106-117; for the use of Andy Warhol and other "high art" sources in subway painting, see Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990) 376-7.

[29] Situationist International, "The Beginning of an Era," in Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 324

détourned paintings, Jorn wrote "Be modern, collectors, museums! If you've got old pictures, don't despair. Keep your memories but modify them and bring them up to date. Why reject the old if it can be modernized with a few strokes of the brush?"[30]

Though the SI dissolved a few years after the student and worker uprisings of 1968, which brought a great deal of (unwanted) attention to the SI, their artistic ideas flourished in art and graphic design throughout the 1970s and 80s. Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid, for example, claimed superficial, yet interesting links to the SI and employed Situationist-inspired techniques to create posters and advertisements for McLaren's fetish-based clothing shop, "Sex"*,* and album covers for the Sex Pistols. Though McLaren and Reid were aware of the Situationists and their texts, they found SI literature too difficult to read and bought the publications only for the pictures and short slogans. "The text was in French: you tried to read it, but it was so difficult. Just when you were getting bored, there were always these wonderful pictures and they broke the whole thing up. They were what I bought them for: not the theory."[31] McLaren's later efforts included managing the new wave band Bow Wow Wow, whose first album featured the lead singer, a then 14 year old Annabella Lwin, in a remake of Manet's *Déjuner sur l'Herbe*, which may certainly be seen as a form of both *détournement* and *dérive*, in that it integrates earlier artistic production with experimental behavior, and is linked to a radical critique of urban life. Other punk writers and promoters employed a similar "pop Situationism" to attract disillusioned young people in the 1980s, though, according to John Lydon, the lead singer of the Sex Pistols who is more commonly known by his stage name, Johnny Rotten, "All that talk about the French Situationists being associated with punk is bollocks. It's nonsense!. . . The Paris riots and the Situationist movement of the 1960s—it was all nonsense for arty French students."[32] In fact, artists did employ Situationist-inspired techniques to create works of high art that question ownership, consumer society, patrimony, and a variety of other hegemonic structures. However, where Jorn and the SI created their *détourned* works to critique and revolutionize all spheres of twentieth-century life, artists who employ Situationist techniques, including the street artists below, make their works with an eye toward success in the art world.

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[30] Asger Jorn, "Détourned Painting," in *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957-1972*, ed. Elizabeth Sussman, (Boston: the MIT Press, 1989) 140 Such advice went, necessarily, unheeded by collectors and museums, though Banksy, a street artist who began working in the late 1990s, would take up Jorn's *détournement* technique, albeit in a completely commodified and superficial form.

[31] quoted in Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1991) 30.

[32] John Lydon, *Rotten: NO Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs: The Authorised Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994), 3. For more on Situationism in popular culture, see Simon Ford, *The Situationist International*, 148-152

Shepard Fairey

Frank Shepard Fairey began the Obey Giant campaign in 1989 while enrolled in the illustration program at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Throughout the 1980s, Fairey created bootlegged t-shirts and stickers from stencils he made of band logos and, in 1989, while working at a skate shop in Providence, agreed to teach a friend how to create paper cut stencils. "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" was born (Figure 1). The first stickers were crudely designed and, with their use of hand lettering and celebration of rough edges and simple graphics, show links to the design aesthetics of skateboarding and punk cultures. Fairey began pasting the stickers around Providence as a joke but soon "became obsessed with sticking them everywhere both as a way to be mischievous and also put something out in the world anonymously. . ." for which he could claim authorship. He pasted stickers everywhere he went, ran classified ads for his stickers in skateboard and punk magazines, and began mailing them to friends and admirers throughout the country. Fairey financed the sticker campaign for the first few years, but began charging five cents per sticker to offset his production and shipping costs and offering t-shirts and specialty stickers to provide some extra income. The stickers became rather well known among skate boarding enthusiasts, RISD students, and the police, but few others took notice until late 1990, when he modified a billboard that advertised mayoral hopeful Vincent Cianci by wheat-pasting an eight foot Andre head over Cianci's and adding a sign that urged viewers to "Join the Posse." A local newspaper, "The *Nice Paper*," offered a reward for information about the source and meaning of "Andre the Giant Has a Posse." In response, Fairey sent the newspaper some stickers and wrote a manifesto in which he claimed links between the stickers and Heidegger's phenomenology.

> The FIRST AIM OF PHENOMENOLOGY is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The Giant sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings. . . . The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker. Because Giant has a Posse has no actual meaning, the various reactions and interpretations of those who view it reflect their personality and the nature of their sensibilities.[33]

While there were reactions to Fairey's stickers, especially among the police and various subcultures, virtually no one went on to question the images that pervade public space, as Fairey had hoped. In fact, most people who took notice of the "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" stickers began removing and collecting them or ordering packages of stickers and t-shirts from Fairey's fledgling design business.[34] Perhaps Fairey was right, though, to claim that reactions to the stickers reflect the viewer's personality and sensibilities. Removing and collecting works of street art reflects a desire to belong to or own part of a

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[33] Frank Shepard Fairey, "Manifesto: A Social and Psychological Explanation, 1990," *Supply and Demand: The Art of Shepard Fairey*, (Corta Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2006) 5

[34] ibid.

subculture, and despite the desire of street artists to remove their art from the elitist gallery and museum systems, many viewers of street art want to possess the works they find on the street.

Undaunted, Fairey began creating larger, more elaborate, wheatpasted works that betray his RISD education and maturity in graphic design. After his discover of two films —John Carpenter's *They Live* and Michael Radford's film adaptation of George Orwell's *1984*—Fairey began adding the word "Obey" to his images and asserting a propagandistic motive for the works.[35] He remade the original newspaper photograph of Andre the Giant into a stylized image of the wrestler's face and found some inspiration in graphics created by Russian Constructivists and the artist Barbara Kruger: "Obey Giant" was born (Figure 2).

This new campaign allowed Fairey to make more coherent claims about his project, though he continued to ground his activities in phenomenology and a somewhat misguided and largely failed attempt to force viewers to question the relationships between propaganda and advertising. Again, instead of coming to question the images that surround them, viewers continued collecting street works and buying t-shirts, stickers, posters, and other objects. By the mid-1990s, Obey Giant gained the attention of a variety of corporations that specialize in mass producing objects for rebellious teenagers and hipster twenty-somethings, and Fairey began accepting commissions from skateboard manufacturers, shoe companies, and others. He also began producing limited edition prints and exhibiting original artworks in small galleries in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere.

At the same time, Fairey took on other iconic figures: revolutionaries and civil rights leaders, such as Che Guevara, Bobby Seale, and Angela Davis; musicians like Johnny Rotten, the Beatles, and Tupac Shakur; politicians, including an image of George W. Bush as a vampire; and other public figures. In each of these images, Fairey included the word 'Obey' or a small, stylized logo that contained the Giant face. The popularity of these new forms led to further graphic design commissions from music groups for album covers, promotional posters, and other materials. In 1999, Fairey undertook one of many "guerilla marketing" campaigns by designing, printing, and illegally wheat-pasting advertisements for the Universal Pictures film *Man on the Moon* that included no reference to Obey Giant or Shepard Fairey. When Urban Outfitters sponsored a show of Fairey's work in Philadelphia, he "complemented the Urban Outfitters logo on the flyer [for the show] with the text 'Cash for chaos provided by Urban Outfitters.'"[36] When viewers accused Fairey of "selling out," he claimed that, since the clothing company paid for his trip to Philadelphia, where he would illegally post works in the street, Urban Outfitters became an unwilling facilitator of his illegal activities. However, Fairey

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[35] In *They Live*, the protagonist—played by professional wrestler Rowdy Rody Piper—reveals an alien plot to enslave humanity. Magic sunglasses reveal subliminal messages: paper money proclaims "This is Your God;" a couple relaxing on a beach says "Procreate;" political posters say "Obey;" and so on. In Fairey's work, 'obey' has little significance beyond "obey your parents" or "obey the law," though Fairey does expect people to *dis*-obey most authority.

[36] Frank Shepard Fairey, "Absoloot Sponsorship," in *Supply and Demand*, 314

provides clear services to the corporations that commission advertisements from his firm. Not only do companies receive professional designs and advertisements, Fairey's visibility in the street art community adds a level of credibility to companies and helps to validate their products to fans of Fairey and his works. While this may be seen as contrary to Fairey's project, his participation in the marketplace is entirely in line with his aims as an artist and graphic designer. After all, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he attended RISD, one of the top illustration and design schools in the United States, and ran a small screen-printing and design service that catered to various subcultures. After several years of rapid growth, from one employee (himself) to nearly thirty, he split the business into a fine art printing and gallery service (Subliminal Projects), commercial graphic design firm (Studio Number One), and clothing line (Obey Clothing). In the words of Rob Walker, "If the idea of spreading the Obey image is to see how far the Obey image can spread, doesn't it make sense for it to show up on apparel that is sold in chain stores? If a multinational can put its icons on the street, maybe the street should put its icons into the shopping mall."[37] Indeed. However, if Fairey intended Obey Giant campaign to cause people to question the advertisements and other images that pervade public space, what happens to the project when it becomes just another corporate logo or advertisement? While the quality of Fairey's street art and traditional art works has improved over the years, his participation in corporate advertising and ownership or operation of printing, design, and clothing companies really does go against the idea of street art as a resistant or transgressive force. After all, Fairey brands the world with the trademark of a successful artist and graphic designer, and leaves behind works that call advertising and other images into question. That he is largely unsuccessful in this endeavor is immaterial: Fairey has made a career and name for himself through the Obey Giant campaign, and his trajectory—from design school, to illegal street art, to "guerilla advertising," to successful commercial design—is a common route to success for many street artists.

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[37] Rob Walker, "Surface Effects," in *Supply and Demand*, 323

Swoon

Swoon, whose real name may or may not be Caledonia Curry, began her street art career in 1999 while enrolled in the painting program at the Pratt Institute. Her complex, life-size paper cutouts and prints depict a variety of different individuals and situations that populate New York City (Figure 3). The images—which often depict disenfranchised immigrants, workers, and homeless people—repopulate the city, converting actual and mobile citizens into static, two-dimensional objects. On one hand, the works draw attention to the plight of the urban poor, reminding viewers of the numerous struggles and fleeting moments of joy that people experience throughout everyday life in New York. On the other hand, the images reify the subjects, turning the actual pain, joy, alienation, and celebration experienced by the subjects into an opportunity for an aesthetic experience, in effect anesthetizing both the subject of the works and the viewing subject.[38] While this is an interesting (and, to a degree, accurate) assessment of Swoon's work, an examination of her artistic practice adds layers of complexity which seem to defy such simple critiques.

Swoon's production methods and materials— pierced paper and intaglio print processes on newspaper and recycled newsprint—leave the works vulnerable to wind, rain, sunlight, automobile exhaust, and many other environmental factors. This temporal aspect of the works echoes natural life. Just as humans age and ultimately decay, the works yellow, become brittle, and begin to flake off the wall (Figure 4). The works begin as a sort of imaginary citizenry, adding a sense of community and belonging to derelict city spaces. As the works decay, viewers are reminded of the passage of time, the life cycle, the invisibility of everyday life in the metropolis. Eventually, the works disappear altogether, much like the invisible population of homeless people, service workers, and others that comprise a large portion of every major city. Swoon's works remind viewers that everything changes and either becomes something new or disappears altogether: nothing lasts forever. Just like the actual people from which Swoon drew her inspiration, her street works have a life cycle and function as part of the New York City environment. "With the cutouts, because they have so many holes in them, there's a way in which they instantly become a part of the environment just by the virtue that the wall on which it's pasted creates the image. If you put a piece on a white wall, then you wouldn't even able to see it. The piece of paper is almost like blankness, and the wall creates what you can see."[39] The interactions between Swoon's prints, graf, and the support surface provide an interesting commentary on the relationships between graf (or street art), the built environment, and public space.

Graf, as a semi-permanent reclamation of visual space from state-supported corporate advertising, makes use of the support surface, much like cave painters made

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[38] I will return to this critique of Swoon's works, below.

[39] Swoon, quoted in Pitchaya Sudbanthad, "Paper Faces, Paper Cities," *The Morning News* (September 29, 2004). Available at http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/new_york_new_york/paper_faces_paper_cities.php

use of natural features of the rock, while also covering and obscuring the support. Swoon's pierced paper cutouts reveal the support and create a contingency in the work that is not present in graf and other forms of street art. The works rely both on viewers and on the support (the wall) for their visual impact: indeed, the works rely on the surface to create contrasts, shadows, and textures in the works. Carving into and cutting the prints displays a concern with what lies beneath and beyond the surface and reveals the fragility of human-made structures, revealing the limitations and artificiality of ownership, as well as the futility of attempts to reclaim public space from corporate and state control.

However, Swoon also participates in the art market, creating permanent and static versions of her street works for consumption by museums and wealthy collectors. Shows at Deitch Projects and lectures for the "Conversations with Contemporary Artists" series at MoMA lend art world credibility to her otherwise subversive artistic practice. With several works in MoMA's permanent collection, the impact of her street works changes, moving from an illegal and unsanctioned celebration of New York street life and culture, to a sort of unofficial museum exhibition. Despite their ephemerality, Swoon's street works take on a commercial character; despite their illegality, the works come to function as advertising for her museum and gallery shows rather than social commentary.

In an attempt to reclaim for her art some of the potential for resistance that was lost when the works moved into the art market, Swoon also participates in a number of artist collectives and community groups that work to return a sense of excitement to social life in advanced capitalism and counter some of the alienation faced by many residents of large urban centers. Before its demise in 2006, the Toyshop collective staged a variety of events: small, unsanctioned parades; street art tours throughout Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan; mud-wrestling events in Walter De Maria's *The New York Earth Room*; and many others. Like Swoon's artwork, the Toyshop collective worked to bring together the various facets of the New York metropolitan citizenry—tourists, the homeless, hipster urbanites and urban hipsters, business people, waitpersons, and others —in a celebration of everyday life and community participation. Additionally, in 2006, the Miss Rockaway Armada, conceived of by Swoon and composed of a melange of various art collectives, built a ramshackle, environmentally conscious flotilla which, between September of 2006 and September of 2007, floated down the Mississippi River from Minneapolis to St. Louis. Along the way, the group performed impromptu concerts, art exhibitions, and workshops with communities throughout the upper Mississippi valley. Taken together, Swoon's work with various collectives adds an element of legitimate community action to her artworks, which might otherwise be mere decoration for run-down areas of New York City and an extra attraction for tourists.

Much like the Situationists, though in a more lighthearted manner, Swoon's collective actions amount to sort of dérive, experimental behaviors that are linked to the conditions of urban life, and which return "the potential for absurd exuberance present in any given moment."[40] Taken together, Swoon's individual street works and collective

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[40] Swoon, "Artworker of the Week #40" *kultureflash*, available at http://www.kultureflash.net/archive/111/priview.html

actions work to reanimate the street by populating walls, panel trucks, and other surfaces with figures from the actual landscape, reimagined and aestheticized though they may be. For Swoon, her works and other forms of street art are "one of the strongest currents I see acting against the passive spectator culture that suffocates the imagination. Maybe our thought-marked walls are dirty and disorganized in contrast to the pleasingly predictable red and yellow of a McDonald's façade, but the latter can feel terribly alienating to me, while the other feels like home."[41] Though her works appear in art fairs, galleries, and museums, Swoon consistently and consciously works to combat the alienation of existence and commodification of identity that runs rampant in metropolises and advanced capitalism.

While Swoon gained some art world celebrity through her street works and collective actions, she has yet to achieve the level of financial success enjoyed by Shepard Fairey and others, due to her commitment to community action, and her resistance to the commodification and commercialization of her works. While she mounts exhibits with commercial galleries, she produces far more works for display (and decay) on the street, and, unlike Fairey, she foregoes most of the commercial graphic design commissions that come her way. She does, however, enjoy a great deal of notoriety in the museum world and has close ties to MoMA and other prominent museums and galleries. Like Fairey, Swoon began as an art student who took her works to the street, though, unlike Fairey, Swoon moved to the street to avoid turning her works into commodities, and to celebrate the temporality and decay afforded by existence on the street. From her street works, Swoon went on to form and participate in several artist collectives before finding fame (but not fortune) in the art world. This marks the second path that street artists traverse in their careers, and may be the most closely aligned with Situationism and other avant-garde groups that have interest in working with community-based groups to counteract alienation and celebrate everyday existence.

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[41] Swoon, in Pitchaya Sudbanthad,"Street Art: A Roundtable,"

Banksy

While Shepard Fairey may be the most successful graphic designer to emerge from illegal and unsanctioned street art, and while Swoon may be the street artist most closely aligned with Situationist and punk rock ideology, community engagement, and social activism, Banksy is undoubtedly the most successful artist, at least in terms of primary and secondary market value. At the "Banksy N.Y.C." show at Vanina Holasek Gallery in December of 2007, unsigned and unnumbered prints started at $4000, signed and numbered prints fetched from $12,000 to $90,000, and oil paintings and other original works fetched as much as $400,000. The show's curators chose to display the works in an extremely haphazard manner, with titles and prices scrawled in pencil directly on the wall (Figures 5 and 6). Spraypaint splatters and rubber rats (a ubiquitous image in Banksy's oeuvre) adorned various surfaces throughout the gallery, and many of the works were hung without removing the packing material. The haphazard arrangement of the show suggested gritty street life and a willful disregard for art world decorum. This is entirely in keeping with Banksy's attitude toward the art world: a 2007 print, *Morons*, depicts an auctioneer and several auction goers in the midst of a sale of what appears to be modern and contemporary art. The piece up for bid consists of a white canvas, onto which the artist has written "I can't believe you morons actually buy this shit." A print of this work sold at Sotheby's New York branch in 2007 for $6250, within the initial estimate of $5000 to $7000.[42] Despite similarities between Banksy's attitude and the arrangement of the show, Banksy had absolutely no connection with the gallery and the works on display were from the collections of a number of unnamed individuals. According to a small note affixed to the inside of the back cover which the logos of two popular beers— Budweiser Select and Stella Artois—"This catalogue represents works sourced over a period of time from private collections and is issued by the gallery in conjunction with the exhibition. The gallery and the contributers to this show do not represent Banksy."[43] According to Robin Barton, co-owner of the Bankrobber Gallery and the organizer of the show at Vanina Holasek, the exhibition provided visitors with an opportunity to experience the aura of early Banksy works. After all, "we don't expect people to come in off the streets and buy at these prices. We deal with the collectors separately."[44]

As noted above, Banksy's traditional works fare very well in the art market. Celebrities like Angelina Jolie and Keanu Reeves, art world insiders such as Damien Hirst, a variety of hedge funds pursue Banksy's works with fervor, and his (illegal and unsanctioned) street works also enjoy extreme popularity and value. For example, in 2007 the owners of a house in Bristol on which Banksy painted one of his last free-hand,

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[42] Another print of this work sold for £5250 ($10,412.18) in early 2008.

[43] *Banksy N.Y.C. 2007*, limited edition. New York: Vanina Holasek Gallery, in association with Bankrobber Productions, London, 2007.

[44] Claire Napier Galofaro, "NYC Gallery Tries to Out-Banksy Banksy," *Radar,* Dec. 5, 2007, http://radaronline.com/exclusives/2007/12/nyc-gallery-tries-to-outbanksy-banksy.php

non-stenciled works—a large illegal mural entitled "Click, Clack, Boom," from ca. 2003 —decided to put the work and the house up for sale through the Red Propeller gallery. According to Sarah Anslow, a co-owner of the gallery, "The people who own the house have decided to sell it but they've become frustrated as they've come close to exchanging contracts on several occasions only to find the prospective owners want to get rid of the mural. The owners consider it a work of art and want it kept as it is. They came to us to help sell it as a mural with a house attached."[45] The owners of other buildings on which other street works works appear have gone so far as to hire conservators to repaint faded sections of popular works, and others cover the works with plexiglass, varnish, and other materials to help protect the works from vandalism and damaging environmental effects.[46] Additionally, Bristol, England, (Banksy's hometown) cites his illegal (but now sanctioned) works as a major tourist draw and exempts his works from an otherwise strict graffiti removal program. However, other cities take a more traditional approach to street works by Banksy and others, citing James Q. Wilson and George Kelling's "Broken Windows" thesis, which, in its simplest iteration, holds that "ignoring the little problems —graffiti, litter, shattered glass—creates a sense of irreversible decline that leads people to abandon the community or to stay away."[47]

In 2007, painters employed by the London Underground buffed (cleaned, painted over, or otherwise removed) a popular mural depicting John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson in a modified scene from *Pulp Fiction*. According to a spokesman, "Transport for London takes takes a tough line on removing graffiti because it creates a general atmosphere of neglect and social decay which in turn encourages crime. We have no intention of changing this policy as it makes the transport system safer and more pleasant for passengers. We recognize that there are those who view Banksy's work as legitimate art, but sadly our graffiti removal teams are staffed by professional cleaners not professional art critics."[48] While Banksy's mural was undoubtedly illegal, local business owners appreciated its existence in that the mural encouraged passersby to linger for a moment before hurrying into a nearby London Underground station. According to George Thomas, the owner of a barber shop in the area, "It was a real draw to the area. People

[45] Canadian Broadcasting Center, "Banksy wall mural on the block, house thrown in for free," Feb. 11, 2007, http://www.cbc.ca/news/story/2007/02/11/banksy-mural-house.html. Unfortunately, before the gallery could sell the mural (and house), someone splashed red and black paint on it, destroying the work. For Sarah Anslow, this was a tragedy: "I'm absolutely devastated that this has happened. I feel really sad that something as important as this has been defaced. The whole point of the sale was to make sure Banksy's work was saved for posterity." Associated Newspapers Limited, "Banksy house art destroyed." *Metro*, April 27, 2007, http://www.metro.co.uk/news/article.html?in_article_id=46984&in_page_id=34

[46] See Jack Lefley, "Council Adds Own Touch to A Work By Banksy," *Evening Standard* (July 11, 2007), available at http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/arts/article-23419935-details/Council+adds+own+touch+to+a+work+by+Banksy/article.do

[47] Richard Morin, "A Crack in the Broken-Windows Theory," *The Washington Post*, (January 30, 2005) available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A46381-2005Jan29.html. See also James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, "Broken Windows" *The Atlantic Monthly* 249, No. 2 (March, 1982) 29-38, available at http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/198203/broken-windows

[48] Adam Stones, "Banksy's £300,000 film noir mural blacked out," *Telegraph.co.uk*, (April 24, 2007). Available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/04/20/nbanksy20.xml

used to come from all over to see it . . . . There is no way it could have been mistaken for graffiti. Whoever destroyed it is an idiot."[49] The disparity in these claims, one made by a state official and the other by a business owner, illustrates the ability of street art to exist as both illegal and sanctioned: illegal in the methods of production and display, and therefore treated as vandalism by the state; sanctioned by support from community groups, business owners, and some members of the public.

Not all community members are as appreciative of Banksy's illegal street works. In *Wall and Piece*, Banksy recounts two less than enthusiastic responses to his street art. In an email message sent to Banksy's website, Daniel asks Banksy to stop painting in the Hackney region of London: "My brother and me were born here and and have lived here all our lives but these days so many yuppies and students are moving here [that] neither of us can afford to buy a house where we grew up anymore [sic]. Your graffities [sic] are undoubtedly part of what makes these wankers think our area is cool. . . . Do us all a favour and go do your stuff somewhere else. . . ."[50] Additionally, while painting the segregation wall in Palestine, an elderly gentleman who happened to be passing by said, "You paint the wall, you make it look beautiful. . . . We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall, go home."[51] In both instances, objections to Banksy's works arise from the aestheticization of of areas and surfaces: for Daniel, Banksy's street works help to bring about gentrification; for the old man, the works beautify a structure designed to segregate his community. In both cases, a split occurs between people who admire street art for its aesthetic merit or economic value, and those who despise street art for virtually the same reasons. The state reflects this split in that many cities continue to eradicate graf, while simultaneously sanctioning and protecting works by prominent street artists.

Banksy seems to enjoy this dual nature of his artistic practice and tends to exploit the illegal and sanctioned nature of street art through the creation of works that challenge established social, political, and cultural norms, and the documentation of official and public reactions. Beyond the already mentioned *Morons* print, which lampoons the thriving market for traditional art works by street artists, Banksy also infiltrated several well-known art museums in London, Paris, and New York, where he surreptitiously added drawings, paintings, and sculptures to their collections. The works tended to be appropriate to the museum in which they were hung and Banksy included official-looking placards that give the usual information about the works—title, artist, medium, date, description, accession date, and catalogue number—though the descriptions tended to contain an ironic or silly undertone. Many of these 'gifts'—unsanctioned additions to the museum collection—remain ensconced in the collections of major museums including the Tate Modern, the British Museum, the Louvre, MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. For *Discount Soup Can*, added to the MoMA

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[49] ibid.

[50] Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, (London: Random House UK, 2005), 20

[51] ibid. 116. Banksy was the first street artist to paint the Segregation wall. Since his visit, many other graf writers and street artists have added their works to the wall. The Israeli government seems unconcerned about this development at present.

collection in 2005, Banksy created a silkscreen reminiscent of Andy Warhol's famous soup cans, replacing the Campbell's Soup label with one from a discount brand of Cream of Tomato Soup. This work went unnoticed for six days before being removed by museum officials.[52] While some of the works, like *Discount Soup Can*, were original drawings, paintings, or sculpture, in many cases Banksy procured works by anonymous artists and updated them with illustrations, symbols, and objects that add humor to the works and comment on current social and political situations. Works installed in the Metropolitan Museum and Brooklyn Museum consisted of paintings that Banksy purchased in flea markets around London and modified with simple stenciled images to create some sort of commentary on contemporary life. This method of production seems reminiscent of the Situationist use of *détournement*, especially Asger Jorn's *Modifications* and *Nouvelles défigurations*, though some obvious differences exist in the technique and theoretical underpinnings of the works.

Jorn's *détourned* paintings comment on the need for new (situationist) ways of thinking about art, culture, and society, and advocate the updating of old art objects devalued by the passage of time and changing cultural mores. For Jorn and the Situationists, the process of updating old paintings and sculpture results in new, modern works that reflect contemporary attitudes, thereby returning or adding cultural and economic value to a work that otherwise may have been forgotten or relegated to the dust bin. In *Mater Profana* (Figure 7), for example, Jorn took a rather clumsily painted Madonna and Child that he found in a Paris flea market and added his signature swirls and ghostly forms to create a valuable piece of modern art. Today, similar works occupy museum and private collections throughout Europe and rarely appear on the market.[53]

Banksy's defaced paintings also comment on social situations, though in a more direct manner. In general, Banksy makes only slight adjustments to the original image, though these minor changes in content result in vast changes in interpretation. In *Silent Night* (Figure 8), for example, Banksy added an iPod to a staid image of the Madonna and Child, creating a rather obvious commentary on commercial culture and the commodification of religious imagery and traditions. A great deal more of the original painting is visible in Banksy's update of the classic image than in Jorn's *détourned* work, and the addition of an iPod, while incongruous, blends in well with the religious imagery. Where Jorn's modifications alter the formal qualities of the original works to reflect Modern aesthetic and art historical trends, Banksy's vandalized oil paintings transform the content to create expressions of his social and political views, and to draw attention to the social, cultural, political, and economic structures at work in the twenty-first century. The resulting images are sometimes banal and sometimes poignant, but always display a

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[52] Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 149. Other reports claim the work was discovered and removed after three days. See http://www.woostercollective.com/2005/03/a_wooster_exclusive_banksy_hit.html and http://artobsrved.com/banksy-does-new-york/

[53] Since 2000, only one of Jorn's *détourned* paintings has appeared on the market, in a sale of Modern and Contemporary art at Sotheby's in Milan. The painting, *Conte du Nord*, 1959, fetched € 102,250 ($160,137.23).

certain dry humor that often serves to belie the seriousness of the situations on which the works comment.

This is apparent in *Silent Night*, where the holy family has been reduced to an advertisement for a popular digital music player. In *Discount Soup Can*, the content is equally transparent, but more complex: the transformation of Warhol's iconic celebration of commercial culture into a wry commentary on the distinction between high and low art also serves to comment on the museum system and urban economic conditions. Where Warhol transformed the everyday into fine art, Banksy went one step further, transforming the most inexpensive and rudimentary product into an unsanctioned work of fine art. According to Banksy, "We the people affect the making and the quality of most of our culture, but not our art. The Art we look at is made by only a select few. A small group create, promote, purchase, exhibit and decide the success of Art. Only a few hundred people in the world have any real say. When you go to an Art gallery you are simply a tourist looking at the trophy cabinet of a few millionaires."[54] By placing his works in museums without an invitation from curators and others, Banksy claims to be democratizing the museum and gallery system. This echoes the classic claim made by graf writers and street artists since the early 1970s, that graf (and, by extension, street art) serves as an antidote to the advertisements that occupy the public sphere. However, given the market for his traditional art works, it seems that Banksy has become one of the "few hundred people" who have some influence over the artworks that hang in galleries and museums.

Despite his popularity and art world successes, however, Banksy remains largely unknown outside of a few assistants and gallerists, and his street works continue to exist as an antidote both to traditional advertisements and the gallery and museum system, albeit an antidote with some side-effects. As Banksy continues his work on the street, people need not visit galleries, pay admission fees to museums, or purchase his works in order to enjoy them first hand. Viewers lucky enough to live in one of the communities that protect his street works have an advantage here, in that their favorite works are available in perpetuity and there are many other works to enjoy. Residents of locales where there are few or no extant street works by Banksy have less opportunity to view his works firsthand, and in this way claims that street art wrests control of artistic production and aesthetic enjoyment from the hands of specialists and institutions becomes more interesting.

Though museums and other cultural institutions exist in virtually every large city, access to such places is limited by proximity and the ability (or desire) to pay admission fees. Though communities require no admission fees for viewing street art, people must live relatively close by if they are to take advantage of the viewing opportunities, and must also have some the leisure to pursue their chosen form of aesthetic appreciation. Viewers must know the location of street art objects they want to view and have the desire to travel to unfamiliar and, perhaps, dangerous areas where street art is commonly found, and therefore, like regular museum goers, committed street art viewers occupy a

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[54] Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 144.

small percentage of the overall population. However—and also like traditional art forms, especially public sculpture and state-sanctioned murals—most citizens of large urban centers are exposed to street art every day, whether or not they attend to the art works as they move through their daily lives. In both cases—traditional museums and public spaces—some viewers are intimidated by the cultural and social conditions that surround the art works and their location, as well as the forces at work in the creation and display of traditional artworks and illegal and (un)sanctioned street art. Interestingly, the qualities of street art—ephemerality, danger, illegality, site-specificity, and so on—that exclude some people are exactly the qualities that contribute to the gentrification of popular street art sites and allow the entry of street art into the art world.

In the early 1980s, the art world elite were drawn to Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring due to the danger and street-level credibility exuded by their early artistic endeavors on the streets of lower Manhattan. Similar conditions surround the art world acceptance of Shepard Fairey, Swoon, and Banksy, though the streets where their works exist are generally much safer and cleaner than the Manhattan of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The art market at that time brought art critics and wealthy collectors to areas of Manhattan where artists and fledgling galleries could rent inexpensive studio and exhibition spaces. This process continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and today, people flock to Williamsburg and DUMBO for the newly-renovated loft spaces and organic coffee shops that exist next to rapidly disappearing warehouses, ethnic communities, and bars that cater to working-classes and immigrants. The gentrification of these and other areas near Manhattan—and this process applies to urban centers worldwide—results from rising levels of education and wages enjoyed by some people and afforded by the worldwide movement of capital in the age of advanced capitalism. As property values in urban centers rise, middle class and emerging professionals move to outlying areas, renovate properties, and encourage upscale merchants to move into the area, thereby forcing immigrants, lower-middle and working-class groups, and others to other areas of the city. This process is largely self-replicating and an effect of simple supply and demand economics: as the demand for property in a particular neighborhood rises, supply declines and prices rise. As supplies dwindle, developers create new supplies—in the form of renovated warehouses and tenements—in nearby areas, thereby increasing demand for property in those areas, and leading to rising prices and declining supplies. At the same time, the new, middle-class residents demand certain amenities: coffee shops and grocery stores; nightclubs, bars, and entertainment venues; upscale clothing and furniture retailers. Developers cater to the tastes of the incoming population, and employ a variety of techniques to attract wealthy residents. For example, Urban Green, a condominium development in Williamburg that offers a variety of floor plans ranging from 530 square foot studios (priced at $430,000) to three bedroom, 1,732 square foot penthouses (priced at $1,575,000), features part of an illegal, yet completely sanctioned Banksy mural on its website (see Fiture 9). "Williamsburg has long attracted a vast range of people from Manhattan and across the city—artists, executives, entrepreneurs, and families live side by side. Rich in history and constantly evolving, it is New York City's most exciting destination. A wide array of galleries, restaurants, and

boutiques offer something for every taste."[55] The Banksy work appears as part of a photo-montage that illustrates the tastes to which Urban Green's developers appeal: a young white woman reclines near the East River with a view of the Manhattan skyline in the background; a young white girl skips rope in the Banksy mural; and white couples enjoy dinner at an upscale Japanese restaurant. The "something for every taste" refers back to the Urban Green's target population—artists, executives, entrepreneurs, and (wealthy, white) families—and makes no mention of the Dominican and Puerto Rican populations that also exist, at least traditionally, in Williamsburg. Urban Green's deployment of the Banksy mural to sell condominiums illustrates Daniel's claim, above, that Banksy's street works contribute to gentrification. Despite the fact that the condominiums, as yet, consist of a large hole at 142 North Sixth Street (construction has been at a standstill since March of 2007), most of the available condominiums have been sold.[56] While it is unlikely that the inclusion of Banksy's mural in Urban Green's promotional materials contributed to the sale of all of these properties, certainly some of the buyers of the condominiums were attracted by the safe, clean, hip, and urban—but still raw and edgy—characterization of the neighborhood provided by the inclusion of Banksy's work in the advertisement.

Untitled (Electric Kids), the work chosen for the Urban Green advertisement, depicts a young girl, jumping rope with a bright green line of paint (Figure 10). The image is a detail of a much larger untitled work from 2006, now destroyed, which was the only Banksy street work in New York City at that time. The bright green jumprope extends along the ground, past an empty storefront and runs up the wall to an electrical box where a young boy attempts to engage a switch that will apply power to the cable and electrocute his playmate. In its entirety, the mural presents a humorous take on intimate relationships—what David Bowie might call "Modern Love"—rather than the safe, bourgeois lifestyle and carefree play of childhood suggested by the procrustean employment of the detail in Urban Green's photomontage.

Banksy's success in the art market, the support for his illegal street works from businesses and communities, and the advertising industry's willingness to capitalize on Banksy's street credibility confirm him as the most successful artist to emerge from street art. Like Swoon, he also participates in a variety of community actions, and like Shepard Fairey he takes on graphic design commissions, including a poster for Greenpeace and the cover for Blur's "Think Tank" album. However, Banksy is neither a community activist, nor a graphic designer: the thrust of his artistic practice lies in creating illegal works of street art for public display and traditional art works for sale to wealthy individuals and museums. Put simply, Banksy is an artist. Despite similarities in their production methods and illegal street art activities, the three street artists at issue here—Shepard Fairey, Swoon, and Banksy—are quite different in their approach to artistic creation and occupy different positions in the art world. If Fairey is essentially a graphic

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[55] Urban Green, "Williamsburg," http://urbangreencondos.com/. In December, 2006, The Banksy mural became one of the Splasher group's earliest targets.

[56] see http://www.prudentialelliman.com/MainSite/NHD/NHDInfo.aspx?id=217&loc=0&PageName=residences. Accessed 17 March 2008.

designer, Swoon is a community activist and Banksy is an easel painter. Despite the clear differences between the content and reception of their works, the artists share a progressive political stance and a tendency to decry their art world successes, while happily accepting thousands of dollars for their works. They also claim that economic success provides further opportunities to create illegal art in the public sphere. For their detractors, street art amounts to nothing more than vandalism—there is no difference between graf and street art. Civic groups and state agencies throughout the world continue to buff popular and valuable street art works with the same vigor used to remove the simplest graffiti. As critiques of street art, these state responses are reductive and simplistic, inasmuch as they ignore the aesthetic, cultural, and economic value of the works. However, the Splasher group offers a critique of street art that provides a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. While responses to the group provide a window into the street art community, an analysis of their writings shows direct links to the Situationists and other groups and points to the failure of the Splasher group to bring about any lasting changes in the production and reception of street art.

The Splasher Group

Though the Splasher group began their campaign in late 2006, the earliest responses to the group appeared in January of 2007, on popular street art and urban culture blogs—such as imnotsayin.blogspot.com, gothamist.com, and curbed.com—and in a short article in *The New York Times*. In general, early coverage of the group consists either of rudimentary and inaccurate analyses of their actions and writings or simple reportage, and few authors take the group seriously. The first report of the Splashers activities appeared on January 17th, on "I'm not sayin, I'm just sayin," a blog centered around Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The author gave a limited account of the Splasher's activities to date, included a transcript of one of the Splashers' communiqués, titled "Art: The Excrement Of Action," and presented a short analysis of the group.

> ART: THE EXCREMENT OF ACTION
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> A Dadaist once smashed a clock, dipped the pieces in ink, pressed the ink-soaked pieces against a sheet of paper and had it framed. His purpose was to criticize the modernist idealization of efficiency. Rather than inspiring the widespread smashing of clocks and the reevaluation of time in society, the piece of paper has become a sought-after commodity. The production of a representative organ (the ink-imprinted paper) for the action (the smashing of the clock) guaranteed this outcome. Like an idealistic politician, the piece of paper, despite its creator's intent, can only represent, and it is for this reason that it instantly became a fetishized object segregated from the action. Only in a culture obsessed with its own excrement are the by-products of action elevated above action itself. Representation is the most elemental form of alienation. Art as representation is no exception. It is just another means by which our perceptions and desires are mediated. Art is the politician of our senses: it creates actors and an audience, agents and a mass. True creativity is the joyful destruction of this hierarchy; it is the unmediated actualization of desires. The passion for destruction is a creative passion. We are all capable of manifesting our desires directly, free of representation and commodification. We will continue manifesting ours by euthanizing your bourgeois fad.[57]

Based on this document and the Splasher group's actions, as well as some limited research into Dada (via Wikipedia), the author of "I'm not sayin" concluded the post with two largely rhetorical questions: "Are the Williamsburg Dadaists. . . acting for actions' sake and 'living in the moment,' railing against their contemporaries need for physical evidence of their achievement? Or are they guilty of leaving behind their own excrement?"[58] In order to understand the author's point an examination of the document itself is needed.

"Art: The Excrement Of Action" is based around an essay by Jeanette Winterson titled "Product is the Excrement of Action," an anarchist- and marxist-inspired work that

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[57] The Splasher Group, "Art:The Excrement of Action," reprinted in *if we did it,* 7

[58] "Williamsburg Graffiti War Rages On; Dadist Manifesto as Rationale for Destruction," from *I'm not sayin, I'm just sayin*, (Jan. 17, 2007). http://imnotsayin.blogspot.com/2007/01/williamsburg-graffiti-war-rages-on.html

outlines Winterson's views on contemporary life. Basically, for Winterson, life under advanced capitalism is oriented toward the future and obsessed with the production of things. Rather than enjoying existence in the present, people work toward some goal—a paycheck, an academic degree, retirement—and exchange joy in the present for some future reward. In other words capitalism encourages people to convert existence and pleasure into material goods. For Winterson, artists exemplify this state of affairs, "for their vocation itself depends on making products out of the raw material of real-life experience."[59]

In "Art: the Excrement of Action," the Splasher group extends Winterson's argument to street art which, like the Dada work they reference in the opening line —"Alarm clock I," a 1919 work by Francis Picabia, which served as the illustration for the title page of *Dada* 4-5[60]—failed to bring about any lasting changes in the art world or advanced capitalism. Just as Picabia's work is now a commodity—a copy of *Dada* 4-5 is in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.—street art has also become a precious commodity and is therefore incapable of resisting capitalism or the art world. It seems obvious that Splashers intend to set themselves apart from Dada and other early twentieth century avant-garde groups.

The misreading of the Splasher group's communiqué, while inexcusable, is understandable to an extent, since the group's writings display a rather thorough knowledge of art history and theory which many readers of their works may not share. Comments left by the readers of the various blog posts concerning the Splashers bear this out. According to "JW" the Splasher group's writings amount to "pseudo-intellectual horse shit. . . they read a couple of books and know some fancy words and are able to knit together some seemingly interesting theory. . . ."[61] An anonymous commenter at Curbed.com added "Art writing: The excrement of a failed education system. Seriously-read the poster. Its [sic] a mass of SAT vocab [sic] words strewn together in such a way as to have absolutely no meaning. That takes skill and effort- the tiniest of mistakes, and your reader might actually find meaning in your words."[62] While the Splasher's readers might benefit from simpler vocabulary and sentence structure, the Splashers project virtually demands obfuscatory language. Inasmuch as the group intends their project to point to the complexities surrounding attempts to resist capitalism—and this is certainly one of their aims—their use of language reflects the seriousness of the situation: "Our

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[59] Jeanette Winterson, "Product is the Excrement of Action," available at http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/ days/product.php. While Winterson's essay is interesting, this is not the place to examine her theory in detail.

[60] The National Gallery of Art provides a reproduction of this work on its website. http://www.nga.gov/ exhibitions/2006/dada/images/artwork/202-489.shtm

[61] JW, comment left March 9, 2007, in response to Jake Dobkin's post "Against Streetart: Tale of the Paint Splasher," on Gothamist.com, (Jan. 23, 2007). http://gothamist.com/2007/01/23/against_streeta.php

[62] Anonymous, comment left in response to "Williamsburg Graffiti War Escalates, Dada Invoked," Curbed.com (Jan. 18, 2007). http://curbed.com/archives/2007/01/18/ williamsburg_graffiti_war_escalates_dada_invoked.php

language is difficult only to the extent that our situation is."[63] This amounts to a sort of *détournement* in that, through the use of difficult language, the group distances itself from the object of its critique and reverses the prevailing view of street art as an art that is accessible to everyone. "The device of *détournement* restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths—or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies. . . . The defining characteristic of this use of *détournement* is the necessity for *distance* to be maintained toward whatever has been turned into an official verity."[64] Street art is just such a "critical judgment" that has lost its subversive qualities and "congealed into a respectable truth." Through the destruction, or *détournement*, of works by popular and prominent artists, the Splashers return some of the subversive resistance that street art lost in its move to the gallery, museum, and advertisement worlds.

Part of the charm of street art lies in its ephemerality and transience. When street art works move into the museum and gallery, the ephemerality is lost and the works become static, unchanging, and permanent. Even though works by Shepard Fairey, Swoon, and Banksy continue to exist on the street, the fact that similar—in some cases identical—works by these artists exist in galleries, museums, and private homes changes the meaning of works on the street. The street works become commodities and their ephemerality looses its charm: a few scraps of rotting paper are virtually worthless, even if these scraps were once a part of a print by a famous street artist. Due to the popularity and market value of some street art, cities, neighborhood associations, and other groups work to protect works by Banksy and other prominent street artists. Other individuals and groups remove the works and auction them for charity or for profit. For example, Network Rail—the owner and operator of Britain's rail infrastructure—issued its "maintenance crews with photographs of Banksy's work, so if they come across it, they'll recognise [sic] it for what it is. We will then try and remove it if at all possible and auction it for charity."[65] The Splashers *détourne* valuable street works, returning ephemerality to the works, reminding viewers of the fragility and transience of street art, and removing any perceived or potential profit from the works. The Splashers also work to remove potential value from their splashings and writings, though they are not entirely successful in this attempt.

At the bottom of each communiqué the Splashers included a short statement that alerts viewers to a danger involved in removing the document and transforming in into a commodity: "Warning: The removal of this document may result in injury, as we have mixed the wheatpaste with tiny shards of glass."[66] If it is even possible to mix tiny shards

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[63] The Splasher Group, "When a wise man points at the moon, the fool looks at the finger," *if we did it*, 11

[64] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 206, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 144, emphasis in the original.

[65] quoted in Patrick Sawer, "Rail Workers Paint Over Banksy Art," *The Evening Standard* (February 2, 2007). http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/arts/article-23385476-details/Rail+workers+paint+over+Banksy+art/article.do

[66] The Splasher Group, "Art: The Excrement Of Action," reprinted in *if we did it*, 7

of glass into wheatpaste, and whether or not such shards would be of sufficient size to cause injury is immaterial: the warning invokes the group's desire to remain within a resistant and discursive, yet viable practice that exists outside of the realm of commodities. Where some viewers of street art remove and preserve works by Banksy and others, with the warning in place, Splasher sympathizers might think twice before removing their written works for posterity (or for sale in the market). The warning amounts to another use of *détournement*, in that a simple piece of copy paper, wheatpasted to a wall takes on a dangerous character, thereby widening the distance between the Splasher group and street art admirers. In theory, this move helps restore subversive potential to street art.

Throughout their writings, the Splashers invoke a variety of resistant and subversive groups. In the first section of *if we did it*, the Splasher group discusses the manifesto and its preparation: "With our appropriation of certain texts, we have given new meaning and improved antiquated works. Plagiarism is necessary; progress implies it."[67] This statement comes directly from Thesis 207 of Debord's 1967 work *The Society of the Spectacle*, which reads, in part, "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author's phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas."[68] This idea of plagiarism as a necessary part of progress is a favorite of many anarchist groups, and constitutes a sort of resistant practice in that plagiarism violates not only copyright laws, but also the ideas of originality and ownership that dominate modern thought and contemporary culture. In eschewing ownership and originality, a door to individuality opens: this is part of Winterson's argument in her "Product is the Excrement of Action." Originality and ownership are, in some sense, oriented toward the future and require constant attention to ensure that they remain viable. This leads to a situation where people are no longer concerned with individual pleasure and action in the present, since the present is constantly occupied by worries about the future. Due to her celebration of the present and rejection of capitalist rhetoric, Winterson's article is quite popular among anarchists and similar activist groups and the Splasher group's deployment of Winterson is no accident.

A strong anarchist thread exists in certain areas of the street art community—most notably in the Visual Resistance collective (justseeds.org), which sponsors a variety of street art and community action initiatives, and has links to Swoon's community activism. In general, Visual Resistance sponsors local and national projects that have a direct impact on or benefit to individual communities. For example, a project called Ghost Bikes memorializes bicyclists that were killed by motorists in urban areas throughout the

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[67] The Splasher Group, "The Point is to Produce Ourselves, Rather than the Things that Enslave Us," *if we did it*, 2

[68] Guy Debord, *The Spectacle*, 145. This oft-quoted passage of *The Spectacle* was itself plagiarized from Isidore Ducasse, otherwise known as the Comte de Lautéamont. In the second book of his *Poésies*, Lautéamont wrote "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It closely grasps an author's sentence, uses his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one." Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror & the complete works of the Comte de Lautréamont*, trans. Alexis Lykiard. (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994) 240.

United States and Canada.[69] Other Visual Resistance projects, such as Street Art Workers, are designed to reclaim "our cities and towns from the businessmen, cops and politicians who define public space for their own benefit."[70] The Splasher group comes out of this anarchist trend in street art, though the Splashers broke with other anarchist groups due to ideological differences, which an unnamed member of the Splasher group discusses in "Interview with Myself: On the Subject of Street Art and Its Destruction." According to this Splasher, street art

> found its way into the practice and aesthetic of the anarchist community. . . . I found this to be an exceptionally disturbing trend for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, there seemed to be no acknowledgment whatsoever that street art is a bourgeois-sponsored rebellion. The effect of that sponsorship was to channel a lot of anger and energy into an activity that was both utterly impotent politically and fantastically lucrative for everyone involved. . . . It makes sense though that street art would be taken up in parts of the anarchist scene: as a specialized activity, it serves the interests of some anarchists just as well as it serves the capitalists.[71]

Here, the Splashers point to a dual function of street art. On one hand, street art is a practice that resists the hegemonic and capitalist structures that form the art world. The placement of art works in the streets provides access to the works that would otherwise be limited to museums or galleries. On the other hand, street art is "fantastically lucrative," though not necessarily "for everyone involved," as the Splashers claim. While works by Shepard Fairey and Banksy are extremely profitable, Swoon rarely sells her works and pours any profits she receives from the sale of traditional art works into the community action groups of which she is a member.

As noted above, Swoon is the street artist most closely aligned with Situationist, anarchist, and punk rock ideologies, and uses her fame and limited wealth to participate in community engagement and social activism. As such, her works seem to be an odd target for the splashings. As the least commercially successful street artist (among those discussed here), Swoon presents a career path quite different from the ones chosen by Shepard Fairey and Banksy. Her community activism—with groups like the Miss Rockaway Armada, Toyshop, and others—presents a form of street art that, in some sense, resists commodification, despite the celebration of her works in the art world. Due to her participation in such groups, Swoon is lauded by various anarchist groups, and the destruction of her works led members of Visual Resistance and other anarchist groups to denounce and ridicule the Splashers and their project.

In comment posted in response to one of the early blog reports of the Splasher group, k, a member of Visual Resistance, claims that the group's actions "insult true

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[69] for more information, see Ghostbikes.org

[70] Street Art Workers, "Mission Statement," streetartworkers.org;

[71] The Splasher Group, "Interview with Myself: On the Subject of Street Art and Its Destruction," in *if we did it*, 3-4

revolutionaries working for self-determination that suffer real consequences."[72] K explains that one of the Splasher's early targets, a work by Swoon depicting a woman sewing a soccer ball (Figures 11 and 12), "is of a woman that is involved in a TRUE struggle for autonomy and liberation from Capital. This portrait made of a woman who lives in Oaxaca is being used to raise consciousness about the uprising and movement of the APPO, (Popular Assembly for the People of Oaxaca)."[73] K obviously has some specialized knowledge of Swoon's work which many viewers may not share. Without a specialized knowledge of the struggles faced by Oaxacan workers, viewers are left with only the beauty and skill displayed in Swoon's printmaking. The Splashers, however, share the specialized knowledge of this particular work by Swoon, though they feel that Swoon fails to effectively communicate the struggles faced by her subjects. Instead, the image reifies the Oaxacan woman, converting her struggle into an object of aesthetic enjoyment. As noted above, this is one of the strongest critiques of Swoon's work.

> In [Swoon's] pieces, the figures appear as if they are involved in their own private struggles, in which we, as spectators, have no relevance, and they do not desire our participation beyond merely consuming or looking at them. It is a portrayal of the poverty of everyday life as strong, hopeful, and in no need of the recognition of our own position, the spectator, in this vicious process of economic production. . . . Instead, we are rescued by the aesthetically pleasing portrayals of the poor that entail a cultural consumption worthy of our appreciation of city life. Caledonia [Swoon] has succeeded in making even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably preferred manner, into an object of enjoyment. . . .
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> While the attitude of the work, or what Caledonia [Swoon] is seeking to express, includes an element of social commentary and is even seeking to bring these struggles into our consciousness, what she fails to express is her own position in this same process. By failing to identify her own social position as a producer, or the commonality between her and those she depicts, the Oaxacan women are left with no relevance to our own position in what might have been identified as a similar struggle under the encroaching umbrella of capitalist hierarchisms. . . .
>
> It is from this perspective that Caledonia is revealed to be recuperating the poverties of everyday life in order to propel the success of her own art career and further enforce her own position, as an artist, in the social hierarchy that constitutes the cultural sphere.[74]

This critique of Swoon's work points to the potential for viewers to view her characters as archetypes rather than actual individuals with specific histories. For viewers unfamiliar with the plight of Oaxacan workers, the image of the woman sewing a soccer ball might appear to be an image of a grandmother sewing a sweater: a variety of interpretations are available, and any story involving a woman and sewing is equally valid. While Swoon's street works repopulate New York City with a cast of characters from everyday life, made

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[72] posted to "Street Art Splashings Provoke Debate," Gothamist.com (Jan. 24, 2007) http://gothamist.com/2007/01/24/street_art_spla.php,

[73] ibid

[74] The Splasher Group, "Abilities of Capital through Street Art," *if we did it*, 5

into static, unmoving, yet ephemeral entities, the actual people from whom Swoon drew her inspiration have no real importance for viewers unaware of the stories that lie behind the works. The struggles faced in everyday life are removed by the conversion of actual struggles and peoples into works of art, whether such art works are legal, illegal, sanctioned, or unsanctioned. While Swoon is an excellent printmaker, capable of producing works of great beauty and complexity, her street works have no inherent value as social commentary, and cannot provide the subjects of the work with dignity or recognition. However, the same things can be said of the Splasher group.

While the Splasher group works in opposition to street art, transforming or destroying valued and valuable street art works and forcing a reexamination of the street art phenomenon, at the same time, the splashings contain obvious aesthetic and art-historical qualities, linking the splashings to several twentieth century art styles and movements. The Splasher group's process and the formal qualities of the splashings recall the drips and violent brushwork found in the works of Jackson Pollock, Franz Klein, Robert Motherwell, and other Abstract Expressionists. While the group intended the splashings to be destructive, in many cases they created aesthetically pleasing juxtapositions between the original works, the splashed paint, and the earlier faded and decaying works of graf and street art that also cover the wall. In "On the Splasher," Matt Shaer clarifies the aesthetic value of the splashings (Figures 13 and 14)

> The scene was riveting for its purity of purpose, and also for its dramatic appeal: the Splasher had matched the earthy tones of the original artwork with his own paint, and created a convergence of tone. How different, in the end were these two artists, layered on atop another, in messy, riotous pastiche? Across the street, at a distance of several yards, I framed the wall on the viewfinder of my camera and found I couldn't pick up where the original ended and the Splasher began.[75]

The aestheticization of the splashings links back to the 'pop-Situationism' of Malcolm MacLaren and Jamie Reid. By ignoring the Splasher group's intent and focusing instead on the beautiful convergences, the "messy, riotous pastiche," the group's project is undermined, reified, and converted into another instance of street art. However, Shaer's reading of the splashings has merit: in some cases the splashings really are quite stimulating, even beautiful. Through their employment of street art materials and techniques, the Splasher group unwittingly became street artists, adding beauty to the urban environment. This critique of the Splasher group is quite powerful and forms the basis for Sam Anderson's evaluation of the group and their activities:

> the most damning irony of the Splasher is that, in critiquing the bourgeois fad of modern street art, he harnessed the same machinery of self-promotion used by the most mercenary artists . . . and in doing so, he became more famous than most of his targets as well as the ultimate guerrilla-marketing campaign for street art's spring 2007 season. His critique of branding, in other words, achieved

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[75] Matt Shaer, "On the Splasher," Hardcorbeau http://www.hardcorbeau.com/?page_id=332

admirable market penetration. His critique of commodification has itself become
a commodity.[76]

This represents one of the Splasher group's failures: beautiful splashings are antithetical to the group's project, and force their actions into an unwanted affinity with street art. Other failures become apparent in the group's writings, which borrow heavily from several late-1960s activist groups.

Near the end of "The Point is to Produce Ourselves, Rather than the Things that Enslave Us," the introductory essay to *if we did it*, the Splashers again borrow liberally from the SI. "Surrealism, in the heyday of its assault against the oppressive order of culture and daily life, could appropriately define its arsenal as *poetry without poems if necessary*; for us, it is now a matter of a poetry *necessarily* without poems. Realizing poetry means nothing less than creating events that seek to abolish the dominant socio-economic culture of commodities."[77] This passage echoes a portion of "All the King's Men," an anonymous essay published in *Internationale Situationniste* 8, of 1963, but with a few changes.

The original quote reads "whereas surrealism in the heyday of its assault against the oppressive order of culture and daily life could appropriately define its arsenal as 'poetry without poems if necessary,' for the SI it is now a matter of a poetry *necessarily* without poems. . . . Realizing poetry means nothing less than simultaneously and inseparably creating events and their language."[78] Here, the Splashers made slight changes to the original that entirely alter the meaning and render the deployment of Situationist theories virtually impossible. Where Situationist poetry amounts to a *détournement* that is composed both of events and language, Splasher poetry attempts to abolish the dominant culture of street art. Situationist poetry is possible: it exists throughout *détournement*, *dérive*, and psychogeography, all of which are easily achieved by virtually anyone, at any time, and with few tools, if any. Splasher poetry, on the other hand, is largely impossible: due to the ideological and legal underpinnings of society and the economy, the creation of "events that seek to abolish the dominant socio-economic culture of commodities" is doomed to failure. This is the second failure in their project. Put simply, they tried to do too much.

In another of their communiqués, "Avant Garde: Advanced Scouts for Capital," the Splashers conclude with "Revolutionary creativity does not shock or entertain the bourgeoisie, it destroys them. Our struggle cannot be hung on walls. Destroy the

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[76] Sam Anderson, "The Vandalism Vandal," *New York* Magazine. (May 28, 2007), http://nymag.com/news/features/32388/. At the time Anderson was writing this piece, reporters were largely unaware that the splashings were perpetrated by a group.

[77] The Splasher Group, "The Point is to Produce Ourselves," *if we did it*, 2. Emphasis in the original.

[78] Situationist International, "All the King's Men," in Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 151

museums, in the streets and everywhere."[79] This statement has links to Italian Futurism,[80] but comes directly from the first issue *Black Mask*, a magazine put out by the anarcho-activist group of the same name. "DESTROY THE MUSEUMS . . . our struggle cannot be hung on walls."[81] Black Mask, later known as Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, was an activist group that performed a variety of actions in New York City between late-1966 and the early 1970s. According to Ben Morea, Black Mask

> saw a need to change everything, from the way we lived to the way we thought, to even the way we ate. Total Revolution was our way of saying that we weren't going to settle for political or cultural change, but that we wanted it all, we wanted everything to change. Western society had reached a stalemate and needed a total overhaul. We knew that wasn't going to happen, but that was our demand, what we were about.[82]

While Black Mask's project, like that of the Splasher group, was impossibly utopian— Total Revolution of all spheres of human life can not succeed without the support of the political, cultural, and social spheres—they acknowledged this impossibility and carried on anyway in the hopes that their actions would seep into the public consciousness and ultimately alter the course of human society. To this end, they worked with anyone who shared even the slightest affinity with the group, thereby bringing together disparate groups to work on a common project.[83] While the Splashers are obviously familiar with Black Mask, and while their project exists in a genealogy of resistance that includes the Situationists, Black Mask, and other groups (the Danish Solvognen theatre group comes immediately to mind), the Splasher group excluded other anarchist and socially active groups that might otherwise share affinities with the Splashers.

Through the alienation of anarchist groups and other potential collaborators, the Splashers isolated themselves into extinction: they took Debord's demand for distance toward the object of critique a bit too far. Though the anarchist groups that unquestioningly support street art as a form of resistance should question the effectiveness of art in social change, especially given the market value of works by Banksy and others, they have an edge on the Splashers in that they seek out collaborators and affinity groups in order to achieve their goals. Without the support of a broad range of like-minded individuals and groups, any cultural or social movement is bound to fail. Even if the Splasher group's project had been of manageable size—and it was not: the transformation of an entire cultural movement, even one as relatively young as street art,

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[79] reprinted in *if we did it*, 12

[80] see F. T. Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 286

[81] Black Mask, frontspiece for *Black Mask* 1, (Nov. 1966), reprinted in Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland, *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority*. (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2007), 162

[82] Ian McIntyre, "A Conversation with Black Mask," in Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland, *Realizing the Impossible*, 159

[83] for more on Black Mask and the concept of affinity groups, see Ian McIntyre, "A Conversation with Black Mask," in *Realizing the Impossible*, 161-164

is an enormous undertaking—their methods left the project open to commodification. While the Splashers succeeded in drawing attention to street art, they failed to initiate any sort of long-term discussion of the role of street art in gentrification, or any of the roles played by street art in advanced capitalism, and likely gave street artists and admirers further resolve.

The failures of the Splasher group—the employment of street art materials and techniques, the attempt to do too much, and the alienation of potential affinity groups— are, in one sense, successes. First, the Splashers make clear the potentials for resistance that remain open to street art. Though street art has close ties to advanced capitalism and the art world, it also remains intimately linked to graf. While street art has been transformed into a commodity, its illegality and anti-establishment roots remain, to a degree, and its popularity and visibility opens possibilities for conversations about art, vandalism, and social structures, and such conversations have the potential to produce small changes in culture and society over time. The Splashers' adoption of street art as a tool to combat street art makes a clear point: resistance remains possible, even within commodified cultural practices. Second, though the Splashers tried to do too much, like Black Mask, the group seems to understand this, and their project did open some discussion about street art among groups that otherwise wholeheartedly support the phenomenon. The blogs that hosted spirited discussions while the Splashers were active continue to reference the group: their actions have entered the collective unconscious of the street art community, and can thereby continue to work on the world of street art. Third, the Splasher's alienation of affinity groups strengthened the resolve of street artists and their supporters. Given the potential for resistance that is, to a large degree, inherent in street art, a strong resolve among street artists may bring about new and more powerful campaigns in street art and among resistant groups generally. However, this failure essentially ended any possibility for growth within the Splasher group, and destroyed any hope of finding solidarity with like-minded groups or individuals who could continue and broaden the Splasher project. Taken together, the Splasher group's failures point, on one hand, to the power of advanced capitalism to recuperate resistant practices. However, the group's failures also gesture toward some of the routes available for individuals and groups to resist advanced capitalism and other social, political, cultural, and economic hegemonies.

Resistance in Advanced Capitalism

Capitalism and its offspring or descendants—advanced and global capitalism—have long formed a part of the production and reception of art works. Though resistant, at times, art has been particularly useful in the expansion of markets and profits, especially in the age of advanced capitalism. Attempts by various art movements to resist or transgress capital are quickly recuperated or assimilated by the machinery of advanced capitalism: as objects of aesthetic or art-historical import; as objects that have some use or necessity to contemporary thought; or as objects or activities of nostalgic relevance. The failure of resistant practices to endure lies in the necessity of capital in everyday survival: throughout the developed and developing world, capital drives production and consumption in the twenty-first century. This spread to a new, global framework marks the change from early and modern forms of local and national capitalisms, to the contemporary age of advanced capitalism.

The relationship between capitalism and art dates to Immanuel Kant's development of an aesthetic philosophy and the related appearance of the bourgeoisie as a social class. According to Peter Osborne, the "theoretical specification of the 'aesthetic' became the intellectual basis for the institutionalization of art as a specific, and very special kind of, commodity: namely a commodity the exchange-value of which derives . . . [from] its capacity to sustain 'disinterested' or 'aesthetic' contemplation."[84] The bourgeois class, like the aristocracy in prior eras, had the leisure and economic capital necessary to pursue this 'disinterested' contemplation, and drove the production and consumption of the fine arts well into the twentieth century. The formation of the aesthetic provided the capitalist system with the means to relegate human creativity to 'legitimate' venues, such as art galleries, museums, and concert halls while, simultaneously, the social value of art became a matter of individual tastes and sensibilities. Avant-garde movements, many of which became increasingly critical of the bourgeoisie and the ghettoization of the arts, struggled against the separation of art and everyday life, the reification and commodification of art works and artistic practice, and the alienation brought about by consumer culture in capitalism. However, "because it is detached and autonomous and is juxtaposed to society, . . . art threatens to degenerate into a mere compensation for what society lacks and thus serves finally to affirm social conditions it sees no reason to protest against."[85]

Alastair Bonnett provides an excellent discussion of the attempts to unify art and everyday space by a number of avant-garde movements. He concludes that, with the exception of the Situationist International (SI), itself usually left out of the art history archive, avant-garde movements failed to bring about any lasting changes in the

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[84] Peter Osborne, "Aesthetic autonomy and the crisis of theory: Greenberg, Adorno, and the problem of postmodernism in the visual arts," *New Formations* 9 (1989) 38. For a sustained discussion of this development, see Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997)

[85] Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Forward: theory of modernism versus theory of the avant-garde," in Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxxv

disjunction between art and everyday life due precisely to the commitment to art.[86] According to Bonnett, the SI "engagement with the city involved a politically purposeful, constructive assessment of the possibilities of establishing attitudes, practices, and physical spaces conducive to the creative use and exploration of the urban environment."[87] Many of the techniques developed by the SI to reclaim public space— including *Détournement,* psychogeography, and *dérive*—are present, albeit unconsciously, in street art. While the Splasher group has clear links to earlier anarchist and resistant groups, and while they employed Situationist tactics consciously and to great effect, Swoon is far more successful with her resistant actions than the Splashers.

Resistance within advanced capitalism requires a relationship to capital, however marginal. Without capital, the means for resistance of any sort are extremely limited. At the very least, resistance requires leisure time to plan, gather support for, and execute the resistant acts. As such, Swoon has a far greater capacity for resistance than the Splasher group, given the variety of resources available to her through her art making practice and various affinity groups. Though the Splashers have theory on their side, Swoon has people and, though her commitment to art renders many of her projects impotent, successful and long-term changes require a variety of skill-sets which only a large group of people can provide. While Swoon's art may indeed reify and commodify the struggles of everyday life, sales of her art works provide the capital needed to work with groups like Toyshop, Visual Resistance, and the Miss Rockaway Armada. While Swoon's community projects do not entirely resist capitalism, they show the power of community organizing, an option rejected by Splasher group and which ultimately led to their failure. However, and despite such failures, the Splasher group reveals continued possibilities for resistance from within assimilated cultural practices. Though advanced capitalism has street art firmly within its grasp, spraypaint and wheatpaste remain excellent tools for direct action and community engagement. Read together, Swoon's community engagement and the Splasher group's critical actions and writings reveal the potential for art to continue to function as an agent of change and powerful tool for individuals and groups in the twenty-first century.

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[86] Alastair Bonnett, "Art, Ideology, and Everyday Space: Subversive Tendencies from Dada to Postmodernism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 10 (1992) 83

[87] ibid.

Illustrations

Figure 1
Shepard Fairey, *OG Sticker*
Xerox on Paper, 1989
Artwork © Shepard Fairey

Figure 2
Shepard Fairey, *Obey Icon*
Lithograph, 1996
Artwork © Shepard Fairey

Figure 3
Swoon, *Untitled*, unknown date
Artwork © Swoon
Photograph by Jake Dobkin

Figure 4
Decayed Swoon Print, unknown date
Artwork © Swoon
Photograph by Jake Dobkin

Figure 5
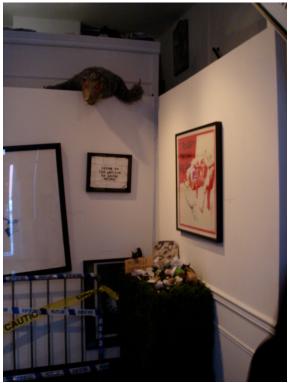Banksy NYC 2007, installation view
Photograph by the author

Figure 6
Banksy NYC 2007, installation view
Photograph by the author

Figure 7
Asger Jorn, *Mater Profana*, 1960
Artwork © Artists' Rights Society

Figure 8
Banksy, *Silent Night*, 2004
Artwork © Banksy

40

Figure 9
Urban Green advertisement (detail)
© 2007 Urban Green

Figure 10
Banksy, *Untitled (Electric Kids)*, 2006, now destroyed
photograph by Jake Dobkin

Figure 11
Swoon, *Oaxaca woman sewing*, 2006
Artwork © Swoon
photograph by Jake Dobkin

Figure 12
Splashed Swoon print
photograph by Jake Dobkin

Figure 13
Splashed Shepard Fairey print
photograph by Jake Dobkin

Figure 14
Splashed Shepard Fairey Print
photograph by Jake Dobkin

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