

# **VIRAL ART**



# VIRAL ART

RJ Rushmore



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## Some notes on the format of this book

“With enough of us, around the world, we’ll not just send a strong message opposing the privatization of knowledge — we’ll make it a thing of the past. Will you join us?” — Aaron Swartz<sup>1</sup>

Because the format of this book is unorthodox, it seems worth addressing its format, licensing scheme and initial distribution before really getting into things. *Viral Art* has initially been published online on a WordPress installation running the PressBooks plugin (so it’s basically a giant blog reformatted to look like a book) and made available free of charge under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. The philosophy behind free cultural works is too much to get into here, but suffice it to say that I want *Viral Art* to be read, shared, and tweaked by as many people as possible without concerns of copyright infringement. Going the traditional publication route with a print publisher would have limited access to this project to those who could pay for a physical book.

On a more practical level, much of the artwork referenced in this book exists in a form that would be difficult to reproduce in a traditional printed book. By publishing online, I am not limited to screenshots of videos or a certain number of pages of full-color images. Instead, the doors are to be opened to hyperlinks to webpages and videos and as many embedded images as is necessary. Unfortunately, in this version of *Viral Art*, GIFs will not be displayed as animated in some e-readers.

1. Swartz, Aaron. "Guerilla Open Access Manifesto." Guerilla Open Access Manifesto. Openlibrary.org, July 2008. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.

Finally, there's the possibility for constant tweaking of the text and having conversations with you, the reader. You can leave public comments on [the online version of \*Viral Art\*](#), and I hope you will. Through these comments, we can engage in healthy debates. You can bring up anything I've missed or let me know where I've rambled on too long. Your feedback could result in tweaks to the text of the book itself.

Yes, the format of this book is strange, maybe even off-putting for some people, but publishing it in this way promotes the free flow of information and allows *Viral Art* to be the best book it can be.

## Acknowledgements

This project would have been impossible without the support and cooperation of the many people who have helped me and put up with me along the way.

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Researching and writing this book has kept me glued to a keyboard for countless hours for two and a half years, often at the expense of spending time with others. Thank you to my family, friends, and especially my partner [Caroline Caldwell](#). They put up with my odd hours of work and my habit of sleeping in until 2pm and were tolerant of all the days and nights I was tucked away working instead of spending time with them.

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Two of my professors deserve special thanks. First, [Professor Laura Holzman](#), who allowed me to explore some of my ideas about what

could constitute street art and public art in her class Public Art in America at [Swarthmore College](#). My final project for that class acted as a rough outline for what would eventually become this book. And of course, [Professor John Muse](#) of Haverford College, who helped me to organize my thoughts when this project was in the early stages. Professor Muse has also been instrumental shaping my conception of art both during his class Art After Conceptual Art and over the course of our friendship that has developed since then. I use what I learned in his class almost time I think about art, and what I learned from him was invaluable to this project as I had to think about just what the hell it means for something to be “street art.”

The decision to release the text of this book under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#) was made largely as a result of a period of reflection and mourning following the tragic death of [Aaron Swartz](#).

Thank you to all of the people who took the time to speak with me or sit down and type out answers to my questions. There were over 50 interviews conducted for this project. As you read further, you’ll notice a few people whom I’ve quoted or referenced extensively, but many of my interviews were helpful in less obvious ways, helping to develop my thoughts and better understand some of the critiques I will soon face. The following people were interviewed or otherwise provided input: [AVOID pi](#), [Banksy](#), [Blek le Rat](#), [Brian Adam Douglas aka Elbowtoe](#), [Brooklyn Street Art’s Jaime Rojo and Steven Harrington](#), [Bruno Levy of Sweatshoppe](#), [C215](#), [Caleb Neelon](#), [Caledonia Curry aka Swoon](#), [Carlo McCormick](#), [Charlie Ahearn](#), [Dabs and Myla](#), [Dan Witz](#), [David Schmidlapp](#), [Dennis McNett](#), [Diego Bergia](#), [Don Leicht](#), [Evan Roth](#), [Patrick McNeil and Patrick Miller of Failé](#), [Faith47](#), [Fred Brathwaite aka Fab 5 Freddy](#), [Gaia](#), [Eric Haze](#), [Ian Strange aka Kid Zoom](#), [James Jessop](#), [Jane Dickson](#), [Jay “J.SON” Edlin](#), [Jeff Greenspan](#), [Jeice2](#), [John Fekner](#), [Jordan Seiler](#), [Kaff-Eine](#), [Katherine Lorimer aka Luna Park](#), [KATSU](#), [Know Hope](#), [Logan Hicks](#), [Marc and Sara Schiller of The Wooster Collective](#), [Martha Cooper](#), [Nug](#), [OX](#), [Pedro Alonzo](#), [Poster Boy](#), [Robyn Hasty aka Imminent Disaster](#), [Ron English](#), [Rub Kandy](#), [Shepard Fairey](#), [Space](#)

Invader, Tanley Wong of Arrested Motion, Tod Seelie, Workhorse and PAC of The Underbelly Project, and Yote.

Thanks you to everyone involved in making the cover of Viral Art. General Howe came up with the concept and designed it. Martha Cooper let us use her photograph of a blank subway car. The artworks on the cars are by Jay “J.SON” Edlin, Diego Bergia and General Howe.

Thank you to all of the people whose art and art documentation I have used in this book. Without that content, Viral Art would be a lot less interesting and understandable. Of particular importance are the many hobbyist photographers and filmmakers who spend a considerable amount of time and energy documenting street art and graffiti for the love of it. Please see the credits page for a full list of the people whose work has been used in Viral Art.

Finally, thank you to those who helped to edit this book. Caroline Caldwell, Rhiannon Platt, Mike Rushmore, Jillian Steinhauer, Kendall Whitehouse, Thy Vø and many of the interviewees, particularly Jay “J.SON” Edlin. Without the contributions of these editors, all of whom volunteered their time, this book would be little more than the error-riddled ramblings of a madman. Maybe it still is. If so, my bad.



# Introduction



Work by Banksy in London. Photo by [Lasse Socker](#).

*“What is more famous? Is it the Banksy stencil on the wall, or is it the photo of the [Banksy](#) stencil on the wall? The answer nowadays is the photo, obviously.” – [Ian Strange aka Kid Zoom](#)*

This book is an examination of how communication and communication technologies have affected graffiti and street art and where things are going as a result of those technologies. Anyone looking for a general history of street art or graffiti will be sorely disappointed and maybe even misled if they read this book as such. *Viral Art* includes a combination of art criticism, sociology of art and art history.

What I've noticed over the last few years has been an increasing reliance on the internet by street artists and graffiti writers. While these two movements began outdoors, on the streets, they have moved into the digital realm. There are positives and negatives to this shift. It

has allowed artists to communicate with one another from around the world wherever they are and it has been a key component in street art's growing popularity, but in some cases the digital documentation and online distribution of street art and graffiti has superseded the art on the wall. There's a nagging suspicion floating around that all of this work supposedly made for people walking down the street is really just being used in a massive game of who can get the most hype for their next print release, and that the importance of nonpermissioned interventions in public space has been diminished. As I thought about this issue further, I realized that communication technologies have always played a role in the popularity of art and what art looks like, but the internet brought things to an entirely new level. I also began to discover artists playing with space on the internet in the same way that street artists and graffiti writers play with space on walls, which I found encouraging. I've come to the conclusion that this transition from playing with walls to playing with the internet can be the shift that keeps street art and graffiti relevant in an increasingly digital world.

Chapter one looks at graffiti and street art from the middle of the last century through the late 90's. The internet wasn't a major consideration or influence on the artists that I highlight from that time period. Nonetheless, they did talk to and were influenced by one another in other ways. I have selected a few choice examples of how communication in this era functioned, and how the communication channels that did exist influenced the art that was later produced or was being produced at the time. For example, I show at how the book *Subway Art* (by [Martha Cooper](#) and [Henry Chalfant](#)) brought New York-style graffiti to the rest of the world and how just hanging out at the right clubs in downtown New York could be part of an artist's job. This chapter explains the importance of both the printed documentation and the strong personal bonds and in-the-flesh communication between art world figures before the internet was a part of daily life for most people.

Chapter two shows how the internet dislodged street art and graffiti from geographic locations. The possibility of viewing photos online has dramatically changed how we experience street art and graffiti. Whereas graffiti and street art were initially focused on getting



the attention of the public and so were placed outdoors, it's now the case that the documentation of artwork can be more important than the artwork itself. "Pics or it didn't happen" seems to be the motto of the contemporary outdoor artist, or fan of outdoor art. Today, the public arena for art is the internet, but much of that art being distributed in the public arena is still initially placed in the street, with photos uploaded to the web after-the-fact. This means that an artist painting in abandoned factories in Belgium can become world-famous and bring his work to your doorstep and artists working in suburban Tel Aviv can be influenced by artists in Los Angeles, but it also means that some street artists are neglecting the streets in which they are working in favor of the online audience, and that the thrill of discovering street art in the wild seems less important to fans than it once was. As a blogger, I have contributed to both sides of this double-edged sword that is the dislocation of contemporary street art and graffiti. Drawing from my own personal experiences as well as the experiences of artists and other bloggers, I explain the structures facilitating this dislocation and its effects.

In chapter three, I show the many ways the internet has changed what street art and graffiti look like and the forms they can realistically take. This goes beyond people from different countries influencing each other. The chapter is about art that's been made on the street for an internet audience. Yes, it may have existed on a wall in a city somewhere, but it looks better on your [Facebook](#) wall. Just as graffiti writers adapt their styles depending on if they are painting a piece for a moving train or a static wall, contemporary writers and street artists are adapting their styles to the internet. I start with a detailed explanation of the different adaptations artists have attempted, from producing videos to making work that's so disruptive that it will hardly last a day to experiments with conceptual street art. Again though, these adaptations are a double-edged sword. Is it a good use of resources to paint the wall of a building just to post the photo online? The chapter ends by raising many of the criticisms of viewing street art and graffiti online and the adaptations that artists have made to suit this new situation.

Although I am certainly not the first to suggest a lot of the ideas that I go through in chapters two and three, I know of nobody who has written so extensively on them as I do here.

Chapter four looks to the future, questioning the place of street art and graffiti in a digital age and introducing the concept of viral art. By highlighting out some of the best examples of modern internet art with a street art or graffiti bent and contrasting those with early internet art, I argue that the internet is the new frontier for the kind of public engagement that street art and graffiti are about. Viral art is my term for art that takes advantage of this new environment, but I differentiate between viral art that spreads naturally as it gets shared and viral art that invades digital space like street art and graffiti invade physical space. While it's impossible to say for certain where any art movement is going, I hazard some guesses as to how at least a segment of the street art and graffiti communities will evolve, and I believe should evolve, in the coming years.

Hopefully, with an understanding of where things have been, we can agree where things must go. I see what graffiti and particularly street art have become in the last few years, and I fear their disruptive potential is declining. Chapter four, and this book as a whole, is my attempt as a fan to urge street artists and graffiti writers to seriously consider adopting viral art as a way to get back to the core values of street art and graffiti while remaining relevant in a society where we spend practically our whole lives online.

# Chapter 1: Communication from the 1960's through 1999

*“The subway is a system. I watch Style Wars and I think about how they're hacking the city, how they find this system and figure out a way to hack it, spreading their artwork in a huge scale across the city.” – [Evan Roth](#)<sup>1</sup>*

Now that there are college graduates who can hardly remember a time before mass availability of the internet, it seems important to start this book by giving a sense of how people communicated with one another and learned about street art and graffiti before the internet. Only then can we see how profoundly the internet has changed these artforms.

The art and sport of graffiti writing as we know it today began its development in the late 1960's and was built upon and modified by generations of children and young adults, rarely over 18, through the 1970's before solidifying in the early to mid 1980's thanks to the publication of a handful of articles, books and films that codified and highlighted the culture for those who were not there to witness it firsthand. The bulk of this chapter provides a rough idea of the early graffiti scene in New York City in the moments before the publication and international distribution of those key documents, explains how some of those documents came to be and gives examples of what happened when soon-to-be graffiti writers in cities all over the world got their first taste of graffiti through a handful of photos and videos. The remainder of the chapter briefly touches on similar situations in street art during the same time period. These were times when every chance encounter with another graffiti writer or street artist mattered, every black and white photo with some graffiti in the background mattered and where you lived in mattered immensely.

There is no one linear history of graffiti. While at least portions of the New York graffiti scene had come together and could be

1. Roth, Evan. "Evan Roth." Interview by Alexander Tarrant. Juxtapoz Oct. 2010: 124-35. Print.

recognized as a cohesive community of sorts by the early 1980's, the stories of the graffiti world before and after that are still a bit of a tangled mess. In part for that reason, this chapter only highlights a handful of (sometimes overlapping) stories of particular people or places. By the end of this chapter, hopefully, the stories can come together to give some sense of the whole, even though they are surely incomplete and not a full history.

The purpose of these anecdotes is to give a sense of the networks and communication strategies that existed in the graffiti and street art communities (if they could even be called that) before the internet took over, as well as to show how those networks and strategies influenced the art that was being produced. I try to answer the question of how information about street art and graffiti traveled from artist to artist, city to city and into art galleries before the internet simplified all of those processes.

### On being a graffiti writer in the 1970's



[Sane](#) and [Terror161](#) in New York City in 1988. Photos by [Sane](#), courtesy of [Jay "J.SON" Edlin](#), stitched by [RJ Rushmore](#).

Imagine being 13 years old, taking the bus to school every day, and seeing graffiti cover the walls of Harlem and the South Bronx on your way to Manhattan. You start to think about names. Who were these people? How could they be everywhere and anonymous simultaneously? Eventually, you decide to begin writing on the back seat of the bus, a safe place, where nobody would ever see your moniker, then the streets of your isolated Bronx neighborhood. First write with toy markers, then spray paint. As you struggle to rise to

the top of the fame charts, one day you hit the inside of a subway car. And then you do it the next day. And it's a thrill. You may not know anyone else who writes graffiti, but now you're a writer. After that, only the yard missions fueled by visions of your own masterpieces running alongside the greats like MOSES 147 and Cliff 159 will suffice.

That's how a lot of graffiti writers started out. That, or they had one or two friends who wrote and introduced them to the scene. But there was no instruction manual or online course that could give any real hint as to what graffiti was or how to get involved with it. If you only rode specific lines, you knew the kings of those lines, but you probably had little clue what sort of work was going up elsewhere in town, and seeing graffiti certainly didn't mean that you knew how it was made.

Jay "J.SON" Edlin, aka TERROR161, J.SON, and other names, began writing in 1973. That means that he began before much of the media attention that would put graffiti on the map: before *Subway Art*, before *Style Wars*, before *Wild Style*, before articles in *The Village Voice*, before the *Beyond Words* show, before Henry Chalfant showed at OK Harris and even before Norman Mailer's *Esquire Magazine* article "The Faith of Graffiti" (or the subsequent book by Mailer, Jon Naar and Mervyn Kurlansky). Compared to the rest of the city, Edlin was living in an area with very little graffiti, but he saw it when commuted through the South Bronx and Harlem to school in Manhattan. Mostly, he took the 1 line, which was the first line where graffiti appeared on the outside of trains. Edlin started out writing in his own neighborhood, with no clue about seemingly basic things like how to get into train yards or how to acquire the markers such as uni and min-wides used by the more established writers he sought to emulate.

In what Edlin describes as "a lucky break," he found out that a friend of a friend was also a writer, and that friend knew the location of a shop where graffiti writers were getting their supplies like markers for tagging the insides of trains. Thanks to that tip, he went to the shop and hit pay dirt: Uni's, mini's pilots and a rainbow coalition of flo-master inks. Edlin was ecstatic, but his elation was short-lived. After buying several of the elusive markers he had sought, he was accosted

and robbed by MOSES 147, King of Broadway, upon exiting the store. Shark ate minnow. For Edlin, that early era was the golden age of graffiti, a time when he only knew a couple of toys (amateurs) from his neighborhood but saw and became familiar with the names of kings just by seeing their work run.

Communication amongst writers, particularly those who did not want to risk getting mugged or beaten up, was extremely limited. Spots like [The Writers' Bench](#) could be dangerous for anyone who planned to just show up one day without already knowing a regular or two in that crowd. One way that some writers did try to make connections was by writing "X wants to meet Y" at spots where they assumed their target would pass by, but while writing on walls can be great for spreading your name around, it's obviously not a reliable way to plan meetings.

Chance encounters helped too, and tended to be less dangerous than going to The Writers' Bench. If one writer saw another one catch a tag, they might introduce themselves, but there were less obvious signs too. Like most writers, Edlin liked to watch the trains go by. If he saw another teenage guy watching the trains go by, Edlin figured there was a good chance that the other guy was a writer too. Edlin also noticed that many writers dressed the same or had paint and ink stains on their hands and clothes. Again, there was a good chance that a teenager with ink-covered hands was a writer, and so if one writer spotted another's stained hands or clothing, they might say "Yo, you write?"

Edlin recalls one way, perhaps the most ironic way, of meeting other writers; it is something that only happened to him once and he describes it as "the greatest graffiti experience of my life." He had been arrested in 1975, and was sentenced to go to a subway station and clean graffiti off the station with other writers. By getting all of these writers together to clean up graffiti, the NYC judicial system inadvertently connected groups of writers from disparate parts of the city. Without getting apprehended, these writers would have only known each other by reputation – networking at its finest. This makeshift buff-squad turned out to be a great way of connecting writers from various parts of town, allowing them to trade info on yards, paint racks and lay-ups

out of their normal jurisdictions. Edlin even remembers kids who had not been arrested showing up “just to hang out and meet people.”

Eventually, Edlin would go to the Nation of Graffiti Artists meetings, which was an arts program and studio space specifically for graffiti writers. It was founded in 1974 to move graffiti writers from illegal painting towards legal work and potentially even careers in the arts.<sup>2</sup> Initially writers went there and created canvases and experienced writers mentored novices. Eventually however, much like the court-mandated buff squad, rather than get writers off of the street, it ended up being a place for artists to meet people from other parts of the city, stash paint and conspire to bomb trains.

After a few years on hiatus, Edlin picked up graffiti again in 1980, but things were quite different from how he remembered them. This was shortly before writers and the poseurs that followed started showing in galleries, and those shows were a new way for writers to meet one another. Everyone could show up to openings, see some art and meet other writers who were all fans of the same artist or artists in the show (or, potentially, had beef with them). A stable community was beginning to form, but graffiti had become about the money rather than the fun and the rush of it, and it just wasn't as interesting to Edlin, who continued to show on transit only.

### **The Soul Artists**

The Soul Artists were a crew, and eventually a lot more than that, started by Marc André Edmonds aka ALI and others in the early 1970's. In 1979, the Soul Artists evolved from a crew to a group of signpainting writers and artists when they set up shop in a storefront 107th Street and Columbus Avenue. Edmonds had a vision for what graffiti could be, and he wanted to shepherd his friends along that path. At the Soul Artists' workshop, artists led by Edmonds began trying to take graffiti to the level of a legitimate and established art form. Of course, graffiti had been indoors before (including a Soul Artists show 5 years before the studio space started up), but only infrequently, and there had been other groups like the Nation of Graffiti Artists who were comparable to the Soul Artists in some ways, but the connections

2. Austin, Joe. *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City*. New York: Columbia UP, 2001.

made at Soul Artists directly contributed to graffiti history right at a critical point as artists were transitioning from trains to paid jobs and working in galleries.

While the Soul Artists' storefront was used by day for painting signs as part of a legal city beautification project, every Monday night the group would have meetings open to other writers to help develop that community and paint. Thanks to those meetings, the storefront/studio became a hub for writers. Even for Jay "J.SON" Edlin, who wasn't entirely comfortable with the direction that graffiti was headed, the Soul Artists' studio was a way to meet people. There were stars there from the graffiti world as well as the larger art world and the occasional photographer like Martha Cooper. Major writers like IZ The Wiz, Eric Haze and Leonard McGurr aka Futura were regulars at the studio. Major and minor writers alike could meet up there to trade info about spots to paint. Even journalists, curators and artists who were not coming from the graffiti world, like Keith Haring, stopped by. The connection to "downtown" artists like Haring was thanks to Fred Brathwaite aka Fab 5 Freddy, whom Haze, an early member of the Soul Artists, describes as "a key link to the downtown art world." Brathwaite also brought to the Soul Artists a unique reputation (Brathwaite and his friend Lee Quiñones were perhaps the only graffiti writers to have exhibited their work in a gallery overseas at that point), art world knowledge and an intense drive much like Edmonds' to figure out graffiti writers could operate in the mainstream art world. Through their regular Monday night meetings and outreach to the top graffiti writers, Edmonds and the Soul Artists were consciously creating a place where the best of the graffiti community could connect with one another as well as figures in the larger art world.

In the winter of 1980/1981, the connections being made at the Soul Artists studio began to pay off in big ways for a core group of artists. Some of them, including Haze, Quiñones, McGurr, Lady Pink, Zephyr and Brathwaite showed at the Mudd Club and PS1, and were featured in a cover article in *The Village Voice* about graffiti. Without the Soul Artists, many of those opportunities might not have arisen.

But by 1983, the Soul Artists were no more. The experiment was influential but short-lived. As writers moved on from the clubhouse,



many moved up in the art and design worlds, and they will forever have the Soul Artists to thank for that.

### The Mudd Club and “Beyond Words”



*SE3 tag by Eric Haze, done for Jay “J.SON” Edlin at the Mudd Club during the “Beyond Words” show. Scan courtesy of Jay “J.SON” Edlin.*

One night artist and curator [Jane Dickson](#) and her husband filmmaker [Charlie Ahearn](#) were planning to go out to the [Mudd Club](#), which would eventually become one of the hippest clubs in New York City. Dickson had been procrastinating throughout the day and had not gotten much painting done. Around 9:30pm, she finally herself sat down and told herself that she was going to paint no matter what. But Charlie was insisting that they go to the Mudd Club. Dickson protested that she couldn't go, that she had to work. Really, she wasn't yet a fan of the club and was just trying to avoid it. That's when, according to Dickson, Charlie said “Jane, this is work,” and they went to the Mudd Club.

It's fortunate for Dickson that Charlie was so persistent, because he wasn't wrong, and their time socializing at the Mudd Club and at other events with the Downtown crowd helped to land Dickson one

of her first shows, in an exhibit at the Mudd Club curated by [Keith Haring](#). The Mudd Club was also where Dickson and Charlie ended up getting to know many of the cultural icons who would become their friends, people like Haring, [Cookie Mueller](#), [Glenn O'Brien](#), [David Wojnarowicz](#), [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) and [Patti Astor](#). Thinking back on the experience, Dickson says, "Art happens in the mix more than we usually imagine and less in isolation, and we were part of that mix." Now, it may be possible to be part of that mix without ever leaving your bedroom thanks to sites like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), but in 1980 being in that mix meant you have to be seen and be out at places like the Mudd Club.

While it is perhaps unfair to let the Mudd Club be the defining spot for the Downtown scene of the late 1970's and early 1980's, as if there weren't other clubs and bars that were frequented by the artists and other creative-types who made up the Downtown scene nicknamed the Downtown 500, I have chosen to focus on the Mudd Club because it was one of the core clubs in the Downtown scene, it had the most connections to street art and graffiti, and it exemplifies so many of the features that made those clubs and bars interesting and useful to artists.

The club opened in 1978 and was founded by Steve Mass, [Diego Cortez](#) and [Anya Phillips](#). Over its five-year run, the club hosted performances by musicians and poets including [Allen Ginsberg](#), [Talking Heads](#) and [The B-52's](#), and was frequented by cultural figures such as [Basquiat](#), [Madonna](#), [David Bowie](#) and [Andy Warhol](#).<sup>3</sup>

Around 1980/1981, Mass began getting some of the employees from [Club 57](#) to work at the Mudd Club instead, hoping to give his spot a cooler vibe like that at its competitor Club 57. One of the people he brought over was Haring, who had been curating shows at Club 57 and was put in charge of the Mudd Club's new art gallery on the 4th floor of the space.<sup>4</sup>

Among the shows Haring put on at The Mudd Club was *Beyond Words*, which he invited [Fred Brathwaite](#) aka [Fab 5 Freddy](#) and [Leonard McGurr](#) aka [Futura](#) to curate. The show work by by [John](#)

3. "Mudd Club." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 29 May 2012. Web. 18 June 2012.

4. Gruen, John. Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography. New York: Prentice Hall, 1991.

“Crash” Matos, Rammellzee, Eric Haze, Zephyr, Lee Quiñones, Basquiat and many others. When *Beyond Words* opened in April of 1981, it connected the downtown scene with the uptown (graffiti) scene, and Steven Hager gave the show a favorable review in the *Daily News*.

Many of the graffiti artists in *Beyond Words* had never been to The Mudd Club before. Through Brathwaite and McGurr, Haring had been inviting the people he knew from the uptown scene to Club 57 and the Mudd Club before *Beyond Words*, but even most of them had not been showing their artwork in the area and only a handful were regulars. With *Beyond Words*, the importance of the show was as much, if not more, about having the downtown crowd see the work of these graffiti writers as it was about getting the writers to check out the club.

*Beyond Words* also marked the first time that a South Bronx hip-hop show was seen downtown, with Afrika Bambaataa performing on the show's opening night.

Haze thinks that the importance of *Beyond Words* “was more the fact that the show itself happened. I don't have any clear memory of the artwork being outstanding. But that show provided credibility and an entre into a new world.” Haze had already been hanging out at the Mudd Club, but *Beyond Words* was evidence to the other patrons that he, and graffiti, had arrived.

While many of the artists in *Beyond Words* had also been included in Cortez' show *New York/New Wave* at PS1 in February of 1981, Cortez' show was a massive affair with over 100 artists and 10 times as many artworks where, of the graffiti artists, it was really only Basquiat who made a strong positive impression among reviewers.<sup>5</sup> *New York/New Wave* had the potential to bring a number of graffiti artists into the limelight, but for most of them it came down to a brief taste of the art world and the bragging rights to say that their work was hung next to Andy Warhol's photographs. At *Beyond Words*, Haze, Quiñones, Lady Pink, McGurr, Dondi White and everyone who was in both shows (besides Basquiat) finally got their chance to shine. Sure, the crowd

5. Fretz, Eric. Jean-Michel Basquiat: A Biography. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010.

the Mudd Club was smaller than at PS1, but the Mudd Club had the hippest crowd in the city.

### “Wild Style”

Charlie Ahearn is known as an independent filmmaker, but he’s much more than that. He’s perhaps better described as a community filmmaker. For his films *The Deadly Art of Survival* (1979) and *Wild Style* (1983), he connected with a local community of young New Yorkers (many of them teenagers) and worked with them to make a film that starred these amateur actors essentially playing themselves. Loose plots primarily served to highlight the participants’ unique youth subcultures. In the case of *The Deadly Art of Survival*, the film was an independent Kung-fu movie starring the members of a local Kung-fu school. For *Wild Style*, Charlie created one of the first examples on film of graffiti, breakdancing and rap music brought together under the umbrella of hip-hop.

In 1978, while Charlie was filming *The Deadly Art of Survival* on the Lower East Side, he came across the murals that Lee Quiñones had painted on handball courts in the area, which just happened to be Quiñones’s neighborhood. Charlie was so taken by the murals, he included them in scenes of *The Deadly Art of Survival*. While he was filming next to the “Howard the Duck” mural, the usually reclusive Quiñones came by on his motorbike and spoke with Charlie. Quiñones introduced himself, and Charlie invited him to participate in some way in *The Deadly Art of Survival*. Although the graffiti artist said he was interested, he refused to provide Charlie with any contact information and instead only promised that they would see each other around the neighborhood. That plan didn’t pan out, so while Quiñones’s work appears in *The Deadly Art of Survival*, Quiñones himself does not. After the brief meeting, Charlie and Quiñones didn’t see each other again for two years. By then, the film had been released, and Charlie was looking for a new project.

Charlie and his twin brother, John Ahearn, were involved in Collaborative Projects, or Colab, a loose group of countercultural artists who had formed an alliance primarily to get funding for their off-the-wall projects. John was a key organizer of one of Colab’s best-known endeavors, *The Times Square Show*, a large and informal

group exhibition in an abandoned building off Times Square that opened in June of 1980. Because *The Deadly Art of Survival* was a film very much inspired by the Kung-fu movies showing at grindhouse cinemas in Times Square, Charlie included the posters for it in *The Times Square Show*. [Fred Brathwaite](#) aka [Fab 5 Freddy](#) went to *The Times Square Show* with curator, founding member of Colab and Mudd Club co-founder [Diego Cortez](#). While there, Charlie's film posters caught Brathwaite's eye. He had seen them before (coincidentally while spending time with Quiñones) and was intrigued by the film. Cortez told Brathwaite that Charlie was the man behind the film, so Brathwaite found Charlie at the show and, almost immediately, proposed that they make a movie together about graffiti and the rest of the hip-hop world.

As a side note, it must be mentioned that *The Times Square Show* was particularly important not just for Charlie and Brathwaite and the rest of the team that would come together to make *Wild Style*, but many other people as well. Although artists [John Fekner](#) and [Don Leicht](#) weren't in the show, they did visit, and Fekner marks *The Times Square Show* as one of those moments when the people involved in what we now look back on as the early street art and graffiti scenes came together and began to meet one another, putting names and faces to artwork and street work.

For Brathwaite, making a film about hip-hop was an opportunity to tell a positive story about a strong, artistically minded and cohesive community that involved rap, breakdancing and graffiti. A self-described “art nerd,” Brathwaite had grown up skipping school to visit the great art museums of New York City. He saw parallels between hip-hop and the punk and New Wave scenes. He wanted to show the mainstream creative community that hip-hop was something to take note of, not just a passing fad of little value practiced by inner-city troublemakers.

While I use the term “hip-hop” when writing about *Wild Style*, Brathwaite was making these connections — and making the film — long before anyone was referring to rap, breakdancing and graffiti collectively as such. The word was around, but the first time “hip-hop” appeared in print as a reference to all three activities was in a

1982 article by [Michael Holman](#) in the *East Village Eye*.<sup>6</sup> Holman and Brathwaite were friends, and Brathwaite says he was the one who first educated Holman on the interconnectedness of these art forms that would become known as hip-hop. Although the term isn't used in it, there's also an interview with Brathwaite on the same page of the *East Village Eye*, just inches from Holman's reference, where he goes into more detail than Holman on the theory that that rapping, DJing and writing graffiti are all interconnected.<sup>7</sup>

Charlie was interested in the idea of a hip-hop film, and got even more excited when he learned that Brathwaite knew Quiñones. Charlie invited the two to put some paintings in *The Times Square Show* and paint a mural on the outside of the building. Like the first time Charlie had met Quiñones, two years before, this was a shot in the dark. If they guys didn't show up for whatever reason, there was no telling when or if Charlie would meet them again. But the next morning, Brathwaite and Quiñones brought some canvases to *The Times Square Show*, and John bought some paint for the mural. Starting that day, Charlie and Brathwaite began meeting regularly to plan their as-yet-unnamed hip-hop film.

Three years later, the result was *Wild Style*. The film includes some of the top figures in rap, breakdancing and graffiti. As Brathwaite had hoped, *Wild Style* is a document depicting a cohesive hip-hop culture involving visual art, music and dance. As Charlie had hoped, *Wild Style* is empowering, putting the spotlight on overlooked but talented kids living their lives, with the amateur actors playing ever-so-slightly modified version of themselves. When the film was released, it (and also the film *Beat-Street*) was a major factoring in spreading hip-hop culture around the world. To this day, *Wild Style* remains a cult classic among the hip-hop and graffiti communities.

There is little time for nuance in *Wild Style*. The diversity of graffiti culture and how connected or disconnected it could be from rap and breakdancing were brushed aside. [Zephyr](#), who appears in the

6. Holman, Michael. "An Interview with DJ Africa Bambaata of The Zulu Nation." *East Village Eye* [New York City] Jan. 1982: 22+. *East Village Eye*. Web. 4 Nov. 2013.

7. Keller, Hans. "An Interview with Fab Five Freddy." Trans. Celeste-Monique Lindsey. *East Village Eye* [New York City] Jan. 1982: 22. *East Village Eye*. Web. 4 Nov. 2013.

film and designed the *Wild Style* logo, was a rock-and-roll fan and he dropped out of school to follow a Grateful Dead tour. By overlooking the complexities of graffiti culture, Charlie and Brathwaite may have helped create the image of the hip-hop Renaissance man, proficient in graffiti, breakdancing and rap. In reality, while some writers enjoyed rap and even rapped themselves, others had little to do with the rest of what became known, at least in part because of *Wild Style*, as hip-hop culture.

While *Wild Style* did have a professional and international distribution deal, to promote the film around New York City, Charlie employed a larger-scale version of many of the tactics he saw kids in the Bronx using to promote rap shows — tactics that were depicted in *Wild Style*. The film was being shown at a theater on Broadway and West 47th Street, not far from the grindhouse cinemas playing the Kung-fu movies that Charlie loved so much. To get the word out, Charlie built up a team of high-school students throughout the city who were paid to put up flyers around their schools. The strategy worked. *Wild Style* was a hit; at one point the second-highest grossing film in the city behind *Terms of Endearment*. [A review in the New York Times](#) didn't hurt, but Charlie doesn't attribute the success of the film to that.<sup>8</sup> Just like his use of real graffiti writers, musicians and breakdancers in the film, Charlie believes it was the grassroots promotion that got kids into the theater to see *Wild Style*.

For Brathwaite, the influence of *Wild Style* was apparent even before it was shown in the United States. Shortly after the film's international premiere on the German television station [ZDF](#), Brathwaite traveled to Germany. At one point during his trip, he saw a group of breakdancers breaking in a public square, so he went to check them out. At first, he was surprised that they even knew what breakdancing was; it was an American style that had not yet, to his knowledge, spread around the world. But after observing the dancers for a few moments, "I realized that they were doing the exact same moves that the [Rock Steady Crew](#) was doing in the movie *Wild Style*. And then it clicked that the film had aired on TV. That hit me like,

8. Canby, Vincent. "Wild Style (1983)." *The New York Times* 18 Mar. 1983: n. pag. Web. 16 June 2012.

‘oh my God.’ I realized the effect. Because nobody could gauge that, around the world, it was gonna have that kind of effect.” That sort of emulation would go on to be quite common with films involving hip-hop — kids all over the world brought hip-hop to new regions by appropriating right from their favorites films and books.

“Subway Art” and other early published documentation of graffiti



*Subway Art, The Faith of Graffiti and Spraycan Art, three of the earliest and best-known books on graffiti. Photo by Mike Rushmore.*

Any graffiti writer, or graffiti aficionado for that matter, will tell you that graffiti has been around for thousands of years. They’ll tell you how even on the walls of Pompeii you can find graffiti, and that man has always had the urge to say, “I was here.” Graffiti historians and academics will say that graffiti became the graffiti we know today in the 1960s or 70s, but 1984 was a special year for graffiti. That was the year that modern graffiti (so called hip hop graffiti) truly escaped New York City and seeds were planted for this new style of graffiti to spread around the world. There have been books, newspaper articles



and films about graffiti before, but 1984 was the year the book *Subway Art* was published. That book, by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, which has now sold over half a million copies, accidentally spread New York's subway graffiti around the world and has defined it to this day. While the book only featured a small segment of the graffiti on New York subway trains during the years that Cooper and Chalfant were photographing and an even smaller segment of the graffiti created on New York trains during the entire existence of subway graffiti, the two photographers captured some amazing work. Because the pieces in their photographs were the portion of New York graffiti that people outside of New York got exposed to, those pieces have come to define New York's subway graffiti for generations of kids who never saw a freshly painted wholecar in person.

What exactly did Cooper and Chalfant capture? There's no denying that they shot some of the era's masterpieces. Wholecars on the New York City subway system like Dondi White aka DONDI's *Children of the Grave part 2*, Richard Miranda aka Seen's *Hand of Doom* and Leonard McGurr aka Futura's *Break Car* have rightfully continued to influence writers, street artists, and designers to this day. As the photographs of those cars and the others that Cooper and Chalfant published spread around the world in *Subway Art*, the styles spread with them and began to show up in the graffiti that appeared on previously pristine walls in cities everywhere.

The photographs in *Subway Art* were taken by Chalfant and Cooper in the late 1970's and early 1980's, and most of the photos were taken not across the entire city but in a select few locations. As a result, the book only shows work that appeared on only a few train lines. In fact, it was the writers who connected Cooper and Chalfant, who had started out photographing graffiti separately unaware of each other. Cooper and Chalfant photographed some amazing artwork, but they missed more than they documented. Both Cooper and Chalfant lived on New York's West Side. While this might not have deterred them from traveling all over the city if they had envisioned themselves as the primary archivists for one of the greatest art movements in their lifetimes, that's not how they saw their projects. Cooper mostly shot the #1 and #2 trains, because the Bronx was the easiest place for

her to get to where the trains ran above ground. She was interested in figuring out what graffiti was and how it was done, not trying to archive the work of an entire subculture. Cooper was trying to get good photographs of graffiti on trains and frame each of those trains with a unique contextual location. She was thinking like a photographer, not an archivist. As a result, trains that were painted on other lines could go unphotographed, except perhaps by the occasional writer with a cheap camera, and many of the photographs that Cooper did take remain unpublished in her archives.

Sometimes the reason for not photographing a car was an aesthetic choice, like not shooting “ridgies” in Brooklyn because the outsides of those trains were not as flat as the trains on the #2 line, something many writers also took into account when they were deciding which trains to paint and which to avoid. Whereas trains on the #1 line turned around so that Cooper could stand in the same place for 3 hours and see both sides of every train running on the line, the #2 trains just got to the end of the line and then reversed direction. For pieces painted on that line, the clever writers knew to call up Cooper and tell her that they had painted a train and that their piece would either be on the morning side or the afternoon side, depending on when the light would be ideal for photographing it. If the writer painted a different line or didn’t give Cooper the proper heads-up about something they had done, that piece might never be photographed.

Because Cooper in particular was trying to create powerful photographic compositions showing New York City graffiti, she made choices based on conceptual and aesthetic considerations that may have not been about the graffiti itself. Unintentionally, those choices have gone on to influence graffiti history. Cooper only wanted to publish one photo of a train against any given background, but she took many photos at each location. Perhaps there are trains that would be iconic and would have been influential, but they were photographed at the same location as McGurr’s *Break Car* and so they were not included in *Subway Art* and have never been shown publicly. But Cooper’s decision to only publish one train on any given backdrop and only publish extremely high-quality photographs also may have contributed

to making each of those images that she did choose to publish even more iconic.

Of course, there were also uncontrollable factors that prevented some cars from being photographed despite the writers informing Chalfant or Cooper and painting the work on one of the “right” lines. Obviously weather limited things, and there were writers like CAP who would paint over brand new pieces just because that was his style. Perhaps the most frustrating misses for Cooper were when she would set up a shot, wait for hours, and then right when the train she’d been waiting for would come her way, another train would come from the opposite direction at the same time and block her shot. If something out of the writer or photographer’s control happened, maybe there would be another chance to photograph it, or maybe the train would be buffed or written over the next day, the artwork gone, forever undocumented.

The vast majority of NY subway graffiti was not documented, but the writers that Cooper and Chalfant knew did like to have their work photographed if possible. Besides telling Chalfant and Cooper about their latest pieces, some writers tried to take their own photos when resources permitted. According to Cooper, particularly savvy writers like Blade would even plan when they painted their best pieces around when they had access to a camera and film. Once the writers saw what Cooper could do, they jumped at any opportunity to connect with her. “Part of my entrée was having a camera and giving good pictures to people,” says Cooper.

For the great cars that Cooper and Chalfant missed or writers that they were unaware of completely, Cooper admits feeling “a twinge of guilt,” but it has to be appreciated that she did not and could not have anticipated the archival value of her work in capturing an ephemeral art movement at such a critical moment. Cooper says, “Neither Henry nor I, ever thought that we were capturing every train. We didn’t think that we were archiving that era. And of course, we missed a lot.” She adds, “I feel sad for the writers who were probably equally prolific but who don’t have good documentation of their work, and who people don’t know about. There’s no way they can recapture that work.”

While Chalfant began by photographing the trains and then he met the writers, Cooper was drawn in by the writers and first thought that the graffiti she was shooting was simply another example of kids being creative, not art history. HE3 and DONDI, her first two connections in the graffiti world, both had an interest in keeping pigeons as well as writing graffiti, and in an early interview with Dondi, Cooper asked him as much about keeping pigeons as she did about graffiti, despite DONDI being one of the greatest writers of his time. It took Cooper some time before truly realizing the potential of what she was capturing on the trains.

Before *Subway Art*, there had been another key book in the graffiti canon, but it took decades for it to surface as a valued piece of graffiti history. Jon Naar's photographs of graffiti were accompanied by an introduction by Norman Mailer in the 1974 book *The Faith of Graffiti* (the essay and a few of the photos were also published in *Esquire* magazine). Whereas Cooper and Chalfant photographed what can loosely be described as the second generation of modern graffiti, Naar photographed some of modern graffiti's beginnings. No, he was not there to capture the very first tags of JULIO 204, but Naar did photograph other work from an era where graffiti was really just beginning to take shape as an artform. Most of the work that Naar documented would not be considered beautiful or particularly skillful, but there were signs that graffiti was moving in that direction. Still, even with the right distribution, *The Faith of Graffiti* never could have inspired a generation as *Subway Art* did. Naar knew some writers and Mailer's essays shows a much greater level of understanding than most adults will ever have of graffiti, but the photos in *The Faith of Graffiti* were taken over the course of a few weeks, so the writers whose work was captured may or may not have actually been representative of what was happening on the street at the time and what was most important. Naar, like Chalfant and Cooper for the most part, was trying to show a culture in broad strokes, not elevate a few kings to the level of superstars or photograph a definitive history. It is only now that we can look back and say, "Well thank God that Jon captured that Stay High 149 piece." Naar documented some of the first graffiti, so graffiti nerds and cultural anthropologists and the like will surely appreciate his

work as an invaluable archive, but Chalfant and Cooper succeeded on a much more significant scale because they were photographing in an era when graffiti was truly and undeniably art on par with anything in an art gallery.

*The Faith of Graffiti's* lack of success early on actually deterred the publication of *Subway Art*, despite being nearly a decade apart and extremely different in their content. Many publishers whom Cooper and Chalfant approached just could not see or did not bother to see the difference between the early graffiti in Naar's work, and the masterful art found on nearly every page of *Subway Art*.

Luckily, [Thames & Hudson](#), a British publisher that now regularly publishes books on street art and graffiti, saw potential in Cooper and Chalfant's proposal for *Subway Art* and agreed to publish the book. The struggles that Chalfant and Cooper faced in getting their project published, resulting in a British publisher for *Subway Art* rather than an American, may have actually helped to make the book more influential since it ended up in cities across Europe. A publisher in New York may not have had quite as strong distribution networks there.

After *Subway Art* was published in 1984, it acted as the catalyst for graffiti movements in nearly every major city where the book could be bought. As Chalfant and James Prigoff's 1987 book [Spraycan Art](#) would show, graffiti went from being largely an anomaly of New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles in 1983 to a global phenomenon in less than 5 years. Among writers, *Subway Art* became known as The Bible, as it spread the good news of graffiti worldwide and also acted as the best rulebook available, introducing new writers outside of New York City to just what graffiti was and how it was done. What Cooper and Chalfant envisioned as an art or photography book or perhaps a bit of New York culture to share with the world was taken by kids as an instruction manual and some of the best inspiration they could hope for. Before *Subway Art*, even if kids outside of NYC had heard of modern graffiti, they were highly unlikely to have seen many examples of it, except for very occasional magazine articles or work by writers who moved from New York to other cities and brought a bit of graffiti with them. *Subway Art* probably contained more modern graffiti in its pages than many individuals outside of New York would

have seen in their entire lives, particularly if they were young like most graffiti writers and unable to travel extensively. After *Subway Art*, nearly every city that the book appeared in began to have a graffiti “problem” that looked a lot like New York-style graffiti, but each city quickly developed its own distinctive styles.



*Martha Cooper photographing Os Gêmeos at Houston Street in 2009. Photo by [Dani Reyes Mozeson](#).*

Perhaps the quintessential story of *Subway Art*'s influence and the rabid cult-following it developed is that of [Os Gêmeos](#), the twin Brazilian graffiti writers whose work has dominated the streets of São Paulo since the 90's. While not to undermine the influence of local graffiti on Os Gêmeos (São Paulo actually already had comparatively well-developed street art and graffiti movements as early as the 1970's), Os Gêmeos became interested in hip hop and got into graffiti through that, so New York's influence was always there to an extent as well as something that they longed for more access to. The twins first saw a copy of *Subway Art* in 1988. According to Cooper, their mother was an English teacher and the young boys had her translate the text in the book for them over and over. They found a copy of *Spraycan Art* around the same time, and those books were both an early influence

on their graffiti. But it was not until meeting [Barry McGee](#) around five years later that they first saw the film [Style Wars](#) or any American graffiti zines. In the years between getting *Spraycan Art* and meeting McGee, they (like most of São Paulo's writers) were more or less out of the loop when it came to what was going on in American or global graffiti. Without *Subway Art*, it seems unlikely that Os Gêmeos would have taken up graffiti when they did and done what they have subsequently done, but their access to more information was so limited that the further development of their graffiti and graffiti in São Paulo generally took a uniquely Brazilian turn, which only reconnected with the global graffiti community in the mid-1990's thanks to magazines and writers who traveled to Brazil (more on that later). While the story of Os Gêmeos is perhaps the most obvious example of *Subway Art*'s influence, there are countless similar stories from just about any city where *Subway Art* could be found in the 1980's.

Before kids in Norway could look up the latest Los Angeles graffiti with the click of a button, before zines were traded around the world or graffiti hit freight trains and traveled along those national networks, before hip hop magazines began to include a page or two of graffiti in the back of each issue, images of graffiti were hard to come by. Exceptions like *Subway Art*, [Wild-Style](#), *Spraycan Art*, and *Style Wars* planted seeds in practically every city where they were available, and a somewhat connected and certainly global graffiti movement was born. With all of these projects, their creators could have little conception of their future influence, and choices that were made for a myriad of reasons besides the sake of historic preservation have subsequently painted a somewhat skewed picture of graffiti in 1980's New York City, a picture which was subsequently taken as gospel and imitated by young writers across the globe. There is little doubt that the worldwide graffiti movement could not have developed in such a short time frame, if at all, without *Subway Art* and a handful of similar projects.

### **Stencils in Paris**

In the days when information about what was going on with graffiti and street art outside of one's own city was extremely limited, the result



*Stencils by Blek le Rat at Cans Festival in London in 2008. Photo by [Bruno Girin](#).*

was that cities often developed quite distinct styles. A prime example of this took place in Paris in the 1980's.

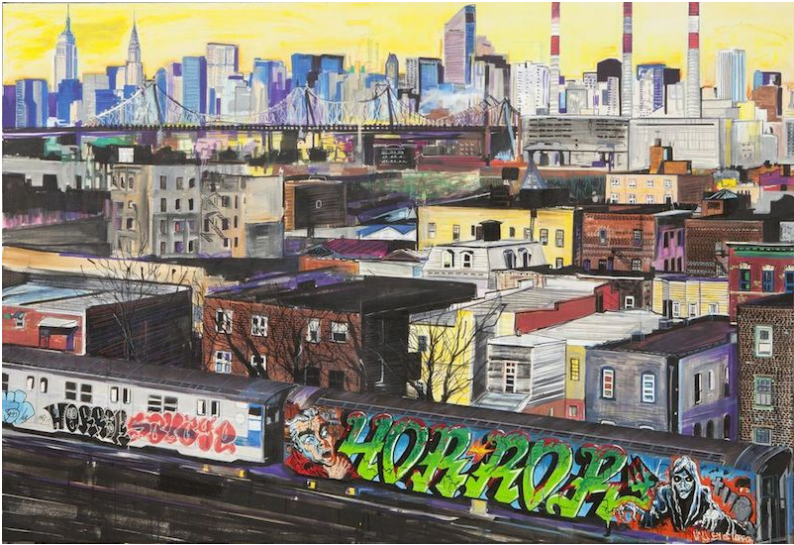
[Xavier Prou](#) aka [Blek le Rat](#) believes that when he began making street art in Paris in 1981, there were two other active street artists in the city and any graffiti was political graffiti. Prou's trademark style was the use of stencils combined with spraypaint, which he says was unique in Paris at the time. New Yorkers like [John Fekner](#) and [David Wojnarowicz](#) were also using the technique on the other side of the Atlantic, but, like New York-style graffiti, stenciling had not reached Paris before Prou's work. In 1983, Prou began seeing the first in a long line of artists who were inspired by him to make street art using stencils. He estimates that by 1986, when the French newspaper [Libération](#) ran an article with the headline which translates to "The school of Blek le Rat," there were literally hundreds of other stencil artists in Paris with only a handful of street artists using other mediums. People had taken notice of Prou's work, were inspired, and Paris became the stencil art capital of the world.

Stenciling so defined the early days of Parisian street art that Prou's influence is still felt there today, even if his influence is a generation



removed and it is the artists whom he inspired who are now the ones influencing the younger Parisian stencil artists. Maybe if Prou had been interested in wheatpasting abstract patterns, that would have become the distinctive style of French street art, but he started with a stencil. With limited access to information about the street art and graffiti in other cities, regional styles were often the result of stylistic seeds being planted and then other artists picking up those ideas and running with them, unaware of what art might be being made just a few hours away.

### The education of James Jessop



*The Valley of Horror (2012) by James Jessop. Photo by James Jessop.*

British graffiti artist James Jessop got involved with graffiti in a fairly typical way for a Brit, and it was communication and miscommunication between New York and England that defined his early career and continue to influence him today. Jessop was a young boy of age 11 when he first got involved with graffiti. Today, about 30 years later, he is like a walking encyclopedia of graffiti knowledge, but access to information about graffiti was once not so simple as it is today.

Jessop grew up in a small town outside of London where, at the height of graffiti's popularity, there were still only about 10 active

writers in the entire town. Jessop was into breakdancing, which at the time was also associated with rap and graffiti. After he'd been breaking for a little while, a friend of his told him about graffiti, but Jessop's friend didn't really know what he was talking about. The boys began writing graffiti, but they didn't know to write names. Instead, they wrote phrases like "hip-hop" or "breaking." Jessop began his graffiti career by attempting to imitate graffiti, but he was pretty much doing it dead wrong and had no idea, because he'd actually seen almost no graffiti. He based his work on what little information he had, and did the best he could with that.

In April 1986 though, a simple book Jessop's life changed forever. That book was [Martha Cooper](#) and [Henry Chalfant's](#) [Subway Art](#). One Saturday afternoon, his friends visited the town of Milton Keynes and saw a copy of *Subway Art* at the [W H Smith](#) bookshop there. They were amazed and told Jessop about it, but they didn't have a copy to show him. So Jessop and friends went back up to Milton Keynes the following Monday and managed to steal one copy of *Subway Art*. Sitting outside the shop, they flipped through the pages in complete amazement. Before that, Jessop hadn't even realized that graffiti was meant to be painted on trains. All he had done or seen was graffiti on walls. Unfortunately, they were caught later that day trying to steal in another shop, and so they lost the book. A month later, on Jessop's 12th birthday, he was given both a copy of *Subway Art* and the film [Beat Street](#). Jessop still has his original copy of *Subway Art*.

Jessop loved what he found in that book, and he would try to copy it. Rather than picking a name, he was still imitating others, but now he would do things like try to copy pieces by [Richard Mirando](#) aka [Seen](#) from *Subway Art*. Jessop's copy was the 2nd printing of *Subway Art*, but he didn't know that, and he assumed that he and his friends were pretty much the only people in the country who knew what was up. *Subway Art* became a sort of bible for Jessop, and today the book is one of the strongest influences on his fine art. Today, he still bases some of his paintings on photos from *Subway Art*, and is very clearly still obsessed with the book.



Scan from James Jessop's copy of *Subway Art*, contents page. Courtesy of [James Jessop](#).

Nearly a year after getting *Subway Art*, Jessop and some friends took a trip to London because they had heard that there was graffiti there. That was the first time that Jessop saw graffiti in person where the writer was writing his own name rather than a slogan or copying a piece from a book of someone else's name. The boys also saw graffiti



Sketch by James Jessop (1986) copying a SHY piece from Subway Art. Courtesy of James Jessop.

that looked a lot different from what they knew, and thought it to be a uniquely-London style. As it turns out, perhaps some of it was, but the boys were also just seeing the developments that had been made around the world since *Subway Art*, which was the primary point of reference for what graffiti looked like despite being so outdated. The boys started making regular trips to London, and discovered that there was a London Writers' Bench in Covent Garden, as well as a piece by the New York writer T-KID. It was at that bench in 1987 that Jessop met the British writer Robbø for the first time. While Jessop was still by his own admission a toy, he and his friends were beginning to get exposed to some real local graffiti by spending time in London, but Jessop was still almost entirely ignorant of what was going on outside of his own town and London.

It was not until more than a year after seeing *Subway Art* that another book, *Spraycan Art*, was published that showed Jessop the significant stylistic developments in graffiti since *Subway Art* was first published in



**Martha Cooper**

Martha Cooper is a photojournalist, specializing in art and anthropology. She graduated from Ginnell College with a major in art and spent two years in the Peace Corps in Northern Thailand. After returning from Thailand by motorcycle across Asia she studied at Oxford University for a year, receiving a Diploma in Ethnology.

In 1977 Marty moved to New York City and worked as a staff photographer on *The New York Post* for three years. Her photographs have appeared in numerous publications, including *National Geographic*, *Natural History*, *Audubon*, and *Art News*.

**Henry Chalfant**

Henry Chalfant studied at Stanford University where he majored in classical Greek. After graduating, he took up sculpture and moved to Europe where he lived for three years in Spain and Italy, studying and working in a variety of media.

Henry moved to Manhattan in the early 1970s and began carving in stone. In New York he became interested in graffiti, then in its early stages of development. Both his sculptures and his photographs have been exhibited in Europe and the United States.

James Jessop's copy of *Subway Art*, back cover. Scan courtesy of James Jessop.

1984 (with, of course, images of trains that were painted years before that). Chalfant and James Prigoff's *Spraycan Art* profiled graffiti scenes that had sprung up in cities around the world since *Subway Art*, *Beat Street*, and *Wild Style* had inspired kids everywhere to pick up spray cans. Although not the revelation that *Subway Art* was for Jessop, *Spraycan Art* was still an key update on the global state of graffiti.

Despite his love of graffiti from a young age, it wasn't until he was 14 that Jessop painted his first full trackside piece. Just going out and writing any night of the week wasn't an option for Jessop when he first getting into graffiti. At 12 or 13, he was not not allowed out after dark, which made painting difficult. What complicated things further was that his parents would not allow him to have any spray paint in the house. It was not until he moved out of his parents' home and went to the [Coventry School of Art and Design](#) for university at age 18 that he finally began to write graffiti seriously and, in his own opinion, really became a writer.

At university, Jessop was discouraged from doing graffiti, but he decided soon after he got there that his goal in life was to turn graffiti into an art career, like he had see happen for [Keith Haring](#) and [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#). Of course, Haring and Basquiat were not exactly writers, but they both respected graffiti. In 1992, Jessop got a copy of [Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography](#) by John Gruen. It was primarily that book that inspired him to keep up graffiti and consider it on par with or even superior to his indoor work. Haring himself praised tagging and graffiti writers like [Leonard McGurr aka Futura](#), whom Jessop respected, contributed to the book. While he was at art school, Jessop says he was really thinking "How can I be an artist and learn, but use what I'm learning during the day to get better at graff?"

Around the same time that he got the Haring biography, Jessop finally saw the classic documentary [Style Wars](#) for the first time. Despite writing for the better part of a decade by that point and knowing about *Style Wars* for many of those years, Jessop had never been able to track down a copy of the film. By the time he saw it, the film was interesting to him but also quite dated in terms of the graffiti depicted.

While opportunities to see lots of graffiti at once in books or videos were rare, Jessop did have the occasional magazine or newspaper clipping to update him. Particularly helpful for Jessop was [Hip-Hop Connection](#), a magazine founded in the summer of 1988. When Jessop was reading it in the 80's and early 90's, the magazine featured a two-page spread on graffiti in every issue. Most of the rest of the magazine was devoted to rap music, but those two pages were enough for Jessop



*Dynamic Liveliness (1998) by James Jessop. A reinterpretation of Peter Paul Rubens' Hero and Leandro. Photo by James Jessop.*

to pick up the magazine whenever he could. That was his only regular source of graffiti photos.

As time went on, Jessop became more entrenched in graffiti culture and better at finding information about graffiti in the United Kingdom and abroad, but his entire career has been shaped by the limited information he was exposed to during his early years as a writer. Jessop's story is not an uncommon one, particularly among writers who did not live in New York City or a handful of other urban centers. While kids a few years older than Jessop may have had access to a bit more information more quickly, more opportunities to paint, and a better understanding of graffiti culture, the same introductions into graffiti and the basic lack of up-to-date knowledge about what was going on with graffiti in places other than one's own city were quite standard in the 80's and early 90's.

### **Shepard Fairey's surprising beginnings**

When people think about how an artist generally gets their work into galleries, particularly when they are just starting out, it usually goes something like this: Submit work to 100,000 galleries, try to meet and schmooze with gallery staff, and beg. Shepard Fairey's gallery career began quite differently. In fact, he hardly knew it was beginning at all.



*Andre the Giant Has a Posse sticker by Shepard Fairey. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

Fairey told the story of how it happened in [PAPER Magazine](#) in 2010, and here I've supplemented that telling with additional information from interviews with [Carlo McCormick](#) (senior editor of PAPER magazine) and Fairey.<sup>9</sup>

While he was doing his [OBEY-style parodies](#) of Coca Cola's [OK Soda](#) advertising campaign, Fairey met [Helen Stickler](#), a filmmaker who also knew McCormick and who would eventually make a documentary about Fairey. Stickler loved the OK Soda/OBEY project when she found it in Providence, Rhode Island, where Fairey was living and putting up a lot of work at the time.

Thanks to Stickler, Fairey submitted some posters to a show that McCormick and [Aaron Rose](#) (who ran Alleged Gallery in New York City) were curating at [Bard College](#) in 1994 called *Represent*. It featured the work of artists who were primarily known for designing

9. Fairey, Shepard. "When Shepard Met PAPER: The Tale of How Artist Shepard Fairey First Made Our Acquaintance." PAPER 2010: n. pag. PAPERMAG. 1 Dec. 2010. Web. 20 Feb. 2013.



t-shirt graphics. McCormick thought that the artists doing t-shirt graphics were participating in a culture of appropriation that could be backed up with decades of theory if necessary, but he was excited by the possibility that these young artists were just tapping into something cool without worrying about theory.



*Shepard Fairey is still making clothing, and his OBEY Clothing brand is sold in stores around the world. Here's some in a [Nordstrom](#) in 2008. Photo by [Bobak Ha'Eri](#).*

*Represent* eventually moved from Bard College to Rose's Alleged Gallery, but Fairey had no idea about that. He had basically submitted his posters to the show and forgotten about it, and there wasn't a particularly simple way for McCormick to get in touch with Fairey anyway. Fairey said, "I didn't deal with Carlo directly at all. I just gave Helen a few of my posters to send in to Carlo, and I guess he liked them. Next thing you know, he talked to Aaron Rose from Alleged about moving that show from Bard College to the Alleged Gallery on Ludlow Street, and I knew nothing about it until the day of the show."

And this is where it gets strange. [Evan Bernard](#), a music video director whom Fairey was familiar with for being name-checked in the [Beastie Boys](#) song "Sure Shot", called up Fairey's studio to see if he was going to be at Alleged Gallery that night for the opening of *Represent*.

Bernard was interested in picking up one of Fairey's t-shirts. The only problem was that Fairey had no idea what Bernard was talking about. Once Fairey figured out that the Bard show (the name of which Fairey had not known until that point) had moved in Alleged Gallery, he threw a box of t-shirts into his car and drove straight to New York City to get to the opening.

That night, Fairey met a bunch of the artists and other people associated with the very hip Alleged Gallery. It was really the first time that Fairey had gotten at all plugged into the New York City arts community. Fairey explained that "not only did [*Represent*] put my work in front of a pretty cool crowd, it introduced me to a bunch of people that would become an inspiration and my friends, and so that was a big turning point for me."

One important connection made that night for Fairey was meeting [Phil Frost](#), who took Fairey out to put up some street pieces and taught him how to properly wheatpaste. Before Frost taught him what to do, Fairey had just been making his wheatpaste with Elmer's glue and water.

Of course, that's just one example. Alleged Gallery and the nearby [Max Fish](#) bar were hubs of the New York art community that Fairey would become a part of, and many of Fairey's early connections in the New York art and graffiti communities can be traced back to Alleged Gallery, *Represent*, and a phone call from Evan Bernard.

### Flick trading

As much as you'll hear some graffiti writers and street artists going on about how it's great that their work is ephemeral, the fact is that many of those same people love to document what they do, so photographs are important. While the very first generation of graffiti writers did not photograph their work and it was professional photographers [Jon Naar](#), [Martha Cooper](#), and [Henry Chalfant](#) whose photographs of graffiti first spread the art around the globe, graffiti writers and street artists who had access to cameras were taking photos of their work since at least the 1970's.<sup>10</sup>

10. Snyder, Gregory J. *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*.



OBEY Icon wheatpaste. Photo courtesy of [Incase](#).

Unfortunately for so many writers, Cooper and Chalfant could only document so many trains. The only way to really guarantee that a writer's work would be seen after it was buffed was for the writer to take a picture. While today it seems that practically every writer has a digital camera, writers during the train era did not. Many of those writers had to plan to paint their best pieces around when they occasionally had access to a camera, often stolen, and film.

Eventually, particularly after disposable cameras were introduced in the mid-1980's, many writers began to amass large collections of photos of their work and the work of others. Even if the train had been buffed, the pieces lived on through photographs stored in shoeboxes under beds. But, for many writers, those photos were more than just a private stash documenting their own accomplishments. Graffiti writers have been trading "flicks" with one another since at least the 1980's.<sup>11</sup>

Through flick trading, writers could communicate with one another and show off their work in a more organized fashion than

11. Snyder, Gregory J. *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*.

just hoping that everyone would spot the latest cool train. Writers who traded flicks could spread the word about pieces that were already buffed, running in parts of the city that the other writers they knew might not see regularly, or even running in entirely different cities from the writers with whom they might be trading. Particularly as graffiti spread around the country and the world, flick trading was an early way for writers to see what might be happening with graffiti outside of their home city without having to travel. Besides the occasional major graffiti publications like *Subway Art* and *Spraycan Art*, flick trading was perhaps the best (if not the only) early way for graffiti writers to gain fame among peers who could not see their work in person.

Flick trading was not a perfect way for artists to distribute their work, but it was a start. The networks that were built around flick trading and the basic ideas behind it would evolve and become much more powerful by the 1990's, when writers and graffiti fans gained access to a better means of publishing their work.

### Zines and magazines



Various graffiti zines. Photo by [Adam Void](#).

*“Zines were important in the 90’s and early 2000’s because they were the link between picture trading and the internet. Picture trading was these big piles of loose images. Zines collected them into a hard copy bound format where they are all collected together. Later, that manifested as websites.” – Adam Void (aka AVOID pt)*

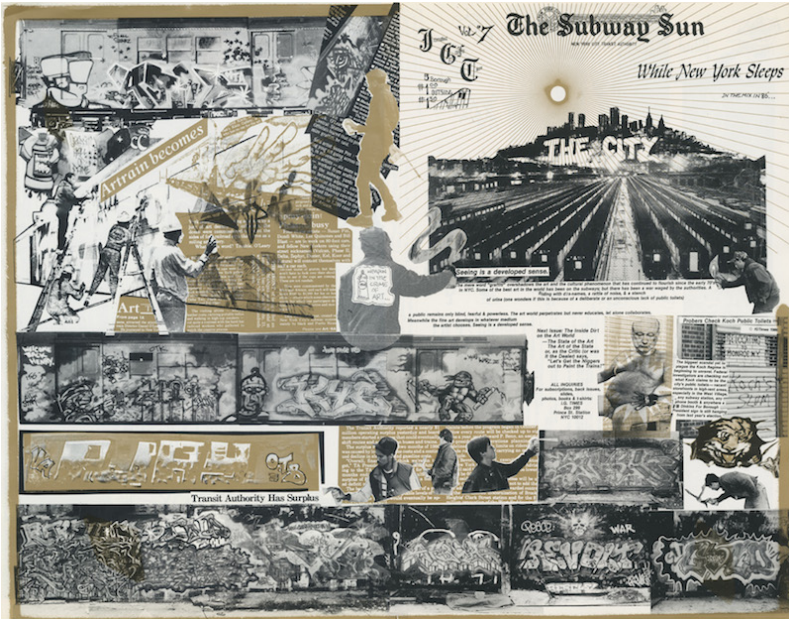
Like many DIY art and culture movements, graffiti has long been documented through the creation of specialized zines. Zines are essentially homemade magazines that practically anyone with access to a printer can make. Graffiti writers have been making zines since at least 1979,<sup>12</sup> with zines focused on graffiti coming to prominence in the 1990’s.<sup>13</sup> These publications were the stepping-stones between flick trading and full-fledged magazines/the internet, but zines have also continued on their own path even after the advent of professionally-produced graffiti magazines and websites.

A simple zine is easy to make. It does not need to take much time or expertise. Rather than lay the pages out in any professional manner, a zine editor can simply cut and paste (in the physical sense) photographs and text onto pieces of blank paper, which then get photocopied. Depending on the length of the zine, the photocopies can then be folded and possibly stapled. In an afternoon, an active writer or a fan with a bit of content can make their own publication and start distributing it among their friends and contacts. Or they can distribute their zine by just leaving it around at coffee shops or music venues alongside other zines. A zine really could be as simply designed as photos taped to a sheet of paper and photocopied. That could still be an effective source of information and fame for writers, but not all zines are so simple.

More complex zines can easily be artworks, rather than solely publications for writing documentation. This trend of zine as artwork started happening fairly early on in the history of zines and continues to this day. *IGTimes*, the first zine about writing on trains, was initially conceived by David Schmidlapp in 1984 as a series of artworks about

12. Austin, Joe. "Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City." Google Books.

13. "Art Crimes: Graffiti Magazines." Art Crimes.



*IGTimes volume 7, 1986 – broadsheet (17"x22") with a quarter fold – designed by founder/ publisher David Schmidlapp, a photographer / filmmaker who did photo collages and photo layouts in the mid-1970's. Courtesy of [David Schmidlapp](#).*

art and brought on PHASE2 as an art director starting with their 8th issue in 1986. Further developing a design aesthetic also used by Schmidlapp, PHASE2 incorporated complex collages into the zine that would mix together photographs, text and sketches.<sup>14</sup> IGTimes and similarly complex zines still distributed documentation of writing and piecing, but they did so in a way that transformed the original pieces into a part of a larger whole, the zine/artwork.

Despite the existence of zines as artwork, the primary function of most zines, particularly early on, was to print distribute photographs in a more efficient way than flick trading. While the full-color 8×10 photographs that one might get through flick trading are certainly a higher quality print than can be found in any zine (which are

14. Austin, Joe. Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City. New York: Columbia UP, 2001. Google Books.



*The center page of IGTimes volume 14, 1994 – broadsheet (17"x22") with a half fold. Design by PHASE2, early 1970's godfather of aerosol lettering and major flyer designer of early 'hip hop' events from the late 1970's. Courtesy of [David Schmidlapp](#).*

often black and white publications printed as cheaply as possible), photocopying 1,000 copies of a zine full of dozens or hundreds of photographs was more appealing to many writers than the prospect of printing out a tiny fraction of that many photographs for the same cost. This is not to say that flick trading disappeared once zines came into play, but zines did surpass flick trading as a cheap distribution method for photographs (although reproduction quality could suffer).

More design-savvy and business-savvy graffiti writers and fans made magazines, which came into prominence around the same time as the zines. One of better-known graffiti magazines was [12ozProphet](#), which was started in the early 1990's by [Allen Benedikt aka Raven](#). Whereas zines were basically made with x-acto knives, glue, paper, and photos, Benedikt had access to a scanner and [12ozProphet](#) was digitally designed. Benedikt wanted to take what the zines were doing and professionalize it; he wanted to make a graffiti magazine.

~~Caleb Neelon aka Sonik~~ met Benedikt on the streets of Providence, Rhode Island where they lived and began writing and editing starting with the magazine's 3rd issue in 1996. Neelon got his start with *12ozProphet* by writing the introduction for the issue's cover article, an interview Benedikt had done with graffiti legend ~~Barry McGee~~.

Some publications started out as zines and developed into magazines, and often the line between magazine and zine was blurry, but magazines have continued to develop into more and more professional publications or die out due to online competition, whereas zines, by their very nature, have retained the DIY ethos and production value. Not anyone can make a magazine, but anyone can print up some zines.

Most graffiti magazines actually started out as zines. By the time Neelon began working on *12ozProphet*, it was a magazine as far as the graffiti community was concerned, but that was a matter of perspective. *12ozProphet* had worldwide distribution. It had advertisers. It was digitally designed. There were editors. It was in many ways a brilliant publication, but it was also at times amateurish compared to a "real" magazine. Worldwide distribution often meant swapping with other graffiti and hip hop magazines in other countries by sending a few boxes of *12ozProphet* issues to them in exchange for receiving a few boxes of their magazine and trying to get the stores in the USA that stocked *12ozProphet* to also take a few issues of the foreign magazine. While *12ozProphet* had a circulation in the tens of thousands, that was a drop in the bucket compared to professional magazines. The advertisers in issue 6 included ~~Shepard Fairey~~ and a distributor of graffiti magazines, not car companies and department stores.<sup>15</sup> Neelon himself acknowledges that next to a handmade zine at a hardcore show, *12ozProphet* looked like a magazine, but next to an issue of ~~Time~~ or ~~Newsweek~~, *12ozProphet* was clearly a zine.

According to Neelon, magazines like *12ozProphet*, *Skills* (edited by ~~Greg Lamarche/SP.One~~), *On The Go* (edited by ~~Steve Powers/ESPO~~), *While You Were Sleeping* (edited by ~~Roger Gastman~~) and others

15. Benedikt, Allen, ed. *12ozProphet* Issue 6 1996: 1. Web.



were how artists like McGee, [Brian Donnelly aka Kaws](#), Fairey and others received their initial national exposure.

The most famous article in *12ozProphet* came about when Neelon and Benedikt visited São Paulo in late 1997 to see a completely different world of graffiti and meet [Os Gêmeos](#), Brazilian identical twin graffiti writers who become the cover artists for *12ozProphet* issue #6 in 1998. It was their first time getting press in North America, and it ended up being the article that introduced their work to the world. Subsequently, the twins have been acknowledged as not only some of the most important Brazilian graffiti writers of all time, but among the most important graffiti writers anywhere in the world and two of the most successful fine artists to have roots in graffiti. As the Os Gêmeos article shows, *12ozProphet* and other graffiti magazines were essential links between graffiti in different cities and countries around the world in the mid-1990's.

The power of graffiti magazines is that they had a much wider distribution than the average zine, but they were still made by people within the culture and with a much quicker turnaround than a book. Neelon cites new technologies such as scanners and desktop publishing software that became available in the early 1990's as essential tools that allowed *12ozProphet* to be a more professional publication. So while some people, primarily college students or people with access to university computer labs, could start making magazines around the time *12ozProphet* was being published, it was not a path that was open to everyone and zines were still the publishing method most available to the average writer.

### **Adam Void on zines**

For [Adam Void aka AVOID pi](#), zines have been an essential component of his graffiti practice since the late 1990's. AVOID pi grew up in Columbia, South Carolina and went to college in Charleston, South Carolina. In Columbia, he was exposed to graffiti thanks to writers like KLEVER, and at college he was introduced to the work of Charleston native [Shepard Fairey](#), which fit well with his interest in punk music and culture. Those influences formed the basis of his graffiti practice, and his interest in zines.



Various AVOID pi zines. Photo by [Adam Void](#).

While AVOID pi plugged into the national graffiti scene as much as he could through connecting with out-of-town writers who visited Charleston and Columbia and got involved with flick trading, graffiti zines weren't on his radar when he first started looking at photos of other peoples' graffiti.

Before he had ever seen a graffiti zine, although they were certainly around, AVOID pi was picking up punk zines at concerts. Those punk zines and anarchist pamphlets (particularly [Working Sucks](#) by [Tim Righteous](#)) showed AVOID pi how easy it was to make your own zine. Inspired by those publications and graffiti magazines like [Mass Appeal](#) (which actually started as a zine in a suburb of Virginia)<sup>16</sup> and *Life Sucks Die*, AVOID pi was inspired to make his first zine in early 1999. It was called *Permanent Ink* and was full of AVOID pi's photographs of graffiti in Charleston, which was graffiti that AVOID pi saw every day in the flesh but wasn't seeing in major graffiti magazines like *Mass Appeal*. To distribute *Permanent Ink*, AVOID pi started sending bundles of the zine to his flick-trading contacts. The recipients would then give out some of the extra copies to friends or send them on to their own contacts. Whereas with

16. "About." *Mass Appeal*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 June 2012. <<http://massappeal.com/about/>>.

flick trading AVOID pi would make five or so copies of each of his photographs and send out a selection to each of his contacts, now he could flood the graffiti community with his zines by the hundreds. As some of those secondary contacts got in touch with AVOID pi to ask for more copies of *Permanent Ink* or his future zines, his network began to grow to people whom he had never even met in person. People around the country were becoming aware of AVOID pi's work and other graffiti in Charleston without ever having visited the city.

Through the contacts he was building up distributing his own zines, zines also started coming AVOID pi's way. Some of those zines, like a freight-train zine out of Indianapolis called *HRTA Journal*, came from smaller cities without internationally recognized graffiti scenes and were sent to AVOID pi through his network of contacts. Other zines could be found in certain bookstores, such as 52.5 Records in Charleston which had zines out of San Francisco thanks to the publisher/distributor *Last Gasp*.

When he first started collecting them, zines kept AVOID pi plugged-in to a network of graffiti writers around the country even though he felt a bit isolated in South Carolina, but he thinks that zines were valuable for that same reason no matter what city you lived in. He says, "In some part, everyone was isolated. It doesn't matter what city you were from, you were isolated, and zines were the way to communicate outside of that."

Nearly 15 years since *Permanent Ink*, AVOID pi is still making zines. He has made around 50 zines and distributed an average 400 copies of each one, with \$0 in profit for his work. In that time though, the culture has changed. Zines used to be distributed primarily through an internal distribution network, the occasional zine distributor and zine libraries. Those things still exist today, but the web has provided a platform for people to sell their zines directly to fans around the world. Until the internet came along, zines were the best, and perhaps only, way for the average artist or fan to document and share local work. Now, except for the case of people who are taking photos of their own illegal actions, the internet has without a doubt become the most logical way to share those flicks. As a result, the purpose of zines has shifted somewhat.

Today, AVOID pi says that zines are still important today for a few reasons: 1. As they always have been, zines are a material record documenting work from the past, since walls fade or get buffed, and now, websites disappear, but zines can stay on the shelf for decades; 2. Whereas digital data and websites can get artists arrested for putting up their illegal work, zines are much harder to trace and use in court cases; 3. With zines, artists and crews can distribute their own work on their terms rather than relying on another photographer to document the work and distribute the photos, as generally happens when pieces are posted online.



*A spread inside of the zine *Learn To Die Live The Dream II* by AVOID pi and DROID 907. Scan by [Adam Void](#).*

The 4th and final reason that AVOID pi says zines are still important speaks the most to how zines have evolved since websites like [Flickr](#) have become popular. He argues that the internet has freed up zines to move from pure documentation to artworks. Although transition was already evident in some early zines such as spread in [IGTimes](#), it is more and more common that zines are more than fans and artists publishing

straightforward documentation in a DIY fashion. They have evolved to become artworks themselves.

Today, it's probably easier and makes more sense for fans to upload their photos to Flickr than to make a zine, but blogs and tumblr and Flickr photostreams are limited in their design. A zine allows for much more freedom. Looking at a contemporary zine by AVOID pi, you can see immediately why he chose to make a zine rather than just post photos online: He isn't just putting photos on a page, he is making a document much greater than a tumblr. That's not to say that tumblr pages cannot be artwork, but zines, by comparison, are unconstrained in their design and possibilities. AVOID pi's most recent zines probably will not give you a great idea of the freshest pieces going up in his local scene, but, as artworks, they do so much more than that. AVOID pi can post photos on his website if he wants to show reality. With zines, he can make something new.

AVOID pi puts it best: "At one point, paintings were used to reflect the reality of the world. And then what came out? Photography. So then paintings went abstract, because they were freed from having to represent reality. I think that zines, at one point in time, were representing reality. When the internet came along and began serving that function, zines got freed up to be art pieces. Zines got abstracted. In much the same way that photography freed up painting, the internet freed up zines, and made them even more important and more valuable, because now zines are creative art objects."

### **Conclusion to chapter one**

From their earliest days, graffiti and street art have been shaped by communication technologies. There is no doubt that these art forms look the way they do today because of the way that certain communities sprung up decades ago and how information flowed from one community to the next. Lucky breaks like going to early Soul Artists meetings or painting on the #2 line when [Martha Cooper](#) was photographing it have made careers. Missing those opportunities placed others in obscurity. Even seemingly well-informed communities that relied on flick trading and zines were actually quite limited and cut off from most of what was going on elsewhere in the world. It is only with the internet that the street art and graffiti

communities have become truly globalized, a shift that quickly began to change just what the hell street art and graffiti look like and what they are.

## Chapter 1.5: In conversation with Martha Cooper, Luna Park and RJ Rushmore

Photographers [Martha Cooper](#) and [Katherine Lorimer aka Luna Park](#) are two of the most important documenters of post-1960's street art and graffiti. While both are still photographing today, they represent two generations of graffiti and street art documentation.



*Martha Cooper in 2010. Photo courtesy of the [New York Council for the Humanities](#).*

A photojournalist with a background in anthropology, Cooper began documenting street art and graffiti in the 1970's and eventually collaborated with Henry Chalfant on [Subway Art](#) (1984), a book of their photographs of graffiti and the most influential book ever published about graffiti. Today, with half a dozen more books on graffiti and hip hop culture under her belt, Cooper continues to photograph street art and graffiti, with a focus on works-in-progress. She has [taken to Instagram](#) for sharing many of her photos, including more general street photography.



Katherine Lorimer aka Luna Park in 2009. Photo by [Becki Fuller](#).

Lorimer has been taking photos of street art and graffiti and posting them to [Flickr](#) since early 2005. Although Lorimer's photographs have appeared in books, she has not yet released a book of her photographs. Most of Lorimer's fans see her work online on her [Flickr](#), [blog](#) or [Instagram](#). Photography has never been her day job and documenting the streets has always been purely a hobby for Lorimer, but she has become one of the most respected photographers of contemporary New York street art and graffiti. Lorimer is known for her beautiful shots, knowledge of the New York City street art and graffiti scenes and commitment to documenting the best work on the streets at any given time.

One evening during the summer of 2012, I sat down with Cooper and Lorimer to discuss their lives, their work and street art and graffiti in general. Here is an edited version of that conversation:

Katherine Lorimer: Martha, I was looking over [your Wikipedia entry](#) last night. I didn't know that you had a background in anthropology. I also have that background, so I was wondering if that has informed your interest in subcultures such as graffiti?



Martha Cooper: Absolutely. I wanted to have a career in the museum anthropology, or museum art. I was a curatorial assistant at Yale in anthropology, and I used to shoot archaeology assignments for National Geographic. But when I looked at getting a PhD in anthropology, it looked too difficult and not really something I wanted to do. I wanted to work in the field. I wanted to see the African masks in action, rather than in the museum environment. So I married an anthropologist, he did his fieldwork in Japan, and I went with him to Japan. I was interested in everyday art. Art in its environment, not in museums. It's what I shot in Japan in 1970, Japanese hand tattooing. It required getting into the scene similarly to how I got into graffiti.

Lorimer: Gaining the confidence of the community?

Cooper: Yeah, gaining their confidence et cetera. I'm surprised to hear that you also have a background in anthropology.

Lorimer: I have an undergraduate degree in anthropology and German. Career-wise, it was the same thing for me – I had thought about doing a PhD in anthropology, but ultimately decided against it. Part of what interested me, once I learned more about graffiti and street art, was that it is a subculture with rules for how people interact, what you can and can't do, with unique concepts of fame, respect and hierarchy. How all these things play together is fascinating to me.

RJ Rushmore: I'm curious about how each of you gained entry into the street art and graffiti cultures, which I think we can safely say are two different but overlapping cultures.

Lorimer: In my case, it was all over the internet, which is obviously a very different experience from Martha's. To this day, there are many artists whom I've never met, but we know each other through social media, Flickr, blogs... and I've e-mailed with a lot of people before ever meeting them, so it's a very strange situation sometimes to meet people whose work I've been following for years, people I've corresponded with. It can be awkward, but in most cases there is a certain comfort level immediately after we meet one another that I don't think would be possible if we didn't have the technology to make these connections.

Cooper: Didn't Just stay with you when he came over? And first he stayed here. When he left, he said, "Now, I'm going over to Luna's." But he had never met you, right?

Lorimer: No, but there are all these networks, and I think that social media just makes it easier for people to make these connections. I know people in Berlin, so whenever people from Berlin come over here, they all say, "Look up Luna. Because A. She speaks German, and B. She knows A, B and C." But I'm curious what your experiences were like. Today, people will send me a text or an email, and I'll know, in some cases minutes after a piece goes up, because of the technology. Whereas, for you, what was the process like?

Cooper: Telephone. The process of getting in was that I was working for the New York Post as a staff photographer and every day going through the Lower East Side and using up my rolls of films. I shot a project on kids' creative play. They had to be building something or making something, so really it was like children's folk art. I met a boy, HE3, and he showed me his book, and he had been flying pigeons, so I saw him more than once. He said, "Why don't you take pictures of graffiti?" He showed me that he was designing his name to put on a wall, and it just clicked. I didn't know that graffiti was nicknames. It had always been a bit disappointing. You'd see something, but it didn't make any sense. It was just a collection of letters. It wasn't generally known that these were nicknames, and so he really got me into it and he introduced me to DONDI. Before I went to look at trains, I spent time interviewing DONDI. I took a friend, the photo editor from the New York Post, with me, and she shot this photo of me interviewing DONDI in DONDI's basement. I interviewed him as much about pigeon flying as about painting. I wasn't only interested in graffiti, and I shot these pictures in his room of DONDI and his friends designing in a black books way before I seriously looked at trains. I didn't even understand that there were wholecars or anything. Remember, at any one time maybe there was only one wholecar running on a line. I hadn't been looking. The looking came later. I got in through this circuitous children's play idea that I had.

RJ: It's interesting to me how sometimes people think that Vandalog is my day job. I go to college, and I'm a political science major. I have friends who don't care about art. Does that sort of thing happen to you where people assume that this is your day job or your only interest?

Cooper: Yes.

Lorimer: Sure.

RJ: Is that something that you simply accept or something that you try to dispel in some way?

Lorimer: People only know the public part of me, which is what I choose to share online, and are often very surprised when I say that I work a full-time job as a librarian, I travel for work and I do other things. I think people just see me online and have this kind of romantic notion that I'm the torchbearer for the next generation or something like that.

Cooper: I don't want to be considered a graffiti photographer, or a street art photographer. So if somebody actually calls me that to my face, I'm going to correct them. Of all the pictures I've taken, those just happen to be the pictures that people know about. I'm very grateful for all the places that I've had the opportunity to go because of graffiti, and all the friends that I've made because of graffiti. That's given me the kind of life I never could've had otherwise, but I don't perceive myself as a graffiti photographer. And I don't want to be thought of as some kind of graffiti historian, because I only know what I saw. I wind up having to apologize for all of the things that I didn't see.

Lorimer: I can only talk about what I know, which is the last eight years. Within the larger history of graffiti, that's a drop in the bucket. I'm a newbie. One of the biggest differences between Martha and I is that Martha has an entire history of being a photojournalist who has shot all kinds of subject matters, and I'm not a professional photographer. I'm an amateur photographer. If anything, the experience of shooting for the last eight years was sort of a creative awakening for me. I enjoy shooting, but it's not everything that I do.

Cooper: I only want to shoot process. I want to see how people do it. That might be the anthropologist in me. I want to see what stencils they use. I want to see if they use a roller. In Baltimore, Jaz had this

contraption of 2 brushes at 2 different angles, and I took pictures and close-ups of that. I like seeing all the creative ways artists figure out how to work. Besides, everybody with a phone can take a photo of the finished walls.



*Jaz' brush contraption in Baltimore, MD. Photo by [Martha Cooper](#).*

Lorimer: There's not any point in trying to be the 1st to get a flick anymore because it's a losing battle. Everyone is a photographer these days. The landscape of street art photography has even changed in the last seven or eight years since I started. All these blogs, including Vandalog, didn't exist when I first started, whereas now there's a huge street art blogosphere/media just waiting to suck up whatever photos they can get their hands on first and blast them out into the internet. Sometimes I feel like the photos are merely fodder for this never-ending content-consuming beast that is the internet. People look at it once and it's like "That's cool," and then it's next, next next, next, next...

Cooper: And as I said, I really want to see work in progress. That just takes place over one or two days, so if somebody doesn't tell me and I don't know about it, I'm not going to run out and try to catch that finished wall. The writers used to call me and tell me if their pieces

were on the morning or the afternoon side of the train, because the two's went back and forth without turning around. The one's turned around. If you waited on the same side for three hours in the morning, you would see both sides of the train. The two's go out to New Lots and back, but they don't turn, so if you were on the wrong side, you'd never get to see the piece. And the kids learned to tell me to go out in the morning or the afternoon, because you don't really want a backlit train. You want the sun hitting the train.

Lorimer: A lot of the time, it's just a matter of being there for good light. The best tips are the ones that say "come by in the afternoon," or "best light in the morning," because otherwise it's a waste of my time.



Aiko Nakagawa's mural on the wall at Bowery and Houston in New York City.  
Photo by Martha Cooper.

Cooper: Yeah, you could go and there would be a big shadow diagonally across the wall. The Houston Street wall has a big shadow problem if you don't come at the right time of day. For me, the challenge is to take a good picture, and I think people don't understand that I'm at least as much interested in my photography as in the wall. I want the artist to like the picture too, but for me it's really hard to get an unusual and interesting photo of somebody painting a wall. Or

just the wall. I think Just is really a good photographer. Sometimes I see pictures that he's taken and I'm jealous because he'll nail it. So I'm looking at it from a photographer's point of view, and not only from whether it's a good wall. I'm at least as interested in its being a good picture. Is it the same for you, Luna?



*RAMBO in Brooklyn with plenty of context. Photo by [Luna Park](#).*

Lorimer: It's getting there. I feel like I'm learning to hone my craft as a photographer as I go along. I go back to what I shot in 2005, and it was tightly cropped detail shots, which though interesting for the historical record, is not so interesting as a photo showing more context.

Cooper: Although the artists tend to like those.

RJ: I know, Martha, that we've talked before about the difference between taking 30 shots on film and taking 130 on digital. Sometimes it can be hard to tell who shot a photo. I'm wondering if either of you think digital photography can be artistic?

Cooper: Of course. I think digital photography can be anything that any other kind of photography can be and more. I'm a big fan of digital photography, but it took me a long time. I used to say, "When it goes digital, I'm out. That's it. I can't do it. I won't do it." I was not an early adopter at all. In 2001 or 2002, I got a little [Olympus](#) and started

playing around with it. That's when I realized, that there were so many things that were better than film. Like how you can change the ISO. I always shot with [Kodachrome](#), or Fuji 100, and if it got dark I had to push the film. With digital, you can change the ISO with every picture, and the color balance too. You don't have to worry about filters or any of that stuff. Plus you can see what you're getting right away and correct it. With film I was always making mistakes. I love that part of it, and still do. With film, it was all guesswork and you wouldn't see what you were getting until two days later. By then, it was too late to reshoot. I used a bracket like crazy, and I used to think that every time I pushed the button it was \$.50. I don't understand the mystique of film. People who use film are constantly telling me how wonderful it is. I don't get it. I don't miss it. 40 years of Kodachrome, and I don't miss it. I'm out of there.

Lorimer: I didn't get my 1st digital camera until pretty late in the game, 2003 or 2004. I regret not taking everything in the largest size possible with my first digital camera. I've got pictures of [Faile](#) stencils from 2005 that are 200 kB – people ask if I can send it to them in hires, but I can't.

RJ: How do you feel about things like watermarking or people reposting images without credits?

Lorimer: I think people are very fast and loose with photo credits. I'm not going to name names, but there are certain sites where I've just given up trying to go after them.

Cooper: I don't generally put watermarks on my photos. It's just too much work. But I do it for my old stuff, and I try to keep all the old photos offline as much as possible. I license those pictures, and I try to make money from them. It's not like I make lots of money but I do need to live. Stock photography used to be a major part of my income, but it's dwindled.

Lorimer: [Flickr](#)'s killed that.

Cooper: Yeah. Then the rights that people are asking for, for the amount of money that they're willing to pay, is ridiculous. People are constantly saying, "Oh we're doing a documentary on old-school Bronx graffiti," and when I look at the contract for the rights it's always "in perpetuity not just for this particular video but for anything in the

future including things that have not been invented yet.” You might think, “Well, what’s that?” That’s the contract that I signed for *Style Wars*. There’s something like 23 photos of mine in *Style Wars*, for which I think I got paid something like \$20 each. In that case, “not yet invented” included the DVD and everything digital. I do feel stupid about signing those rights away. We don’t know what’s going to be invented, and I don’t really want to sign “in perpetuity.” I’m extremely cautious about licensing now, but sometimes it works out.

RJ: Luna, have you done a lot of licensing?

Lorimer: I haven’t licensed anything. The only thing I’ve ever shot that got any sort of licensing interest was *The Underbelly Project*. It was the photos that were *in the New York Times*. I got a call from some guy at an agency. It was a real hard sell, with him telling me I have to act now and that the interest is limited. He sent me a contract, and it was the same thing: I had to give them all of my rights to the Underbelly photos in perpetuity, not even control who they then turn around and sell the photos to. I said, “No, thanks.” Maybe I missed out on a couple hundred dollars worth of photos, but I think I made the right decision.

RJ: What do you want to do with your photos once you’ve taken them?

Cooper: I want to publish in print media. That was always been my thing. Of course that’s gotten really hard. I don’t want to publish street art, and I have no street art books in the works. I did two little *sticker books*, but they were very specific and fun to do. I would like to do a Baltimore book, that’s a whole other thing, but another street art book isn’t on my bucket list. Why would it be? There is so much available out there, and I don’t have a particular point of view about it that I think would make a good book.

Lorimer: That’s ultimately my rationale too. Unless I come up with something novel or something to set my book apart from all the other street art books that are out there, there’s really no point.

Cooper: I’m happy to license photos to other books, but I don’t really see myself doing street art book. I don’t know what it would be about.

RJ: Festivals?



Cooper: Nah. In some ways the festivals are the least interesting. They're most interesting in terms of meeting and hanging out with the artists. At [Open Walls Baltimore](#), I met [Freddy Sam](#) and he invited me to South Africa. But most of all I like the surprise of going through some neighborhood and seeing something that I didn't know was there. To have everybody painting legal walls is not as interesting to me as being surprised by something.

Lorimer: The internet is both the best thing and the worst thing to happen to street art. The worst thing is that in many cases I'll already know what I'm going out to shoot, so the entire element of surprise and discovery is lost. That was what got me into photographing street art in the very beginning, before every piece was excessively documented and on [Instagram](#) or [Twitter](#) 20 minutes after it is finished. I really miss that moment of "Wow." I spend a lot of time walking around New York, and, on my way to and from things that I know are there and that I want to photograph, I'm obviously open to finding whatever it is that I see along the way. I always have my camera with me, so there's a certain percentage of things that I still just come across, but the internet has dampened that aspect of street art photography and documentation. I almost enjoy shooting in cities outside of New York more because the element of surprise is greater. I love to travel, and part of traveling is just walking around strange cities where, unless I'm with somebody who I know from the scene who is guiding me, it's all about just being open to finding what it is that happens to be there.

Cooper: That's when I'll photograph completed pieces, I don't need process when I discover them. I love to walk around and find things. I love [stikman](#). I love little things like that.

Lorimer: He's got great placement, and I enjoy that he's constantly reinventing himself. With a lot of the artists who have their logo or their character, it's just the same thing over and over again, but with his stuff, you start to walk past it and it makes you stop and look. He's special to me for that reason. He gets it. Good placement and changing things up are really the two key things that make work on the street interesting and unexpected.

Cooper: I agree.



*stikman in Manhattan. Photo by [Luna Park](#).*

RJ: Are either of you eventually going to do something with your archives?

Cooper: Good question. Maybe.

RJ: Like, would you donate your archives to a library?

Cooper: Well I would hope to donate them somewhere before I die so that it doesn't all get thrown away. Luna at least has all digital photos. All my slides are getting harder and harder to scan, because people don't have the scanning equipment.

Lorimer: I'd like to think that all this work hasn't been done for naught. I would like for someone looking back on this period of time to be able to access these images in a meaningful way. I'd like to have them be organized as well so that you could say, for example, "here are all the pieces by [Swoon](#) captured on the streets between such and such a time." I think there's a value to the collection. Whether an institution will want it or not, I don't know.

Cooper: There's a value, but whether anyone will ever want it as much as they want it now is hard to say. They might want one or two images out of the thousands that I have. It's impossible to predict. I'd like to



*Swoon in Manhattan. Photo by [Luna Park](#).*

think that my collection would end up somewhere where somebody will care about it, but whether I'm going to get to a point where it will be accessible, I don't know. I'm not all that interested in scanning and labeling.

RJ: Do you ever feel pressure to take photos?

Lorimer: I'm happy not to have to monetize any of this, because it makes things so much easier. Most of the pressure I feel is pressure that I put on myself. I want to document things well and in a way that is respectful of the pieces. That's what pushes me out the door every weekend. I'm not complaining, but I feel like I've set the bar high and now I have to keep up with it. I've got a lot of people nipping at my heels, but that's okay. It's not a competition really, and the way I see it is that at the end of the day, I see a lot of amazing art and travel to lots of places and meet wonderful people and whether or not I get a good picture out of it, that's great, but the experience is what's interesting to me.

Cooper: It's disappointing to me if I don't get a good picture. I like all that other stuff, but the bottom line is, if I can't get good pictures I'm disappointed.

Lorimer: Sure. My camera is screwed right now and nothing upsets me more than that I can only take fuzzy pictures.

Cooper: Or sometimes I come home and realize a good picture was there, but I didn't see it or I didn't get it. I worry about my own ability and think, "Oh my God, you're losing it. You missed that. That was so cool, and you completely missed the shot."



[Sam3](#), [MOMO](#), KUMA, CURVE and RISOT in Queens. Photo by [Luna Park](#).

Lorimer: I'm proud of the fact that the history of graffiti is, in part, being written by two strong women that are part of it, but independent as well. There's something to be said for that. Especially because of all the haters in the beginning who were like "You don't know anything." That motivated me more than anything. Not too long ago, I was out in Queens shooting a wall and this guy came up to me. He said, "Oh, white girl coming to the hood. You're a culture thief." So I rattled off every single name on the wall and his jaw dropped.

Cooper: Good for you.

RJ: I loved being in Baltimore with you, Martha. We went out to dinner with the Open Walls Baltimore group and you were like the Den Mother or something.

Cooper: It always surprises me that so many of these artists from around the world know who I am. So many of them do come from some kind of a graffiti background. Even people like Ever whose work is so far removed from graffiti now. A lot of them did start out with letters.

Lorimer: And if not letters, with your book.

Cooper: Well that's less and less now. That's two generations ago. Now they're starting out with the internet. They don't need to start out with a book.

RJ: To what extent to either of you feel like you were caught in the right place at the right time?

Cooper: Completely.

Lorimer: Yeah.

Cooper: Well, I was in the right place at the right time and had the energy and the idea to keep my finger pressed on the shutter. It was luck to be there, but more than luck that I actually photographed it.

Lorimer: That was a lot of work.

Cooper: And I can think of lots of things that I probably should have photographed but I didn't; things where I was in the right place at the right time, but I didn't take pictures.

RJ: And Luna, you caught the Flickr bug before a lot of people, right? Who else was around when you started?

Lorimer: The two really go hand in hand. Flickr and street art happened at the same time for me. It was this perfect storm. There was all this great stuff going on out there on the streets, so I went out to take pictures to put them online. All these artists started coming out of the woodwork to say, "Hey, that's mine." This dialog started, people began inviting me to events, and the whole thing just snowballed from there.

RJ: So I'm just realizing this now. Martha, you came across the people and discovered that there was art, and Luna, you saw the art and then discovered the people behind it. Right?

Cooper: True. And [Henry](#) was like Luna. He was interested in the art and then met the people. To me, the art was the last thing. The culture came first.



*SMELLS, UFO and DROID of 907 Crew in Queens. Photo by [Luna Park](#).*

Lorimer: And for me the culture has become more and more interesting as I've gotten deeper into it. I started with street art in Brooklyn by the likes of Swoon, Faile, and [Elbowtoe](#). But the more I started digging, the more the history of graffiti became more interesting to me. I would even say now that the graffiti aspect is becoming more interesting to me than the street art aspect, because the history is so much richer, and it's something I can learn about. Which is not to say I'm uninterested in street art. I'm really interested in people who blur the lines between street art and graffiti, artists who aren't so easily categorized. That's crews like [Burning Candy](#) and [907](#). People who are outsiders doing their own thing and who have the respect of their peers.

Cooper: And I'm interested in techniques. I'm interested in seeing that there are so many people using rollers and house paint rather than spray paint. That's capturing my imagination.

Lorimer: Well, particularly in New York, if you get caught walking down the street with a spray can, you're gonna get in trouble, whereas with a bucket of wheatpaste or a roller, you're not going down as bad. In the increasing police state in which we live, people have to find creative ways to get up without getting caught.

Cooper: And that's the part that interests me, how they are managing to do all of this. I'd like to go out on more illegal missions, but I don't really like going out in the middle of the night.

Lorimer: I have a 9-5 job and responsibilities. There are opportunities that present themselves, but A. I'm a horrible climber, and B. I'm afraid of the consequences of being caught in the subway when terrorism charges are being thrown around.

Cooper: So what do you see as the future? What's happening?

Lorimer: For all the street art that's broadcast across the internet, you simple don't experience it the same way without context. I'm increasingly moving towards the point where I would rather turn the computer off and go outside to experience life and whatever I come across than stress about going to [Bushwick](#) because there's that mural I saw a picture of that I should probably take a picture of.

Cooper: Yep, that's me too.

Lorimer: Sure, I look at a ton of street art online, but it just pales in comparison with going outside and looking at your own city. I get emails all the time from people who ask, "How do I find street art?" People should just go outside. Go to whatever cool part of your town and you'll find stuff. To me, seeing work on the internet or using mural locating tools is like short-changing yourself. The whole idea is to go out and experience your environment, notice something wasn't there before, or have a piece change your perception of a spot because of thoughtful placement. Good street art, where someone's thought about the context and made something that's clever or provokes a reaction, to me that's far more interesting than half of the things you see online.

Cooper: Yeah, I'm with you. I just wanna be surprised.

RJ: Martha, what were your early experiences like of seeing graffiti online?

Cooper: When I heard about [Art Crimes](#) and that people were putting graffiti online, I thought, "That is amazing. I can't believe it."

The whole idea of a website was a new thing, and the idea of a graffiti website was fascinating. And now there's a million graffiti websites. I'm interested in how the entire art world has changed because of graffiti, and I think that there has been a shift, especially because of street art. It has changed people's perception of what is art.

Lorimer: I think it's remarkable that you have this truly global phenomenon, well first graffiti and now street art. I don't know where it's going, but there's something to be said for this artform being democratic and with low barriers to entry. There are kids all over the world picking up spraycans or brushes or whatever. There's something really magical about that.



## Chapter 2: Building and discovering the global track

*“There was 600 miles of track. Because of the internet, it’s now a global track.” – Hector ‘Nicer’ Nazario of FATS CRU<sup>1</sup>*

The internet changed everything – not just for street art or graffiti, but for all of us and in all facets of our lives. In this chapter, I take a close look at what the internet has done for traditional graffiti and street art. In short, it sped things up and messed with our ideas of location. The communication between artists that took years before the internet – if it ever happened at all – now occurs in minutes across international boundaries. There’s just more information available today. While there may never be another event like the stencil artist boom in 1980’s Paris, a similar situation could be geographically dispersed but visible online. It’s a new world, one that has propelled street art and graffiti to new heights.

This chapter begins with a theoretical examination of what the internet means for the audience for street art and graffiti. I argue that artists are now fully-aware of, and comfortable with, producing work to be seen both on the street and online. The geographic constraints that had previously limited street art and graffiti have been lifted. While a major boon for artists and fans, the shift has forced artists to reconsider their intended audience.

Next, I look at some of the online systems for digitally documenting and distributing street art and graffiti. These systems have facilitated the growth of street art and graffiti over the last 15 or so years, reaching a larger fanbase, offering new platforms for artwork, and greatly increasing the opportunity for communication between artists.

1. Steel Canvases. Perf. John "Crash" Matos, Hector 'Nicer' Nazario, Wilfredo "Bio" Feliciano, Henry Chalfant and Eric "Deal" Felisbret. Facebook. Bronx Documentary Center, 11 Feb. 2013. Web. 13 Feb. 2013. <<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10200766599386636>>.

Finally, as in the first chapter, I recount a series of anecdotes about artists' experiences with the internet. These stories show how street artists and graffiti writers have taken advantage of the internet and how these new systems have lifted the geographic constraints that had previously defined street art and graffiti.

This is a chapter about location, about city streets and places that exist only as URLs. The internet has dislocated street art and graffiti, moving it from walls into a digital ether. Much of the art in this chapter exists primarily in these new locations. Some of it wouldn't exist without the internet. Some of it uses this new sense of location as a promotional tool for the artist and other pieces engage critically with the idea of dislocated street art. It's all about location, about discovering that there is now a lot more out there than just the walls of the neighborhood. There's a global track.

### **Audience and public in the digital age**

For street art and graffiti, the internet has taken works that were local and made them global. As is seen most profoundly with graffiti, books provided initial flashpoints of global inspiration, zines helped to nationalize styles and magazines continued this trend while also starting to globalize styles. But it was the internet that allowed styles to be updated throughout the world almost instantaneously. If a piece of street art appears in Paris, it can influence an artist in Chicago the same day. While some cities still have distinctive street art scenes (like the handmade stickers that currently cover the newspaper bins throughout Philadelphia or the poster tradition of Los Angeles), there are international trends running parallel to the local scenes. The internet is like books, magazines and flick trading all combined and on Adderall.

As was shown in chapter 1, when street art and graffiti were first developing as genres of public art, the intended audience were people who could come around the corner and stumble across the work. The public for the art consisted of those physically there to see the writing and not many other people. But as people began to photograph the work, things changed. Photographs of graffiti from New York could be seen in London, but the graffiti writers in New York were still doing the work for people who would see it in person. While some

artists in the 1980's realized that they could paint pieces with the intention of having them photographed and distributed worldwide, this was not the focus of most graffiti and street art.

Later, when photos of street art and graffiti began to appear on internet, the situation was similar: Many artists were happy to have their work appear online, and while a few played to the online crowd by putting up work in less risky spots that could be photographed for instant internet fame, most artists were doing work outdoors for a "real life" audience and regarded the digital audience as secondary. But this is no longer the case. The digital audience is now the primary audience for many street artists and graffiti writers.

To understand this shift in how artists who work outdoors see their creations reaching people, there is a distinction to be made between the "audience" for a work of art and its "public." [Michael Warner](#) distinguishes between a "concrete" public of a "bounded audience" such as an audience in a theater, and a more nebulous public, "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation."<sup>2</sup> My distinction between audience and public is similar, with the "audience" as Warner's theater audience and the public as the more nebulous audience. Where I differ from Warner is that I consider even his nebulous audience falling into the concrete category if it is the intended audience for a work, whereas it is that audience plus the unintended audience that make up the public for a given artwork. I came to this distinction by basically reading Warner wrong, so I still think he deserves some credit. Anyway...

The audience for a work is anyone who sees the artwork as intended. In the case of graffiti in the 1970's, this was anyone who saw the piece in person as it flew past them on a subway car. For early street art like that of [John Fekner](#) or [Keith Haring](#), the audience was anyone lucky enough to see the work on a wall as they walked around the streets of New York City. Yes, Haring and Fekner each printed simple books of their work and a select few graffiti writers liked to called up [Martha Cooper](#) and [Henry Chalfant](#) to make sure that their latest work would get photographed, but most street artists or graffiti writers were

2. Warner, Michael. "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 49-90. Web.

not thinking, “Today I’ll do some work so that I can put a photo of the work in a book for people around the world to see.”



*Broken Promises/Falsas Promesas (1980) by John Fekner. Photo by [John Fekner](#).*

The public for a work is anyone who sees it. By this definition, a viewer seeing the work for the first time in 2013 can be part of the public for Fekner’s *Broken Promises/Falsas Promesas* stencil even though it was destroyed decades ago. I have seen photographs of the piece, and it has inspired me to think about issues of urban development. While Fekner did photograph the piece, he could not have imagined that, decades later, such an ephemeral artwork would still be relevant, interesting and influential. Similarly, much of the work in [Subway Art](#) has found a large public outside of its intended audience, and those decorated trains unintentionally launched a global graffiti revolution.

Since the age of graffiti magazines, people have complained about graffiti being painted for the purpose of getting published, but that trend has never been more popular than it is today. Thanks to advances in both physical and digital publishing, artists now make work with the idea that documentation of the effort will at least be distributed online, and possibly in print as well. With this shift, a work’s public and audience are now virtually the same. In some cases there is no intention on the part of the artist that people see the work in person

rather than online. Thirty-five years ago, the expectation was that street art and graffiti would mostly be seen in person. As recently as 15 years ago, it was typically accidental or, at most, a fortuitous bonus for artists when photos of their street art and graffiti appeared online and exposed their work to a potentially global public. Today, the expectation for street art and graffiti, particularly top-tier work, is often that it will be seen by few people in person and by many more people online. Documentation of outdoor art, and the distribution of that documentation, has become the norm. As they say, “pics or it didn’t happen.” As a result, in the 21st century, the audience for street art and graffiti is pretty much identical to the public for street art and graffiti.

You may think that the preceding few paragraphs are a bit of academic bullshit for any art theorists out there, but the key point is important: Twenty years ago, [Shepard Fairey](#) and [Revs](#) didn’t spend time thinking about how their pieces were going to look when reprinted in books or on the web. They were concerned with how their work would look to people who saw it in person. Work might end up in magazines or books, but it wasn’t what artists were considering while the work was being put up. Today, every street artist knows that a photo of his or her work is likely to end up online and be seen by many more people as a result. In response, street artists may take this new audience into account, changing the way the work looks and functions.

The problem with the overlap between audience and public is that the audience for contemporary street art is made up of two distinct groups: A local physical audience and a worldwide digital audience. These two audiences do not experience art in the same way. It’s much like how [Jon Stewart](#) has both a live studio audience at each taping of [The Daily Show](#) and the (much larger) audience of viewers who watch the show online or on television. Stewart knows that both these audiences are going to see him perform, and he has to entertain both of them. Sometimes, Stewart tells inside jokes that only make sense to the studio audience, and other times he includes on-screen graphics and pre-taped segments that are more exciting for the TV audience. Street artists must make similar considerations with their work. What

looks good in person may not be the same as what “pops” when viewed through the lens of an iPhone camera and an Instagram filter. Street artists can choose to focus on one of these audiences or try to please both, but when those considerations are made, the art changes as a result, sometimes with no effect on the physical viewer and sometimes with an extreme one.

Who is this new digital audience? [Evan Roth](#) pointed me towards [Jonah Peretti](#)'s idea of the Bored at Work Network, which Roth sees as the audience for his own work (some of which is street art, some of which is fully digital, and some which is neither but is easily shareable online). The Bored at Work Network is an audience Peretti identified around 2001 as all the people who are bored at work (duh) and forwarding emails around full of cool images and stories and whatever else could get people's minds off being bored and stuck at the office.<sup>3</sup> I had been thinking about this new audience for street art, when I saw [a video of Roth](#) and he hit the nail on the head: Street art's online audience is the Bored at Work Network.<sup>4</sup> The Bored at Work Network consists of the same people who look at street art on the street, and now they have time to view street art because they can do it from their desks. The Bored at Work Network is the audience for street art in the 21st century. And, by the way, Roth is one of the most accomplished artists when it comes to making art that appeals to both the traditional art world and the Bored at Work Network. More on him later.

Beyond the Bored at Work Network, many street artists also take into account the gatekeepers to that audience. While street art began as an artform that rejected gatekeepers, segments of the scene have become dependent on them. The new gatekeepers are bloggers, [Flickr](#) and [Instagram](#) photographers, prolific [forum](#) posters, tweeters and so on. Fifteen years ago, the idea of gatekeepers for street art was ridiculous, but thanks to the internet, many people are now initially

3. McLaren, Carrie. "Media Virus: How Silly Videos and Email Pranks Created the Bored at Work Network. Social Networking Guru Jonah Peretti Explains." Stay Free! Feb. 2006: n. pag. Stay Free! Web. 12 Feb. 2013.

4. Evan Roth Presentation, Storytelling, Kitchen Budapest. Perf. Evan Roth. YouTube. Kitchenbudapest, 26 Feb. 2012. Web. 13 Feb. 2013.

exposed to street art through sites maintained by digital gatekeepers. Although most street artists may be telling the truth when they say they do their work for the person on the street, they aren't stupid either. The average street artist today is well-aware that the right buzz online can lead to opportunities with outdoor projects and in galleries. As a result, even some of the most well-intentioned and "pure" street artists email exclusive pictures to bloggers and call photographers to tell them the location of their latest piece. Acting individually, none of these artists or fans is doing anything wrong, they are just trying to spread the word about great art, but collectively these actions create gatekeepers. And when an artist tries to please a gatekeeper, the work may change.

Inevitably, this reevaluation of whom the street artist is making work for (whether that be the digital masses or gatekeepers or gallerists) has caused changes in the look of the art. The goal of this chapter is to highlight some of the new systems that street artists and graffiti writers are working in as well as the changes that have occurred due to the reduced importance of geographic location for artwork that can be distributed online. In chapter 3, attention will be focused on further changes to modern street art and graffiti as a result of the internet, exemplified by artists actively engaging with the Bored At Work Network by creating street art or graffiti that has stylistic elements best suited to being viewed online. In chapter 4, I look at artists who go further to explore how they treat these new online systems as they or others might treat a city street. This reevaluation and how it affects the artwork is ongoing, but we can look at the last decade or so to get an idea of what has happened thus far and where things might be going.

There's a large amount of street art today that could have existed in 1990, but would not have gotten the same attention despite that the work would have looked just as good 30 years ago. It's not the work that has changed but, rather, the methods of documentation and distribution are becoming as important as the physical street art or graffiti itself. A lot of street art that would have been impossible or ridiculous to make in 1990 makes perfect sense today. For the artists working in that arena, the online street art community has proved a fertile ground for distributing documentation of work which acts like great street art, but which may not actually be successful in

person. Both in person and through photographs, street art today looks and functions differently than it did before the internet. Some of the changes in contemporary street art and graffiti are just part of the natural course of art history and the maturation of the genres, but many are directly related to the internet and the new distribution systems that have arisen.

### The early new systems

Street art has been on the web since at least 1996. With a personal homepage on [Art Crimes](#) by late 1997<sup>5</sup> and a website of his own in 1996, [Ron English](#) was perhaps the first street artist with [a website](#) (and [the first street artist represented on Art Crimes](#), best known as the first website about graffiti). [Shepard Fairey](#) was another early-adopter with his own website by mid-1998,<sup>6</sup> soon followed by [Invader](#) in early 1999.<sup>7</sup> Invader didn't have the same history and automatic fanbase as English and Fairey when he launched his website. He says, "I created my internet website the week after I started my street art project." While these sites put street art and street artists online, fans had to seek out these websites. Anyone typing [graffiti.org/ron\\_english](#) in their web browser was probably someone who had already heard of English. The idea of a street art news site did not yet exist, and there was no way for fans to interact with one another or with the artists on those sites except via email.

However, the graffiti community has had an online presence longer than that of street artists. An online newsgroup about graffiti began in 1994. [Art Crimes](#) launched later that year and eventually became the first place many writers saw graffiti online.<sup>8</sup> I won't focus on Art Crimes or other early examples of graffiti online here even

5. "Ron English - Agit-Pop Artist." Ron English Agit-Pop Artist. Art Crimes, 9 Dec. 1997. Web. 05 July 2012. <[http://www.graffiti.org/ron\\_english/](http://www.graffiti.org/ron_english/)>.

6. "Obeygiant.com WHOIS Domain Registration Information from Network Solutions." Network Solutions, n.d. Web. 05 July 2012. <<http://www.networksolutions.com/whois-search/obeygiant.com>>.

7. "Space-invaders.com WHOIS Domain Registration Information from Network Solutions." Network Solutions, n.d. Web. 18 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.networksolutions.com/whois/results.jsp?domain=space-invaders.com>>.

8. Neelon, Caleb. "Ten Years of Art Crimes: The Effects and Educational Functions of the Internet in Graffiti." Ten Years of Art Crimes. Art Crimes, 1 Sept. 2004. Web. 21 Mar. 2013.



though they are extremely important, because [Caleb Neelon](#) has done a great job writing [a history of the first 10 years of the site and of how the internet affected graffiti in the early years](#).

One lesser-known aspect of Art Crimes is that, according to Neelon, there was a listserv run by Susan Farrell, the founder of the site. This secret listserv included important graffiti writers from around the world, many of whom were active on the street. Many of the writers on the list remained anonymous observers of the conversations rather than active participants, but the list was nonetheless important because it allowed relatively private group conversation among the world's best writers in a time before message boards. Neelon says, "That was the first time I ever thought email was useful."

Neelon was actively involved in the graffiti magazine [42ozProphet](#), and he marks 1999 or 2000 as the time when the internet surpassed magazines as the most useful and popular way to see photographs of graffiti.

From his perspective in the graffiti community, Neelon notes a few peculiarities about street art's popularity online which are worth considering. Because street art was hardly an art genre or movement before the internet, Neelon thinks it developed in tandem with the growth of the web. Whereas graffiti has a set of rules that has been developing since the late 1960's, street art's rules could develop to fit this new medium. I'll discuss this further later on, but Neelon makes the point that a lot of "good" street art looks interesting in a photo even when devoid of context, whereas the best graffiti requires context, and does not translate as well through photographs. Perhaps in a world without the internet, street art would not look interesting when shown devoid of context, but Neelon thinks that the norms of street art that were developed in an internet-era make it a more natural fit for being displayed online.

[Ekosystem](#), the first notable fan-run photo site to cover street art, went online in late 1999. It began, like Art Crimes, as a site for posting photos of graffiti. Unlike Art Crimes, Ekosystem's focus shifted, and photos of what would come to be known as street art were being posted regularly within the first year of the site's existence. As time

passed, Ekosystem began showing more photos of street art, and was eventually reformatted into something closer to a blog.<sup>9</sup>

The next major milestone for street art news came in 2003, when the [Wooster Collective](#) site launched. Wooster Collective, run by [Marc](#) and [Sara Schiller](#), began as simply a place for the Schillers to post photos of street art, interview artists and mention interesting gallery shows, much like any one of the dozens of street art blogs online today. But in 2003 there were few street art blogs and Wooster Collective was able to stake out a position as the go-to site to look at street art (at a time when the term street art was hardly in use at all).

Blogging was still a young medium at the time, which helped Wooster Collective quickly grow both in size and reputation. Even many of the the first artists featured on the site would sometimes send off a round of emails saying, "Check it out, I'm on Wooster Collective," and include a link to the site. The artists were just happy to be getting some attention for their work. Early on, neither the artist nor their friends were likely to have any idea of the popularity of the site and maybe had not even heard of it before, but once they were aware of Wooster Collective, they kept coming back. Those emails ended up driving a lot of early traffic to the site and helping to build their initial readership with people who were already somewhat familiar with street art. Very quickly, a community formed around the Wooster Collective. The first photos on the blog were ones that the Schillers had taken themselves, but within a couple of weeks artists were submitting their own photos. Marc Schiller remembers emails early in the site's existence along the lines of, "I went on the website and I saw what people were doing. It kicked my ass because I hadn't be out there doing stuff on the street in a while, so I wanted to do better and better. It motivated me, so I went out there and I did this piece," but then that piece would amaze the Schillers and they would post a photo of it, which inspired other artists to push themselves further. Artists were looking to Wooster Collective for the type of inspiration they might see on the walls in their own cities. Even [Faile](#), now world-famous street artists, say that they got excited when their work was

9. Eko. "10 Years of Ekosystem.org (part 1/3)." Ekosystem Blog. N.p., 15 Apr. 2010. Web. 05 July 2012. <<http://blog.ekosystem.org/2010/04/10-years-of-ekosystem-org-part-13/>>.

posted on Wooster Collective and when they saw other interesting work from around the world being on the site. The Schillers seem to have stumbled upon a niche that was begging to be filled.

### And then came 2006

Wooster Collective and Ekosystem both continued to grow, and things began to heat up for street art in 2006. With Banksy's LA warehouse show *Barely Legal* and Wooster Collective's *11 Spring Street* installation both happening that year, there was an unprecedented public interest in street art. Over the preceding years super-fans of the culture like the Schillers had become as embedded into the street art community as the artists themselves. But unlike many of the artists, particularly the elusive and extremely popular Banksy, the Schillers were not anonymous; they had a public email address.

During *11 Spring Street*, Wooster Collective was getting attention from mainstream press, which, for a street art website, was new. When they began, street art sites like Ekosystem, Stencil Revolution and Wooster Collective were sites for the street art community. Especially after *11 Spring Street*, Wooster Collective became a site that anyone with a passing interest in edgy design might want to bookmark. The Schillers went from well-respected fans of street art who shared their taste with others to the people distributing street art imagery to the world. More blogs appeared over the years, but none have surpassed Wooster Collective's popularity. Although the Schillers have slowed their posting in recent years, they still define street art for many readers.

2006 was also the year that Flickr left beta. Street art photos had been uploaded to Fotolog, Photobucket and other precursors to Flickr, but Flickr eventually became the dominant place for amateur photographers to post their work. Free users on Flickr can upload up to one terabyte of photos and videos (previously, Flickr allowed free users to upload up to 200 photographs, and paying users could upload unlimited uploads of photos and videos for \$24.95 per year). Myspace and Facebook were designed for sharing photos primarily among friends, but Flickr was always designed to be more of a public-facing photo repository with most images available to be viewed by anyone visiting the site, making it the choice for photographers who want to show their work to a larger audience.

With occasional exceptions, street artists working before 2006 or so generally had to document their own work or get their friends to document it for them. The photographs that were taken often ended up hidden in shoeboxes. Largely thanks to Flickr, the number of easily accessible photos of street art and graffiti went from perhaps a few thousand to millions.

Finally, two online messages boards were founded in 2006: [The Banksy Forum](#) and the forum at [The Giant](#). There had been online forums to discuss street art before such as Australia's Stencil Revolution, which was important for connecting artists and sharing stenciling knowledge around the world, but The Banksy Forum and The Giant forum were the first major online forums for street art focused on discussions among fans rather than among artists. These fan forums helped build the community of fans and collectors that many street artists would come to depend upon financially. The forums are places for the discussion of new work both on the streets and in galleries, and their conversational nature resulted in harsh critiques of artists as well as earnest efforts to promote good street art. At their best, the forums provide places for anyone interested in street art to converse with one another on an equal footing. At their worst, anonymous individuals posting on the forums can make or break careers and lead to vicious arguments between people with undisclosed financial stakes in their opinions. Whereas Flickr is for photographers and running a blog requires some regularity in posting, forums are a place for typical street art fans to express their thoughts.

Forums, Flickr and blogs formed the initial street art communication network online. The network was really just a loose collection of sites run by a couple of random fans and visited by a variety of people, some dedicated regulars and some just passing through. Some commented on every forum, blog and Flickr album they could find while others only checked in on one site. Some people knew each other in real life; others have stayed anonymous behind a screen name or just observed silently. Despite a lack of formal organization, information moved across the network, with photos traveling from Flickr to blogs, and forum posts being echoed by

bloggers. This crossover also occurred less formally, with active participants in one arena acting as silent observers in another.

Through these websites, a loose community began to form. For the first time, street art fans could easily communicate with one another regardless of geographic proximity. The network fed itself, with these sites making it easier for people to discover street art and, in turn, increasing street art's popularity, which generated more content.

### **Rise of the hobbyist documentary photographer**

The number of photos uploaded to Flickr doubled between 2006 and 2007.<sup>10</sup> More people with better digital cameras (and camera phones) began to document street art. Taking photos and posting them to Flickr became one of the simplest and most enjoyable ways to become involved in street art as more than just a fan. What began as one or two photographers snapping photos became a daily onslaught from (in some cities) a dozen or more photographers. In some instances there appeared to be an unspoken competition to get the first photos of new work online before another photographer else got the scoop. That competition might not exist among photographers in smaller cities and towns, but there still is something that was not around ten years ago: One or more photographers in just about any city for whom it's a hobby to document street art and share those photos online. As a result, someone living in London following Billy Craven's Flickr stream can be more up-to-date with street art in Chicago than someone who lives in that city. Flickr and Instagram are now significant communities where nearly everyone there viewing, sharing and producing content.

These amateur photographers capturing street art or graffiti were not (generally speaking) also actively putting up work on the street themselves. Even if that class of photographers did exist before Flickr (and indeed there were a few people documenting work before 2005), it was certainly the first time that photos by amateur fans were being published in such great numbers and so quickly.

Publication speed is a major draw of Flickr, Tumblr and Instagram. Professional-quality photographs can be posted to Flickr

10. Michel, Franck. How Many Photos Are Uploaded to Flickr Every Day and Month? Digital image. Flickr. N.p., 20 Mar. 2012. Web. 11 July 2012. <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/franckmichel/6855169886/>>.

and Tumblr almost immediately, and cellphone pics are often uploaded to Instagram, Tumblr and Flickr as soon as they are taken. This means that new work can be viewed by people around the world on the same day it hits the street. [KATSU](#) says Flickr is “almost real-time graffiti monitoring system. If I tag something new, chances are within a day or two I can find different photographs of it.” But, compared to photo services like Instagram where real-time viewing is the focus, Flickr has a degree of permanence as well. It’s as easy to look through all of the photos taken of KATSU’s work before 2009, as it is to find something he did yesterday.

By comparison, [Aric Kurzman](#)’s story exemplifies the barriers that photographers were faced with before Flickr. In June 2011, [Vandalog](#) published a series of 7 photographs by Kurzman featuring work by New York graffiti legends [Adam Cost](#) and [Revs](#). Kurzman took the photos around 1993–1995, but they weren’t shown publicly until 2010, when he uploaded blurry reproductions of them to his Flickr account. In 2011, Vandalog published higher-quality scans of the photos to a larger audience. Kurzman says he has more photographs of Cost and Revs’ work somewhere, but hasn’t been able to find them. There might have been as many Kurzmans in 1993 as there are photographers posting photos of street art to Flickr and Instagram today, but it is rare for those old photos by amateurs to surface except.

Even on Flickr and Instagram, photo platforms where anyone can get an account, there are users documenting street art and graffiti who are disproportionately (although not unfairly) influential. They may have started as complete amateur photographers, but these users have become minor celebrities within the street art community. [Katherine Lorimer aka Luna Park](#) and [Vitostreet](#), who both joined Flickr in 2005, are prime examples.

Lorimer works as a reference librarian, but in her free time she takes her camera around New York City (and sometimes the world) to photograph street art and graffiti. She began photographing without much knowledge about the work she was seeing, but the librarian in her recognized the importance of documenting and sharing images of such ephemeral work. By the fall of 2013, she had uploaded over 9600 photographs to Flickr.

Thanks to the photographs she posted to Flickr, Lorimer has become one of the most well-respected and closely followed photographers documenting street art and graffiti today. At the height of Flickr's popularity, new photos posted to her Flickr could get well over 100 views in less than a day. The focus has shifted, and Instagram is now the dominant photo-posting platform for most street art and graffiti photographs, and Lorimer has thousands of followers there. Almost as important as the number of views is that, for street artists, getting your street art photographed by Lorimer is a stamp of approval. People look to Lorimer and other photographers to see what interesting things are happening on the street, and since she cannot possibly photograph everything, the choices Lorimer makes about whose work ends up on her Instagram account gives others a sense who is important at the moment. It has gotten to the point where certain artists put up a new work, they will email Lorimer to give her a heads up and information about where the piece can be found.

Perhaps to the disappointment of some artists, Lorimer's documentation has become as much about getting a good photo as documenting interesting work. For the work she does publish, the results are spectacular, but if the light is wrong because of cloud cover or the sun being in the wrong place, she may not get a photograph that she deems worthy of publishing.

Vitostreet had been interested in graffiti since 1984, but if he was taking photos before 2005, comparatively few people have seen them.<sup>11</sup> Since starting to upload photos to Flickr at the end of 2005, Vitostreet had posted over 6000 photographs, mostly from the streets of Paris. Although he does not live in the city, Vitostreet says that he spends most of his Sundays in Paris photographing.<sup>12</sup> He documents street art or graffiti ranging from interesting tags to gigantic legal murals. Like Lorimer, a photo by Vitostreet can rack up views quickly, and a few photos can put an unknown artist in the spotlight, but despite

11. Vitostreet. "Flickr: Vitostreet." Flickr. Yahoo!, n.d. Web. 12 July 2012. <<http://www.flickr.com/people/vitostreet/>>.

12. Vitostreet. "Flickr: Vitostreet." Flickr. Yahoo!, n.d. Web. 12 July 2012. <<http://www.flickr.com/people/vitostreet/>>.

his influence, documenting the streets of Paris remains his weekend hobby.

This respected hobbyist situation has occasionally led to difficulties. Being on the right blogs and Flickr accounts can benefit an artist's reputation and potentially their pocketbook as well, but the hobbyists who publicize street art only have so many free hours, and they do the work for fun. Artists know that having their latest mural photographed by Lorimer can be helpful. Accordingly, some artists reach out to bloggers and photographers to announce their latest work. Most of the time these tips are friendly, but occasionally artists try telling the bloggers and photographers what to do, as if the artists employ the photographs of street art. Obviously, this goes a bit too far. The street art community is built by and for fans, and although some documenters get access to information from artists that the average person would not receive, at the end of the day they are still fans.

Like blogs and online forums, Flickr and Instagram accounts can also function much like real-world locations once did. Street art photographers who post the work of others that they happen to come across both reaffirm the importance of the physical location where they are and tear down the idea that you need to be in a certain place to see street art because they're sharing what's around them with a global audience.

These photographers are sharing the art of their cities with people around the world who can be amazed and influenced by it, but they aren't sharing all of it, since photographers don't document and upload everything they see. Just because a street artist gets up in Brooklyn doesn't mean and that anyone outside of Brooklyn will know about that artist if photographers don't pay attention and the artist doesn't post her own photos. For some, who have never been to New York but still consider it a street art capital of the world, the influential street art photographers of New York street art define the city.

Well-respected street art photographers function as a collection of gatekeepers between their city and the people around the world who view their photos. Just as a scientist studying quantum physics may change the results of her experiment by observing it, by simply documenting the work and making judgments about what is worth



photographing, Flickr and Instagram users became arbiters of taste for their local street art scenes. In places like New York this may not be worrisome because there are so many people taking photographs that one photographer's opinion tends to matter less. However, in smaller cities with perhaps only one or two dedicated photographers, a online portrait of the local scene can be shaped by the tastes of a handful of few people. The "best" Flickr and Instagram accounts are like exclusive clubs where only the highest quality artists enter, but they then get to tell all of the world that they have arrived, and sometimes the world listens.

The situation has improved since graffiti writers were trying to get their work into *Subway Art* or *Style Wars*. Instagram and Flickr have not been magic bullets, but new and influential photographers can appear at any time, photographers are publishing pictures instantly rather than years after taking them. A smaller scale version of the photographer-as-gatekeeper problem still exists, but it's fading fast.

### **Continued growth on new digital platforms**

The online street art community has continued to grow since 2006. In that time, more avenues of online communication have also opened up. There are many more blogs and Flickr users, some more forums and now social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram where photos are shared and discussions can be had.

The sheer number of blogs and the people reading them has grown enormously since Wooster Collective first became a mainstream street art blog. In July 2012, a Google search for "street art blog" returned over half a million hits. While not all of those links are to individual blogs, I subscribe to over 30 blogs about street art or graffiti that are not promotional blogs for an individual artist, gallery or festival, and the number of street art blogs that I don't subscribe to far outweighs the number that I do. That said, a select few blogs tend to stand out from the crowd. As of mid-2012, some of the major street art blogs by visitor count and international reputation included Wooster Collective, Unurth, Vandalog, StreetArtNews, Brooklyn Street Art, Juxtapoz and Arrested Motion (although Juxtapoz and Arrested Motion cover a wide range of art including street art). Of those blogs, Unurth,<sup>13</sup> Vandalog,<sup>14</sup> Brooklyn Street Art,<sup>15</sup> and Arrested Motion<sup>16</sup> all

launched in 2008 and Street Art News<sup>17</sup>. The top-tier street art blogs easily get over 1000 hits a day, and artists and gallerists, as well as casual street art fans, closely follow the sites. Steve Harrington and Jaime Rojo of Brooklyn Street Art even write about street art for [The Huffington Post](#). While platforms like [Tumblr](#) and Instagram that focus on photographs can be better sources for a cavalcade of images, blogs still tend to be the sources of record for street art-related information.

In addition to “traditional” blogs, there are also Tumblr blogs, which have a strong networked context. Whereas some street art blogs do not tend to link out to other blogs, blogs on Tumblr are all about sharing content from other Tumblr blogs, which are credited as the source (although crediting the photographer or the actual creator of the content is less common). This tracing of sources, particularly when the source is another Tumblr blog, is built into the framework of the site. While some Tumblr users are the artists themselves, Tumblr’s real strength is that, like Twitter or Instagram, many people viewing the site have Tumblr pages themselves and are eager to repost interesting content that they find. Some street artists even have fans who have created [fanpage Tumblrs](#) devoted to their work but completely independently of the artist. While Tumblr blogs are rarely places for in-depth analysis and generally do not have much content beyond images, animated GIFs and brief bits of text, they are extremely popular and offer massive amounts of fast-flowing visual content.

In 2011 and 2012, the street art community began moving to Instagram. While Flickr has not been left completely behind, their

13. "Unurth.com WHOIS Domain Registration Information from Network Solutions." Network Solutions, n.d. Web. 12 July 2012. <<http://www.networksolutions.com/whois-search/unurth.com>>.

14. Rushmore, RJ. "Vandalog Launches." *Vandalog*. N.p., 15 Oct. 2008. Web. 12 July 2012. <<http://blog.vandalog.com/2008/10/vandalog-launches/>>.

15. "Brooklyn Street Art." *Brooklyn Street Art*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 July 2012. <<http://www.brooklynstreetart.com/theblog/page/465/>>.

16. "Awakening." *Arrested Motion*. N.p., 20 Sept. 2008. Web. 12 July 2012. <<http://arrestedmotion.com/2008/09/hello-world/>>.

17. "StreetArtNews - About." *StreetArtNews*. Facebook, n.d. Web. 12 July 2012. <<https://www.facebook.com/StreetArtNews/info>>.

2013 redesign alienated some users, and Instagram is appealing to amateur photographers who just want to see and share cool photos. The Instagram application for iPhone and Android is designed to make average photos look better; engage users through commenting, hashtags and “likes”; and allow users to quickly upload and distribute photos taken on-the-go. But Instagram has some downsides too. The service’s focus is on immediacy, so users archives are not as easily searchable as on Flickr and uploading is limited to those with smart phones, making the service a bit of a walled garden for low-resolution photographs. If you’re plugged into the network, Instagram can deliver the latest in street art photos from around the world right to the palm of your hand, but as it becomes the default way to distribute photographs of street art, it presents difficulties for those who want images to be easily accessible for more than a day or two.

Twitter was a sort of precursor to Instagram, where the street art community has been able to spread news more quickly than ever before. While Twitter’s focus is not on images, plenty of images and videos are linked to in tweets. And street art news can come in textual forms as well, like rumors of new work by Banksy (okay I hate to call rumors news, but that rumor is the quintessential example of what lights up the Twitter streams of street art people). Twitter, like the forums, has facilitated public discussions and arguments between fans perhaps living a few minutes away from one another or across oceans. While the more in-depth discussions sometimes end with “okay, this can’t be figured out in 140 characters,” Twitter does provide a starting point for conversations that can continue through other, often less immediate and public, means. Many of the top Twitter users within the street art community are bloggers, Flickr photographers or artists who built their initial popularity elsewhere but use Twitter to supplement their main activities and actively engage with others.

Finally, when writing about social networks, Facebook is impossible to ignore, and street art has made its way onto Facebook, too. Most blogs and websites about street art also have corresponding Facebook fan pages where they can link to their latest posts, communicate with fans and post photos and videos. Between fan pages for blogs and artists and fans sharing links with their friends, Facebook

can drive an enormous amount of traffic to a website. During 2013, Facebook has been the largest traceable source of traffic for Vandalog. Facebook is also a place for person-to-person connections. There are artists, fans and gallerists who use their Facebook accounts to interact with one another on a more personal, rather than professional, level. Street artists have gone from being anonymous to posting photos of their babies on Facebook for all their friends, family and fans to see.

### **New platforms away from keyboard**

Events away from keyboard also take place: Mural festivals, art fairs and indoor exhibitions can make the street art community seem surprisingly small when “everybody” shows up. The internet greatly aids in the popularity and success of these events, as well as the impression that there are friendly faces in every room. I have acquaintances that I see more when we are at these special art world events than when either of us is visiting the other’s city. These meet-ups also help to develop relationships that begin online or spark relationships that can build online after the events are over.

The big art fairs can provide ample opportunity to chat with people in the street art community from around the world, if you’re invited and can afford the price of admission. Many of the same galleries show at fairs in Miami, New York, Basel and London, and some members of the street art jet-set travel to all of those fairs. Despite the ridiculousness of the parties and openings and stunts pulled by companies trying to advertise the latest in private jet technology, there are some great things that happen on a smaller scale. I have found that art fairs, particularly the Miami fairs, are a great place to meet the people whom you have been following online. The same general crowd floats from fair to fair and party to party, and artists from Tel Aviv meet artists from LA and end up crashing on the hotel room floors of bloggers from New York.

That said, just getting into an art fair can require buying an expensive ticket. Add the cost of travel and hotels, and it is prohibitively expensive for many people.

By mid-2011, it seemed like mural festivals and conferences were popping up in every urban area, large or small, around the world. And some combination of the same small group of artists seemed to

be invited to each one. While these events take place in person, the internet has facilitated many of them. [FAME Festival](#) (now shut down, although the organizer has said that he is working on other projects related to street art) in the small town of Grottaglie, Italy and [Nuart](#) in the Norwegian city of Stavanger were two festivals that started before the trend. Each are held in places that would not otherwise be known for street art, except for the work that has occurred as a result of the festivals. Thanks to the internet, word about murals in Stavanger and Grottaglie reaches a much wider audience than the local inhabitants, and there is street art tourism as a result. For a few years, street art fans have flown to Italy to visit FAME Festival because they read about it or saw photographs online. As odd as it may sound, visitors to FAME might have eaten dinner one night with the same group of people whom they had seen at an opening the week before at [Lazarides Gallery](#) in London.

Many of these festivals are grassroots affairs, and now street art fans in cities like Atlanta (USA), Rochester (USA), Richmond (USA), Vienna (Austria), and Katowice (Poland) have started their own festivals. The festival organizers rely on the internet to develop their line-ups and post countless photographs of the resulting murals onto their websites, spreading the word about festivals in even the most remote towns.

There seems to be a pool of about a dozen (admittedly talented) street artists/muralists (such as [Roa](#), [Jaz](#), [Aryz](#), [Nychos](#), [Never2501](#), and [Pixelpancho](#)) who consistently get invited to participate in international festivals or one-off murals for which they have to travel internationally. Maybe this is because line-ups for mural festivals are often developed through online research. Rather than build up a reputation in one city, these touring muralists paint one or two murals in lots of cities and establish their reputations online. When they *do* end up in cities like New York or London with lots of photographers, they can turn mural painting into an event to be extensively documented because everyone has been looking forward to the opportunity to shoot these artists.

### **Conclusion on the structure of the new systems**

For fans of street art and the artists trying to reach those fans, the physical location of street art matters much less than it did 20 years ago. The networks of street art fandom that have developed online have led to the displacement of street art from the physical location in which it is put up. It used to be that installing a work in New York City in a major city might help you get attention. Today, wheatpasting a poster in the center of a hipster enclave isn't as noteworthy as having that poster make it onto the front page of [Wooster Collective](#) or even the artist just posting it to their own [Instagram](#) account if they have enough followers. If it's in the right digital locations, who [cares if the poster](#) can be found in Williamsburg or Williamstown? Blogs, accounts on Instagram or [Flickr](#) and all the other places where fans now go to see street art online have become the new locations that matter.

The point of this section is simply that there are international networks of street art distribution to be found online and physical places where connections between web friends can be made in real life. While I have listed specific websites or mediums, this overview of how street artists and street art fans organize themselves online should be considered a rough sketch of the landscape, as examples, not as an exact blueprint that will be accurate in the future. Just as Instagram began to surpass Flickr within some circles around early 2012, something similar could occur next week causing users to abandon Instagram and blogs. The unique quirks of each distribution network are temporary as users can move from one network to another, but the goal within each new network is the same: the sharing of information about street art. It's not blogs, Flickr, Instagram, forums, Facebook or Tumblr that are affecting street art. It's the internet. Those platforms are merely best ways to share art on the internet right now. Tomorrow's platforms will surely be different.

### **Existing in the new systems**

Shifting focus now, I want to look at how artwork actually exists in these new systems and how artists have reacted to and taken advantage of them. These examples range from the commercial to the altruistic, from the conscious to the unconscious and from the subtle to the overt. Nearly every street artist and graffiti writer, whether or not

they maintain their own online presence, has been affected by these new systems in some way.

### Logan Hicks and Stencil Revolution



*Logan Hicks with the mural he painted for Wynwood Walls in Miami, Florida in 2010. Photo by Jeremiah Garcia.*

For those who are very involved in the street art community, Logan Hicks is a bit of an odd but much-loved figure. On the one hand, he is a very important link between many people in street art because he's been around for a long time and has been involved in organizing projects like Primary Flight, and his stenciling technique pushed the medium forward significantly. On the other hand, he isn't much of a street artist since he rarely paints murals and has hardly done any illegal pieces since developing his trademark style. He's more of a studio painter who happens to use spraypaint, but, as opposed to many so-called "urban artists" who jumped on the street art bandwagon in the mid 2000's but stuck to gallery work, Hicks is well-respected in the street art community.

Hicks says flat out that the internet is how he got his start as a serious artist, jump-starting his career by getting his work in front of people around the world instantly. He was posting on the Stencil

Revolution forum, and, like a lot of stencil art, Hicks' pieces work well when viewed in photographs. Some art doesn't translate well when documented in a photograph, like pieces that are extremely detailed in a way that is not photorealistic or need more than one shot for the viewer to grasp, but stencils tend to work well photos, and photos are easy to post online.

The Stencil Revolution website/forum was founded in 2002.<sup>18</sup>

The site began as a school project for the Australian street artist Prism. Hicks began posting to Stencil Revolution shortly after the site was founded in 2002, uploading photos of his art for others to comment on. In some ways, the site was a proto-Flickr, with users posting photos for others to view and comment on, except that, unlike Flickr, the site had a specific focus.

According to Hicks, Stencil Revolution "was the meeting hub for every stencil artist out there." In fact, the site was such a hub that it was how Hicks first communicated with Jeremiah Garcia, a stencil artist who, as Hicks and Garcia would later find out when they met in person, lived in the very same building as him.

While many of the artists on Stencil Revolution were making pop art or Banksy-like puns with 1-2 layers, Hicks was posting photos of his 5-8 layer stencils, and soon he began to see others adding more and more layers to their work. Even in the relatively early days of street art shared online, Hicks' art sparked development in the global stencil community in a way that absolutely wouldn't have been possible just a few years before.

### Shepard Fairey on going from the street to the internet

Shepard Fairey has been consistently putting up street art since before I was born, and he has been one of the most important participants in the street art community as it has grown from graffiti's nameless oddball cousin to the behemoth that it is today.

18. "Stencilrevolution.com WHOIS Domain Registration Information from Network Solutions." Network Solutions, n.d. Web. 20 Feb. 2013. <<http://www.networksolutions.com/whois/results.jsp?domain=stencilrevolution.com>>.





*Logan Hicks at work on the mural he painted for the Electric Windows project in Beacon, New York in 2010. Photo by [Jason Persse](#).*



*Shepard Fairey's mural at Bowery and Houston in New York City in May, 2010.  
Photo by [sari demmise](#).*

As explained in the first chapter, Fairey's first time showing his [OBEY-Giant](#) work in a gallery was in 1994, and he had already been making Andre/OBEY stickers for about five years when that happened. But printing stickers and posters wasn't free, even though Fairey did run a printing studio. In 1995, Fairey set a goal for himself of funding the outdoor portion of the OBEY Giant campaign by selling fine art prints of the same images. He had already been using the same supplies and printing process to print both his street posters and the fine art screenprints. The only difference between the two was that the posters were on cheap paper ideal for wheatpasting and the fine art prints were on high quality paper suitable for hanging on a wall. While he sold some prints, it was not yet enough to entirely offset the cost of the posters he was making for the street. That wouldn't come for a few years.

Here's Fairey on some of the problems he faced selling prints in his early years:

"It really wasn't a very practical strategy until the internet, and here's why: Packing and shipping prints is time

consuming. There's a lot of damage when you're sending them off to retailers who often wanted them on consignment. Stuff would sit around, no one would buy it, and it would come back to me damaged. Or I would run ads in places like Slap or [Juxtapoz](#). It's expensive to do that and that ad is only in there for one issue. I would barely get enough orders to pay for it. I started my website in '97, and really only because a friend of mine said he would program it for me. I thought 'well, this kind of street art culture is all about rebellious people who think that life should be a dangerous visceral pursuit, and the internet is about being complacent and voyeuristic and it's the opposite. None of these people are gonna wanna look for my stuff on a computer. That's nerdy.' But, with the opportunity to have a website without having to pay for it, I thought 'Why not?'. Immediately, within a week of the site being up, it was getting a decent amount of traffic. I set up a shopping cart there and I started to get online orders, but I didn't have [PayPal](#), so people would still have to send a check in, which is crazy. But in 1998, Juxtapoz did an article on me and they had a big following, and then I got PayPal around then, and that made a huge difference. In a lot of ways, the same problem exists with galleries, with clothing retail, and with poster retail: That there's an intermediary that you have to deal with, and no matter how professional you are, they might screw things up. Once I had PayPal set up and that Juxtapoz article, all of a sudden, I was controlling all of the steps in the process. That made a huge difference. It was virtually life-changing."

Fairey isn't the only artist for whom the internet and ecommerce made a huge difference. Patrick Miller and Patrick McNeil of [Faile](#) say that their webshop, where they sell prints, allowed them to become full-time artists. While I cover a lot of "commercial street art" in this book, the commercial aspects of street art are not my focus. It is, however, a topic that writer and curator Pedro Alonzo has thought extensively about and it deserves a brief mention. Alonzo notes that prints were



Four prints by Shepard Fairey. Original photo by [Urbanartcore.eu](#), edited by RJ Rushmore.

once an afterthought for artists, images based on paintings that were their primary and more reliable income. But prints have become huge business in the last decade, particularly in the street art community, thanks to webstores. Online, artists can sell out a print release in a matter of minutes and make hundreds of thousands of dollars in one day, a business model that Alonzo sees as a modern version of what Keith Haring was trying to achieve in the 1980's.

Although the internet has been a huge help to Fairey, he seems to miss parts of the culture that the internet has left behind or changed. He says:

“Street artists and graffiti artists were building a reputation almost completely on personal confrontation with the art and the volume of what they had on the street. You're walking around New York and you see [Revs](#) here. [Cost](#) there. So-and-so there. And you go ‘Wow. That person's putting in work. That is really impressive. They get my respect. They're all-city.’ You don't even hear the phrase ‘all-city’ anymore, really. That used to be the big thing. Then, there were some graffiti magazines, and people would get a little bit of love and a second ripple effect of the

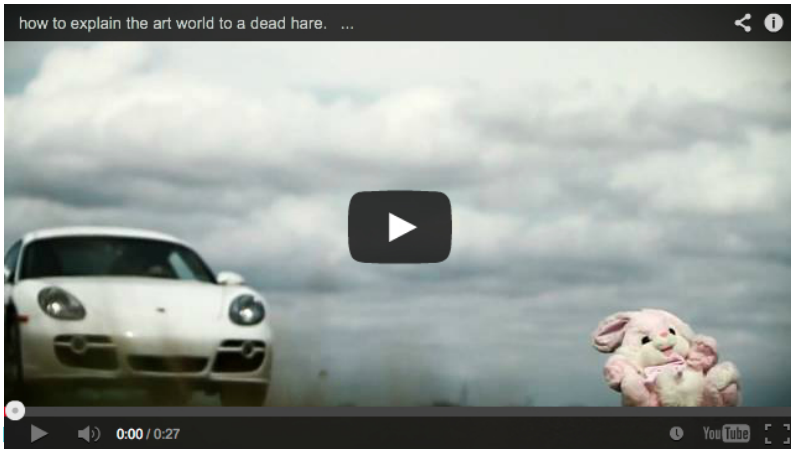
work they were doing on the street by documentation in the graffiti magazines, but the primary mentality of the street artists and the graffiti artists was to do a shitload of stuff. Things like the throw-up evolved out of the idea of trying to balance quantity and quality in graffiti, that you come up with a thing that's just two colors, is quick to do, that looks well-resolved stylistically and covers some surface area, and it's not nearly as much time as a 20-color burner. And with street art... the poster: put up a lot of the same poster; stencils and stickers: put up a lot of the same thing, and it's what you can carry around in a messenger bag or a backpack. And doing a lot was important because some people might not venture from city to city or neighborhood to neighborhood, so you had to cover a lot. Then the internet, in a lot of ways, changed the approach for people who knew that they could do a few really well-crafted pieces outdoors and get the cachet of doing street art and being in public, but spend a little bit more time and document it well and then have it proliferate like mad on the internet. I'm not saying one is better than the other. It's just that if you expected to build a name in street art before the internet, you couldn't have used that approach."

### Reaching beyond geographic boundaries

[Ron English](#) is an artist who has seen firsthand how putting up work in certain locations was advantageous in the days before the internet. He has been doing street art since the early 1980's and began his career in Texas before moving to the East coast. When he moved East, his art began to get national media attention, but, of his work in Texas in the 1980's, he says "Everything we did in Texas lived and died in Texas."

Today, English doesn't think that Texans face that same disadvantage. In the winter of 2010, English made a short video, [how to explain the art world to a dead hare](#), in which a stuffed rabbit full of paint is run over by a Porsche. That video was shot in Texas with a team of locals, and English hoped that the video would show them that "even if

you're stuck down here, you can do something for no money or next to no money. You can reach out and get your art outside of the valley. You're not really stuck here. You just have to think, 'What do we have here that nobody else has?' and then exploit that and put it out there. You're not as isolated as you think. You're only isolated because you think you're isolated." The video has over 30,000 views on YouTube.



*how to explain the art world to a dead hare. by ron english*

But an artist doesn't need a name like English's to make their work spread beyond their hometown. [Chip Thomas aka Jetsonorama](#) and [Yote](#), two artists based in Arizona, made it onto [Wooster Collective](#) in 2010 [thanks to a lucky find by a fan of the blog who sent her photos to the Schillers](#), and both artists have also made it onto [Unurth](#) and [Vandalog](#). As a result, their work in sparsely populated areas has been seen and appreciated by people around the world. In fact, Yote and Thomas met after being connected through [Vandalog](#). Yote had taken photos of some pieces by Thomas and [Gaia posted the photos to Vandalog](#). Thomas saw the post, and reached out to Yote, whose work Thomas had seen only a few days before in the form of a wheatpasted image of a coyote nearby one of his own wheatpastes. Much like [Logan Hicks](#) and [Jeremiah Garcia](#), these two artists, who lived relatively close to one another and were working in the same area, were connected by a blog headquartered in another country. Without

the internet, perhaps Yote and Thomas never would have met and collaborated.



*Chip Thomas aka Jetsonorama and Yote's first collaborative installation (October 2009). Photo by [Chip Thomas](#).*

### **Where are you based? Who cares?**

Despite the case of [Chip Thomas aka Jetsonorama](#) and [Yote](#), most artists do not end up on street art blogs through dumb luck. Blogs with no regional focus like [Wooster Collective](#) and [Vandalog](#) get most of their content through submissions by artists, pr people and fans or by seeing the content after it's been posted elsewhere on the internet. Even for regional blogs like [Streets Dept](#) or [Hooked](#), which typically rely on photographers walking around and looking for street art or graffiti a few days a week, a clever artist can figure out spots where the editor photographer likes to look for art and then put their work in those locations. Or the artist can just email the blog to let the photographer know where their new work is. Most street art and graffiti fans will say there's nothing better than walking around a section of town that they've never been before only to discover some work that they did not know was there, but those moments are not how most major blogs discover new work.

For about the first two years Vandalog's existence, I was based in London, where I made a point of walking around at least once a week to look at street art. That's a large part of how I became educated about street art, and those walks influenced what was covered on Vandalog. But that didn't have to be the case. In the fall of 2010, I moved to suburban Philadelphia where most of the street art is in the form of character-based sticker art adhered to newspaper bins, and street art is effectively nonexistent in the suburb where I live. It was quite a change. But I'm still able to run Vandalog. I still cover things that take place in London, Philadelphia, Cape Town, Los Angeles, New York, Berlin, Melbourne, Buenos Aires and elsewhere. Vandalog was able to continue relatively uninterrupted by my move because most of what I post about, even the London-related things that I posted about while I lived there, are things that I find out about through email, reading other blogs or checking various [Flickr](#) and [Instagram](#) accounts.

Saying things like "London-based" is increasingly less relevant. Yes, it can help commercially-minded street artists to put up work in London or New York City, but putting up work in Cleveland or Mexico City can be successful too, as long as there's a photo.

Today, the important locations for street art are IP addresses. Street artists have more to gain if something they do appears on all of the top five street art blogs than if they get up in five cities around the world without any online attention. Artists who find themselves in "the right places" online can reach a wide audience, build a strong fanbase and even sell work more effectively than even an artist in a major city whose work is ignored by the internet community. Depending on the spot hit, the type of intervention, and the reliability of the local graffiti removal squad, street art and graffiti can be extremely-short lasting, but a photo on a blog is comparatively permanent and can be seen around the world. And unlike the street where most people have no interest in examining the hidden scribbles on the walls of every alleyway, websites dedicated to street art or graffiti are generally visited by people who already have some interest in the work and documentation is presented in such a way that the work is highlighted.

Websites and social media accounts can also assume the function of locations when the pages are run by the artists' themselves, with



artist-run pages a potential alternative to getting work photographed by documentarians. A website or social media account can function as an artist's portfolio, while a blog or someone else's Instagram account might only share one or two pieces by a given artist at a time. Once fans find an artist's site or social media profile, they have access to works the artist may have done in perhaps a dozen different countries over as many years.

For artists like [Lush](#), their fame and success is built online. That's where his fans are and where their art exists best. Lush is from Australia, and he has painted across Australia, the USA and England, but his work is really only finished and out there for consumption on his [Flickr](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [Tumblr](#) pages, where his large audience of committed fans can be found. If anyone sees his pieces in person, that's an added bonus. Lush is an extreme example, but more traditional street artists act similarly. [Gaia](#) lives in Baltimore and the locals love his work, but he posts nearly everything he does on [his Flickr](#). Because he posts photos online, I'm as familiar with Gaia's work as anyone in Baltimore or wherever he's been painting. It matters very little whether Lush or Gaia paint in an abandoned factory outside of Pittsburgh or in downtown London. What matters is that they get the photo and post it online.

While Thomas and Yote ended up on [Wooster Collective](#) thanks to a random fan's photo, even they both post their own photographs online. Thomas has [his own blog](#), and Yote has [a Tumblr](#). For many artists working outdoors, taking photos of their own work for the internet is an essential part of what they do because the photos disrupt the geographic constraint of street art and graffiti.

### **Tracing a style's transition from local to global**

There's a certain style of street art that is often attributed to [Caledonia Curry aka Swoon](#), a New York City street artist and one of the most important women in the genre. For the sake of simplicity, although perhaps at the risk of oversimplification, I'll classify those who practice this style of street art as part of The Block Partiers (after [a 2008 show at Ad Hoc Art that featured many of these artists](#)) and define the style as life-sized or larger-than-life figurative works made with cut paper



PHOTO



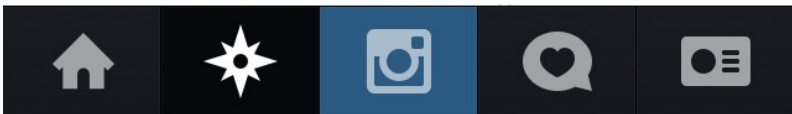
lushsux

2w



♥ 2176 likes

● lushsux Escape the buff... Feel free to repost my work just @lushsux it... #graff #graffiti #comic #comics #drawing #drawings #illustration #melburn #melburngraff



*A screenshot taken November 11th, 2013 of a photo on Lush's Instagram account. Photo by [Lush](#), screenshot by RJ Rushmore.*



*A Swoon wheatpaste. Photo by [Rex Dinger](#).*

or block prints and wheatpasted on the street. Many in the group were inspired by the German Expressionists like [Otto Dix](#) and [Käthe Kollwitz](#). The Block Partiers are a group of artists whom have, for the most part, not had much interaction with one another in person, despite being influenced by each other. Whether or not The Block Partiers form a cohesive movement, they popularized a particular style on the street and, in the eyes of outsiders influenced by the earlier Block Partiers, seemed to be doing so in a way that connected them together. Even though the number of artists in this group is small, the geographic distribution of these artists is noteworthy. The Block Partiers began in New York and became associated with that city, but the style has subsequently spread around the world.

Curry began working outdoors in 1999. By 2004, she was making outdoor work under the name Swoon and photos of that work were

beginning to appear online showing a style that will be familiar to her fans today.<sup>19</sup> Both of Curry's trademark mediums (papercutting and block printing) influenced The Block Partiers. Her street pieces were typically life-sized or larger-than-life depictions of people, either showing their entire bodies or with their bodies dissolving into, or being obscured by, cityscapes. Because the works were made using techniques that make replication relatively simple, many of her images were repeated multiple times.

Of course, no artist works in isolation and it's often difficult, if not impossible, to pin down who was "first" at any particular innovation. There are artists who could be considered precursors to Swoon. Curry herself cites [WK Interact](#) as an influence. While he was not using papercuts or block printing, WK Interact began wheatpasting printed posters depicting life-sized figures on the streets of New York long before Swoon was doing it. [Richard Hambleton](#)'s work goes back even further. Nonetheless, Swoon became the *de facto* trailblazer of this small, loosely-knit movement.

Another of the artists closely associated with The Block Partiers who began creating street art in New York around the same time yet independently from Curry, is [Dennis McNett](#). When McNett moved in New York City in 2001, he was frustrated with the New York gallery scene and, at the same time, got his first serious introduction to graffiti and began working outdoors. Around 2002, he was introduced to Curry's work through their mutual friend [Tod Seelie](#). McNett and Curry have subsequently collaborated on occasion. Although McNett was not inspired by the Swoon wheatpastes, Curry and McNett float in some of the same circles and his is still a Block Partier.

Although McNett began his street art practice around the same time as Curry, he attributes the boom in Block Party work to largely Curry. While the well-known Block Partiers seem to have been more influenced by Curry than McNett, McNett is a professor at [Pratt University](#) and where he teaches printmaking. He has had students taking his classes show him their work, and then noticed the same images on the street. Even if McNett is not the most-cited influence

19. BruceLabounty802. "Swoon." flickr. Yahoo!, 02 Dec. 2007. Web. 21 July 2012. <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/brucelabounty/2082776244/>>.

of the other Block Partiers, his presence on the street is still notable and he contributed to a general sense in New York City that large wheatpasted block-prints could be an interesting way to get seen.



*A wheatpaste by Brian Adam Douglas aka Elbowtoe. Photo by [shoehorn99](#).*

Brian Adam Douglas aka Elbowtoe began his street art career in New York City in the mid-2000's. Although it was not his first outdoor work, Douglas began experimenting with [block printing](#) and [simple papercutting](#) in late 2005. He saw a Swoon wheatpaste in Redhook, Brooklyn, and realized he could use the skills he had learned while experimenting with woodblock printing in college to make work for the street. In 2006, Douglas found his stride with a series of works that would denote him as a Block Partier. His first Block Partier pieces were prints of his [cats](#) that appeared on the street in March of 2006. In April and May of that year he put his [first](#) life-sized woodcut portraits on the street. Although Douglas has worked with different media and has had different styles over the years, his block prints, particularly those that fit squarely within the Block Partier style, are what he is best known for on the street.



*A wheatpaste of a block print by Judith Supine. Photo by [Garrison Gunter](#).*

Another street artist who experimented with wood in 2006 is [Judith Supine](#). Although Supine is best known for his dayglo collages, [as early as February 2006](#) he installed large pieces of wood outdoors which were carved and painted with figures, works which [Douglas publicly commented on and admired](#). He was also featured in Ad Hoc Art's *Brooklyn Block Party* show in the winter of 2008, where he showed a block print.<sup>20</sup> While not a core Block Partier, Supine is one example of an artist who may have been temporarily inspired by what Block Partiers were doing on the streets of New York, and was in the show that gave the group its name.



*A wheatpaste made up of a block print and a papercut by Robyn Hasty aka Imminent Disaster. Photo by [Ray Mock](#).*

20. Sleepboy. "Openings: Brooklyn Block Party @ Ad Hoc Gallery." Arrested Motion. N.p., 16 Dec. 2008. Web. 21 July 2012. <<http://arrestedmotion.com/2008/12/openings-brooklyn-block-party-ad-hoc-gallery/>>.

In 2008, both [Gaia](#) and [Robyn Hasty aka Imminent Disaster](#) began making Block Partier style street art. These two younger artists are the two New York Block Partiers who owe the most to Curry.

Hasty is the Block Partier with the closest connections to Curry. While at [Parsons The New School for Design](#), Hasty was taught by [Martin Mazorra of Cannonball Press](#). While Mazorra is not known for wheatpasting his block prints, he was a member of the Barnstormers Collective, which painted barns in North Carolina, and Cannonball Press, known for their large and intricate block prints. After graduating in 2007, Hasty created her first life-sized block print. By then though, Hasty had already met Curry as a result of joining the [Miss Rockaway Armada](#), a rafting/art project that Curry developed along with a collective of other artists and engineers. After her experience on the Armada, Hasty became one of Curry's assistants. While Hasty had been doing street art [as early as 2006](#), works showing the influence of Curry and [Emory Douglas](#) [began appearing in 2007](#). Her first Swoon-like large block print [appeared on the street in early 2008](#). Hasty worked with Curry in Curry's studio and on the raft projects, and Curry's influence on Hasty's wheatpastes is undeniable.

Until 2006, Gaia was just another high school kid on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Then he got involved with street art. He began by making [simplistic stickers and very small block prints](#) under the name Pisa, but within a year he discovered Swoon. From that point on, he took his street art more seriously. Soon, he [carved his first large-scale lino block print and reemerged as Gaia](#). As Gaia, he spent about 18 months putting up comparatively simple lino block prints. In July 2008, he moved into more serious territory with [work comparable to that of Swoon](#), and his style continued to progress in that direction for some time.

Although Gaia was living in New York and could hop on the subway to see Swoon pieces in person, that's not what happened. Gaia first became familiar with Curry's work by seeing wheatpastes on [Flickr](#). Despite this unexpected mode of discovery, [he has said](#) that Curry and the artist [Kiki Smith](#) were "the impetus for my getting up in the streets." Eventually Gaia met Curry, and their work appeared side-by-side in galleries and on the street. Yet it was through Flickr





*A wheatpaste by Gaia. Photo by [shoehorn99](#).*

that her work first inspired him, and he was not alone. Now, Gaia lives in Baltimore, where he continues to do street art. He makes sure to document his efforts post photos to his own Flickr account.

Around the same time that Gaia's style was developing into something noticeably by Curry, there was at least one non-New

Yorker paying attention to Curry's work: Chicago's [Tiptoe](#). Based on the works shown in Tiptoe's Flickr account, it appears the first serious Swoon influences in his work began to appear [around March 2008](#). That work was indoors. It was not until the fall of 2008 and spring of 2009 that Swoon's influence made its way into Tiptoe's street art as well. In [September](#) and [October](#) 2008, he put up street work clearly influenced by Swoon's papercut pieces. In [April 2009](#), Tiptoe wheatpasted a quintessentially Block Partier piece: a life-sized portrait of a boy made with a woodblock. While Tiptoe has developed his own unique style, he still fits firmly within The Block Partiers, and seems to have been influenced by other artists in the group [such as Gaia](#). It is unknown how Tiptoe first discovered Swoon, but it is clear he was aware of Swoon and it's likely that he followed her work online.



*A wheatpaste by Yote. Photo by [Daniel Lobo](#).*

[Yote](#) is another street artist whose identity was shaped by The Block Partiers. Before working as Yote, the artist behind that pseudonym had been using stencils. He had followed [Wooster Collective](#) since the site's early days, and even though he wasn't living in New York,

he was more up-to-date than most about what was happening on the streets of there and elsewhere. When he began teaching himself to carve and print lino blocks in 2009, had been inspired by seeing pieces online by Curry, Gaia, Douglas, McNett and others (Yote was based in Arizona at the time). Because Yote was not pleased with his initial prints, he reached out to Gaia through Flickr for some tips, and an “e-mentorship” began. Although Yote eventually made it to New York and Baltimore where he saw Gaia and Swoon wheatpastes on the street, it was the internet that first inspired him to work in the Block Partier style.



*A wheatpaste by Dale Grimshaw. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

The Block Partiers expanded overseas in 2009 with Dale Grimshaw, a London-based artist. Grimshaw had done block printing years earlier, but took it up again after seeing the work of Douglas and Curry online and on the streets of London. In April 2009, he put up a small block print of a face, and he installed his first full-body life-sized block print on the street that summer. As a result of seeing work by Block Partiers on the internet, Grimshaw became a part of the group himself. With that, a New York trend and then an American trend became a global one.

Before the internet, street art scenes were local. Information traveled slowly from city to city, if at all. Cities, and even certain neighborhoods, often developed distinctive styles. While this was particularly true with graffiti, it happened with street art as well. Blek le Rat's use of stencils spawned the Parisian stencil scene, which, for years, dominated Parisian street art. Post-Wooster Collective, global street art communities began to develop as information spread more freely. The Block Partiers never had the scale of Blek le Rat's influence, but the loosely affiliated group developed right as people began putting photos of street art online. Initially, the Block Partiers were a New York phenomenon. The artists most closely associated with the style are those who lived in New York City. But thanks to photos posted online, the style was eventually adopted by artists outside of New York City. Grimshaw, Yote, Tiptoe, and others were inspired to go out and do their own work because of what they saw on the web. Yote was living in an area with very little street art, but he had access to it online. Grimshaw could walk around London and see some of the best examples of street art in the world, but it was New York's Block Partiers who inspired him. Undeniably, the internet facilitated the spread of the Block Partier style.

### **The internet gives Roa a boost**

Belgium's premier street artist, Roa has been posting photos of his work online since at least April 2006. While he was painting outdoors long before that, it was in 2009 that he finally began to receive significant attention outside of Belgium for his work. Now, he is one of the world's top street artists and the only Belgian artist to be included in the 2011 show *Art in the Streets* at MOCA in LA. Roa's murals are



*Roa in London. Photo by Leigh Harries.*

much-loved around the world and so there is little doubt that the man can paint a good mural, but it was the internet that helped him to go from being a local artist to an international star.

Although [Ekosystem](#) has posted Roa's work since 2007, it was on [Wooster Collective](#) where I first saw it. When Wooster Collective posted a photo of one of his pieces in [Brussels](#) in January 2009, I was surprised I had never seen Roa's work before. Tracking Roa down proved difficult. He had a [Fotolog account](#) (a site similar to Flickr). On [Fotolog](#), you had to pay to comment on photos unless you were one of the first people to comment on a particular photo. Every day for nearly two weeks, I checked Roa's Fotolog to see if I could comment for free. [On January 21](#), I posted a comment and asked him to email me. I heard back later that day. In March [I posted about Roa](#). By then, he had visited New York City and painted at [Factory Fresh](#) and [Secret Project Robot](#). Those walls caught people's attention.

Soon, Roa's work was appearing regularly on Flickr accounts like that of [Katherine Lorimer aka Luna Park's](#) and blogs like Wooster Collective, [Vandalog](#) and [Unurth](#). While I am not even close to being an objective observer in this case, I did watch the growth of Roa's

career. It is my very biased opinion that those three blogs in particular championed him in front of a large enough audience that our support played a significant role in his growing popularity. Once you see a wall by Roa in person it's clear why he now receives many opportunities to paint at festivals and exhibit in galleries. But he was doing work that was just as interesting back in 2006 and not getting those opportunities. Outside of Belgium, few people knew him. Blogs introduced Roa's work to an audience beyond those who could see his murals in Brussels or at abandoned factories outside of Ghent.



*A piece by Roa, just off of Brick Lane. Painted in October 2009 during his trip to London for a show at The Brick Lane Gallery. Photo by [MsSaraKelly](#).*

It helped that Roa visited major art cities like New York and London. He visited London in October 2009 when he had a few small drawings and two wallpaintings in a show at [The Brick Lane Gallery](#). During that trip, he painted around half a dozen pieces either on or within a very short walk of Brick Lane, the epicenter of London's street art scene. By the time he left town, everyone in the London street art community was talking about Roa. The following April, Roa had his first solo show at the [Pure Evil Gallery](#), a gallery owned and

managed by [Charles Uzzell-Edwards aka Pure Evil](#), a street artist who [collaborated on a wall with Roa](#) during his October 2009 trip.

Roa loves to travel. He has painted across Europe, North and South America and Australia. All along the way, he finds new fans and makes work unique to each location, but he also allows his fans at home to appreciate his work by taking good photos and distributing them online. While Roa's success cannot be entirely attributed to the internet, his combination of skill, travel and web-presence all contributed to his popularity.

### Australians and their travels



*Anthony Lister in London. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

Australia is home to some of the best street artists in the world, but few are known outside of their home country compared to artists from New York or London. The reason for isn't entirely clear, but a possible explanation is lack of travel. While it's possible to live in Nevada and

be a well-known street artist, it helps to have visited at least one of the coasts of the USA. Although Melbourne is a big city with its own street art scene, a similar rule applies.

Many of the internationally famous Australian street artists and graffiti writers ([Anthony Lister](#), [Dabs and Myla](#), [Ian Strange aka Kid Zoom](#)...) have spent time living in the USA. Strange and Dabs acknowledge that moving to the USA helped their careers. Both Strange and Lister moved to New York and then spent time traveling between the USA and Australia. They weren't forgotten while in Australia, however. 20 years ago, that might have been the case, but now, these artists used social media and blogs to keep their names on people's minds. The fans just need that initial introduction with a few pieces painted near them.



*Phibs in Newtown, Australia. Photo by [JAM Project](#).*

[Phibs](#), another Australian street artist, is a member of the well-respected [Everfresh Studio](#) group of artists and has works in the



National Gallery of Australia, but he is not as well-known as Strange or Lister. He also isn't as well-traveled as either of them, or as well-traveled as the more internationally recognized members of Everfresh Studio like Meggs, Rone, or James Reka. A trip to New York City or participation in a few European street art festivals might boost Phibs' global recognition for years.



*Kaff-eine. Photo by the euskadi 11.*

Australian street artist Kaff-Eine, who didn't leave the country between 1989 and mid-2013, said this about Australian street artists traveling abroad to achieve international success: "It seems to be a rite of passage, that Australian street artists will develop here a bit, travel around overseas, paint walls, have some shows, and during this process they develop their art more and garner a gathering of overseas support in the process. So I think it's hard to separate what lots of Australian artists do anyway with the dynamic that they begin to gain an international following while traveling. Would they have gained this international following anyway, if their art is spectacular and documented/marked competently online?"

It's a bit of a chicken or egg problem, with travel on one side and fame on the other, but it's likely easier to get the fame necessary to

facilitate further travel if an artist takes the risk on that first trip and tries to paint the town red in a major street art city. That's what [Roa](#) did in London, although he had [The Brick Lane Gallery](#) to help out. After Roa made his mark in London once, the city never forgot him and new fans there began to follow his work wherever it appeared. Without painting at least once in a major street art city, it's difficult for an artist to break into street art on an international scale. That first trip solidifies an artist's name in people's minds. Future travels and international recognition can follow, with blog coverage and an artist's social media activity sustaining and growing their popularity from wherever they are working.

### A closer look at Kid Zoom



*Ian Strange aka Kid Zoom's installation at Cockatoo Island in Sydney, Australia in 2011. Photo by [Scott Brown](#).*

Documentation and the web have played critical roles for [Ian Strange](#) aka [Kid Zoom](#) throughout his art career, and it now explicitly influences his art. In the Australian city of Perth where Strange grew up and began doing graffiti as a teenager, graffiti typically only lasts a few days, so it was essential for Strange to photos of his work from the beginning. And even in his early years, Strange was looking beyond

Perth for graffiti. He also read graffiti magazines and checked the website [Art Crimes](#). His dream was to have his work featured in one of those magazines or on Art Crimes.

In the mid-2000's, street artists and graffiti writers began to establish [Myspace](#) pages and eventually [Flickr](#) accounts. For Strange, the world got smaller and Perth didn't seem so isolated. He says, "Suddenly, instead of having conversations and competing with the guy down the road, you're doing that with some of the best artists around the world." It was through Myspace that Strange connected with the [Everfresh Crew](#) and other artists in Melbourne, who eventually got him into group shows there. For Strange, the shows were a reason to fly to Melbourne, paint, and meet people. During those first shows in Melbourne, Strange was still an unfamiliar face. On more than one occasion, he sent art to shows curated by people who had only seen his work as jpeg images.

While some artists are hesitant to acknowledge the importance of the documentation and distribution to their work, Strange is happy to discuss it, stating, "More and more, distribution of the image is the most important thing. If you're an artist, you're a visual communicator, and if you're communicating visually, you wanna be able to delineate your work as far as you can. To be able to get more eyes seeing it creates more awareness which creates more interest in your work." Although Strange isn't generally recognized as a social media guru, he is more comfortable than most with the idea that a major audience for his paintings is the Bored At Work Network, who look at jpeg versions of his work.

Strange has a particularly well-thought-out perspective on documentation and online distribution, one that seems more honest and realistic than many other artists. He values documentation and takes no shame in it. At the same time, he is careful not to let documentation compromise the painting; at the end of the day he is still primarily a painter. "It's kind of built in for me it's about the photo," he says. "But then again, you can't think about that too much. I do work with obscene details where it's cut back with layers and layers and layers, and if I focus on how an entire area of a piece is gonna be one pixel, then there's no point in making it that detailed." When asked

if he'd ever painted something for an online audience, he said, "I'd love to say no, but I don't think that's true. I think I always make work knowing that it's going online. It would be the same as an artist in a studio painting a canvas and he can say that it's purely for him in that moment, but he knows that he's painting it to go into a gallery where a particular audience will see it. I think built into creating temporary works where the documentation will continue on is that you know you're making them for an audience who will see those photos."

Summing up the importance of the internet for his career, Strange said, "People like myself who come from these further away cities have always benefited from it. I know I wouldn't be here without internet coverage, without blogs, without the support of my communities. There's no way that I would even be able to leave Perth without that."

### Gaia gets up in Baltimore



*A wheatpaste by Gaia in Baltimore. Photo by [Hank Mitchell](#).*

Baltimore-based street artist [Gaia](#) fell in love with Baltimore while attending the [Maryland Institute College of Art](#), but he began his art career in New York City. Getting up in the right neighborhoods of

New York City contributed to Gaia's rise to prominence, but this was not the only reason Gaia became well-known so quickly. The work was compelling and he was putting his wheatpastes where photographers active on [Flickr](#) would see them. He also had [his own Flickr account](#) from early in his career where he posted his own work. Since moving to Baltimore, Gaia's Flickr and [Instagram](#) accounts have become more important. Baltimore doesn't have photographers like [Jaime Rojo](#) or [Jake Dobkin](#) seeking out his work on a daily basis and his New York fanbase doesn't see much of Gaia's work in person anymore.

Today, Gaia's fans go to his Flickr or Instagram accounts to see his work, which allows him to remain in Baltimore and stay internationally relevant. "If I was getting up in Baltimore without the support of the internet, I basically would have totally fallen off the face of street art," he says, adding that many people simply assume he's getting up in New York when they see photos of his work in Baltimore. Yet Gaia notes that the internet has pitfalls regarding perception. He claims it is easy for artists to create an illusion for an online audience that they are putting up a lot of work on the street, but only people in the artist's city really know if he or she is active. On the flipside, an artist who does get up but doesn't post many photos can give the impression to the international community that they aren't active.

Gaia takes a pragmatic approach to posting online. He has seen Flickr photos and blog posts lead to opportunities, and he knows that he'll fall off of his fans radar if he isn't posting anything, so he tries to maintain a constant stream of new content. In one case, a post on [Unurth](#) led directly to his work with the [City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program](#).

Since Gaia can use the internet for exposure rather than posting wheatpastes in Williamsburg, he can bring his art to a more diverse audience than if he were being similarly pragmatic in the pre-internet days. In doing so, he combines a concern for his own career with the street art ethos of bringing art to people who might not otherwise see it and improving neighborhoods. Although he agrees that putting up posters in New York "will always get you more attention than getting

up in Baltimore,” he says, “I’ve made a commitment to Baltimore…” and notes that “usually I’m getting up in neighborhoods that never see this kind of work,” but that hasn’t destroyed his career.

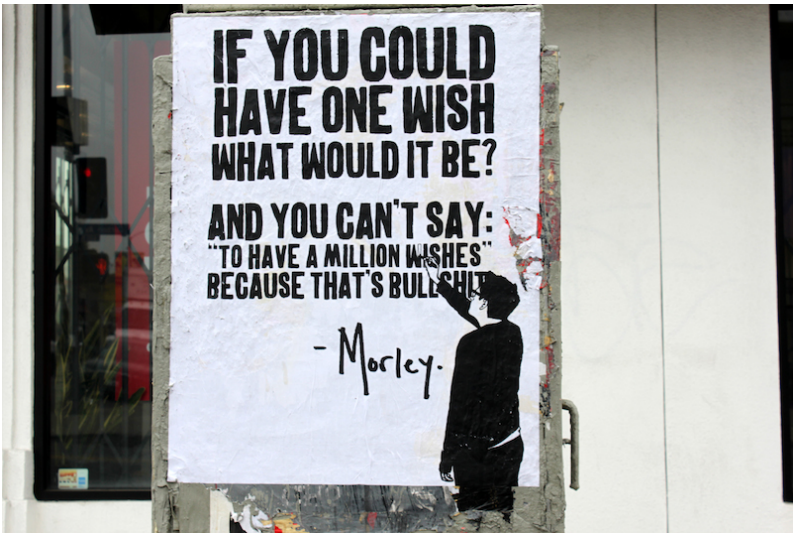
Gaia says, “I can get up in the most cutty spot in Baltimore that nobody outside of that block will see, but because I’m able to disseminate that image across the world through the internet, I get both rewards. I get the local reward of speaking to people, working with people, and producing a piece of artwork for people that feel like that piece is special to them and is something that’s positive in their neighborhood, and I also get to promote myself and keep myself in the conversation in the global scheme of things.”

Yet Gaia doesn’t ignore New York completely. “Williamsburg is one big blog,” he states. “That’s all it is. It’s just a free-for-all gallery, if you will. Which is chill and pretty wild, that that’s developed and become something, but at the same time, it’s totally lame.” Nonetheless, he sees an advantage to getting up in Williamsburg occasionally, saying, “you owe it to yourself to get up in Williamsburg and get seen again.”

It seems that for Gaia, it helps to get up in New York or London from time to time, as that can remind people of his relevance, but putting up work elsewhere and posting it online regularly allows him to make only occasional visits to major street art cities while still maintaining his career.

### **Street art success through the internet**

Does social media or submitting artwork to blogs pay off monetarily? It’s difficult to say for sure. There are stories of people who have spent thousands of dollars buying art based on an online recommendation or who bought works after they were highlighted on a blog, but many galleries rely heavily on existing client lists and word of mouth rather than online press. [Jaime Rojo and Steven Harrington of Brooklyn Street Art](#) say, “We know for a fact that we have assisted many artists to get more opportunities, meet each other, meet collectors, build their practice and build an audience.” They also noted that on occasion they “have simply been ordered [to cover an artist or a particular show] by someone who regards us as employees or pawns, an extension of their marketing effort or their PR machine.” Even if some artists and



*A wheatpaste by Morley. Photo by [Stefan Kloo](#).*

gallerists like to pretend the masses on the internet do not matter as much as their client lists, many of them still reach out with commands or incentives to attract an audience.

While the ways in which bloggers help artists is often private or indirect, I know of two stories with a direct line between blog coverage and a paycheck.

The first concerns Los Angeles street artist [Morley](#). On June 2nd, 2011, [The Outsiders](#) ([Lazarides Gallery](#)'s print and small works shop based in London, UK) launched a series of four prints with Morley. This was his first print release. Morley went to London to put up outdoor work for the occasion. Compared to many of the other artists with whom The Outsiders work ([David Choe](#), [Bast](#), [Ron English](#)), Morley was and is a small fish, and his rise from being an obscure poster artist in LA to showing his work at a major gallery in London took only a few months. How was that possible? The internet, of course.

The earliest mention of Morley I can find on any blog is from [Melrose&Fairfax](#) on January 16th, 2011, shortly after Morley's first posters appeared on the streets of Los Angeles. That speed isn't surprising, since Gregory Linton, the man behind Melrose&Fairfax,

was going out almost daily at that time to take photos of street art in LA, and his favorite spots to photograph have become well-known. Linton seems to like more street art than he dislikes, given how much he was posting to Melrose&Fairfax with a positive review. Melrose&Fairfax continued to post about Morley's work consistently and Morley has established a solid outdoor presence in LA.

A few days following the initial post on Melrose&Fairfax, [Morley's work was posted](#) on [Vandalog](#) for the first time. Whereas Linton at Melrose&Fairfax initially came across Morley's work on the street with no information about the artist, Morley sent me an email alerting me to his website and I reposted images from there. Morley went from having done no street art to being internationally-known in a matter of weeks. While a post or two on Vandalog or Melrose&Fairfax is no guarantee of fame or commercial success, Morley's case shows that it is possible.

In [an interview](#) with [Stephanie Keller](#) for Vandalog, Morley explained that The Outsiders contacted him "out of the blue" with an offer to work together. Many on the staff at Lazarides have stated they read Vandalog regularly, and they likely follow Melrose&Fairfax as well. Morley had never put out posters outside of LA and hasn't been written about in [Artforum](#), but the staff at The Outsiders saw his work somewhere, most likely online, and liked it enough to want to work with him. Why is Morley's story different from the Australian artists who do not seem to have his same luck? Previously I argued that street artists should travel first and then use an online presence to maintain the fanbase developed through travel. Morley successfully reversed the order.

Morley simply reached out to Vandalog, produced art that works very well in a photographic image, and someone at Lazarides saw the work and believed it had commercial potential. Much of the content for Vandalog and many other street art blogs comes through the editors' inboxes. There are some artists whose work I like even though I have never seen it in person. Of those artists, some are active in cities or towns where they are the only significant street artist or graffiti writer. Some email me their new work whenever they want to share it to an audience beyond their immediate geographic community. That



Morley was active in LA is irrelevant. He could have been in Arizona with [Yote](#) or Ohio with [Vinehen](#) or the Navajo Nation with [Chip Thomas aka Jetsonorama](#) or Valencia with [Escif](#) and [Hyuro](#). He sent me an email, the work piqued my interest, and I wrote a post about it. If Morley were not in LA (so his work would not have ended up on Melrose&Fairfax) and he had not sent out emails to blogs like Vandalog, he might still be anonymous. Email isn't the only solution ([Instagram](#), [Flickr](#), [Tumblr](#), etc. are potential alternatives), but is a way to politely and directly reach out to people in a way that social media is not.

Another example of the influence of the online press for street art is the story of [Joshua Allen Harris](#), recounted by [Marc](#) and [Sara Schiller](#) of [Wooster Collective](#). The Schillers posted Harris' work to Wooster Collective in March 2008 after a woman they met at a dinner party showed them a photo of one of Harris' sculptures. It was an "air bear," a little animal made out of plastic bags and attached to a subway grate so that it would inflate with air when a train passed beneath it and deflate to look like trash when there was no air flowing up through the grate. The woman had seen the sculpture on the street the night before, but had little knowledge of street art. She showed the work to the Schillers because she thought they might find it interesting. They loved the piece, and they asked if they could upload her photos to Wooster Collective.

The post was an instant hit, yet the artist behind the air bear was a mystery. Harris was alerted to the post and reached out to the Schillers. Harris wasn't out to be the next big street artist and he'd never heard of Wooster Collective. The animal was done for a class project at the [School of Visual Arts](#). When Harris saw its success, he continued to produce similar work and began to send videos of his inflatable animals to the Schillers, who [posted those as well](#). Eventually, Harris was [interviewed](#) by [New York Magazine](#) and commissioned to make a sculpture for a [Sesame Street](#) segment.

A simple and mysterious post on Wooster Collective led to Harris taking his work in a completely unanticipated direction for a huge audience. While the Marc says that he and Sara have never considered themselves as gatekeepers in the street art world and he points out that

he and Sara don't force anybody to like anything or buy anything or put artists into certain gallery shows or mural festivals, it seems clear that they have significant influence. Not getting your work posted to Wooster Collective isn't going to kill your career and so in that sense they and other bloggers are not true gatekeepers, but a couple of posts sure can help.



*Street Art: Joshua Allen Harris' Inflatable Bag Monsters*

Arrested Motion's Tanley Wong shares Marc's discomfort with being labeled a gatekeeper or potentially influencing people's art purchases, something artists and collectors have told him he has done. On the one hand, Wong wants to give exposure to artists who might otherwise be ignored and support the artists he loves. He fears that if he does not share the art he loves with a wider audience, the artists making that work may stop producing art due to lack of encouragement or the financial means to continue. Wong doesn't want his favorite artists to be forced to choose between making art and getting a day job to support their families. "My job is to share the art that I like so that I can keep seeing new art that I'll like," he says. On the other hand, Wong

says he didn't initially intend to make people buy anything. He worries that readers might take him too seriously sometimes, either buying art on Wong's recommendation without doing their own due diligence or ignoring an artist because of something he's said. That's one reason why everyone at Arrested Motion generally stays positive and avoids posting negative critiques.

Wong is open about his background. He is a knowledgeable fan, but not a professional art journalist. He doesn't try to be or expect to be treated as any more than that. Like many art bloggers, Wong is a superfan with a commitment to sharing what he loves.

### Painting in spaces where fans rarely visit



*Overunder* at the abandoned Atlanta Prison Farm. Photo by RJ Rushmore.

The internet also offers an opportunity for artists to work in abandoned places or parts of town without street art fanatics without sacrificing artistic integrity or the potential for critical and financial success. Abandoned spaces allow artists also serve as great practice spots or spots where you can paint undisturbed. Some artists have used the freedom of abandoned spaces to spend hours or days painting illegal projects

that would be impossible in more populated areas. Other artists go to areas rarely visited by their fans to take photographs and use their art to convey a wider social message when the work is seen through photographs. Still others want to work in these spaces to bring art to an audience that would otherwise have limited access to street art. And, of course, [Banksy](#) has used these opportunities to make a joke or two. While it was once necessary for street art to be located in places where fans would see it in person it was to help the artist's career, artists today can paint wherever they would like. In addition, odd locations can sometimes bolster an artist's popularity.

### **Roa: From abandoned factories to city centers**



*An early piece by Roa in an abandoned building in Belgium. Photo by [Massygo](#).*

Before [Roa](#) began traveling the world painting murals in cities from Melbourne to Chicago, he honed his skills painting in Belgium's abandoned factories (and eventually the mostly-abandoned Belgian town of Doel).

Today, Roa is one of the most celebrated muralists in the street art community and he paints his larger-than-life animals in crowded

cities for fans around the world, but his pieces in abandoned places have been seen by only a handful of people. In some ways, painting in abandoned spaces seems antithetical to street art. After all, it is then not art for everyone. But that's just one way to view the situation. If Roa doesn't legally have access to the large walls that his work requires and he does not want to make something illegal in just a few minutes, painting in abandoned spaces gives him time to fulfill his artistic visions. Abandoned places also provide the opportunity for introspective or experimental work that might not be ready for downtown Manhattan. Finally, even though Roa's work in abandoned factories or in the desert won't be seen by many, seeing those pieces is a reward for those who take the risks to go out and explore.

Roa can now inform his fans of his experiments in abandoned locations. He photographs the work and posts it online. Hundreds of thousands might see the photograph even though few of them will ever hike around Belgium to see those factories in person. It's certainly something Roa did, which is quite clear if you look through the old photos on [his fotolog account](#). As Roa has shown, it doesn't matter if it's street art is in the middle of a major city or in an abandoned building in rural Belgium. As long as the artist takes a good photograph and distributes it, well, people will see the work and share it with more people, if it's any good.

### **JR amplifies voices**

JR has a history of using his art to tell stories and show viewers places they are unlikely to visit. With the installations of his [Women Are Heroes](#) project in Kenya and Brazil, he produced work that was meant to be seen through documentation by an audience outside of those countries through documentation. I assume one of his motivations in wheatpasting the famous favela on a hill in Rio was to capture [this photo](#) and share it with the world. JR has used the appeal of his art to share stories that are worth hearing about the difficult conditions under which people around the world live. By making something beautiful, he's raising awareness.

Most of his audience isn't visiting the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, but JR can still share stories of that place. In Kenya, JR wheatpasted the roofs of homes in Kibera, one of the largest slums in the world

and documented the whole installation from a bird's-eye view. The work was made of vinyl, so it stopped leaks in the roofs. JR could have accomplished the same thing by giving people tarps. Instead, he turned home repair into an art project and documented it from that stunning angle. He both improved the homes raised awareness of a humanitarian crisis through the powerful images that came out of the improvements. JR also wheatpasted a train that runs through Kibera. While people could see that piece from the ground, the effort still focused on capturing documentation to share with people outside of Kibera.

### The Underbelly Project



*Work by Surge, Gaia, Stormie, Remi/Rough and others at The Underbelly Project in New York City. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

One of the strangest projects ever undertaken by a group of street artists is [The Underbelly Project](#). It's an example of what happens when some of the world's most talented street artists want to make art for themselves rather than for fans or for fame, although the organizers subsequently commercialized the project to a small extent to fund future iterations.

The Underbelly Project was organized and executed in 2009–2010 by two street artists, Workhorse and PAC, who facilitated the installation of artwork by over 100 artists in an abandoned and half-built subway station underneath New York City. The project was kept a secret for the year or so that the installation was taking place. To install the work, the organizers brought down artists one or two at a time and gave them one night to paint. Throughout the installation, the organizers meticulously photographed the artists at work. Eventually a handful of outside photographers were allowed to photograph the finished pieces. All was finally revealed publicly on Halloween 2010 with articles in [The New York Times](#) and other major newspapers around the world. Within hours of The Underbelly Project's [article in The New York Times](#), the location of the project was uncovered by urban explorers and revealed publicly online.

Well before *The New York Times* article appeared, much of the project was painted over or otherwise destroyed by explorers who had found the site before the announcement. Unaware of the destruction, people reading the *Times* article tried to visit The Underbelly Project. Police soon set up watch and arrested news crews and other curious visitors trying to see the work for themselves. About a year after the project was first announced, Rizzoli published [the official book documenting The Underbelly Project](#), a pop-up show was held in Miami featuring the work of some of the Underbelly artists, and the team that organized the project in New York did a smaller-scale [Underbelly Project in Paris](#).

Now my questions are: What does the project mean for street art? What role did the internet play in the development and promotion of The Underbelly Project?

The second one is the easier of the two questions to answer. Despite strong print media coverage, the popularity of The Underbelly Project — and particularly its sustained popularity over the years — has been largely due to the online distributions of photos and stories about the event. While the project's website is basically a dormant placeholder, Workhorse and PAC made sure that others shared their story. With 167,000 [hits on Google](#) for “The Underbelly Project” as of October 2013, it is clear that word got out despite few people having

seen the project in person. Although [Vandalog](#) is far from being the most highly-trafficked site to [cover The Underbelly Project](#) traffic statistics for Vandalog show that the site has received over 20,000 page views on stories related to The Underbelly Project in the first two years after it was announced. I'm sure that's just a drop in the bucket compared to the slideshow about the project on The New York Times' website, but it's also a boatload more than I ever could have reached even if I had been telling every person I met about going down to see the project. In the days before the internet, the project might have quickly faded into obscurity even with an article in *The New York Times*. After all, yesterday's newspapers are just paper for dogs to piss on. Thanks to the internet, documentation of The Underbelly Project spread around the world with speed and persistence.

The Underbelly Project is not entirely unique. Workhorse argues that similar events occurred 15 years ago, but without the same high-quality documentation, and to that, I would add distribution as well. Workhorse notes that LA's [Belmont Tunnel](#) would get painted every night and there were wild parties held in abandoned underground locations in Baltimore, but neither of these got the same attention as The Underbelly Project. If someone at those parties had posted photos to [Instagram](#), we might be talking about those events rather than The Underbelly Project.

The internet also helped to solve a major problem that Workhorse and PAC faced: anonymous distribution. Workhorse wonders, "How do you simultaneously tell everyone about it, yet not talk at all?" Their answer was to create a barebones website and spread the word through proxies such as *The New York Times*, [Vandalog](#), [Katherine Lorimer aka Luna Park](#), [Ian Cox](#) and the other artist who participated. Workhorse and PAC have very rarely spoken about the project in interviews, but they have allowed others to tell their stories and speculate about The Underbelly Project for them, with much of that discussion happening online. In addition, Workhorse and PAC use their limited website and occasional newsletter to communicate directly with tens of thousands of people. The internet has allowed Workhorse and PAC to run The Underbelly Project with the anonymity they want, while not keeping it a complete secret.



It's more difficult to determine what The Underbelly Project means for street art and how it is related to street art or not.

Despite popular appeal, the participation of some of the finest artists in street art and graffiti and [BLOUIN-ARTINFO](#) putting the project on [its list of the 100 most iconic artworks of 2007-2012](#), The Underbelly Project was met with resistance in the street art fan community and by some street art bloggers, which was surprising given the street art blogging community's general wariness of providing critique. On the [Very Nearly Almost](#) blog, the blog for a magazine which had previously covered many of the artists involved in The Underbelly Project in a positive light, [VNA's editor-in-chief George Macdonald](#) wrote, "Its [sic] sounds such a great idea on paper but for me it just doesnt [sic] quite work." A commenter on that post asked, "If street art gets put up in a bunker but no-ones [sic] there to see it, does it actually happen?"

Macdonald explained his frustrations with the project this way:

"Dont [sic] get me wrong, the artists involved are pretty damn impressive and the artwork produced for the most part is pretty dope, but I cant [sic] help but feel this project falls at the last post. I think keeping it a secret underground gallery for no one to see is a kind of cool and unique idea but to then invite a bunch of journalists and bloggers down there before "Blocking the entrance forever" just reeks of exclusivity and then getting a big spread in the Sunday Times and New York Times to sort of launch the project is a bit weak too. Why not just release a nice video of the project?"<sup>21</sup>

In the context of a community of street art blogs that are generally supportive boosters, even such a mild critique is surprising. Yet, Macdonald is not entirely off the mark. [As I've written before](#), I agree that The Underbelly Project fails miserably on several traditional street art measures. But people heard about the project and they saw

21. Macdonald, George. "Very Nearly Almost." Very Nearly Almost, 2 Nov. 2010. Web. 28 Dec. 2012.

the work. It's likely that The Underbelly Project was seen by more people than if the same artists had painted equivalent work at ground level directly above where The Underbelly Project took place, and the underground nature of the project added an allure that street level murals don't have.

When people with no connection to art hear that I'm interested in street art, they usually mention [Banksy](#), [Shepard Fairey's Obama posters](#), [David Choe's Facebook millions](#), or The Underbelly Project. And when they bring up The Underbelly Project, it's always in a positive light. They enjoyed looking at photographs of stunning artwork online or on the front page of *The New York Times*. The project's mystery grabbed their attention and has stayed with them for years. In this way, it was successful in achieving the goal of many street artists: People were exposed in an unorthodox fashion to art installed without anybody's permission. While there were the gatekeepers involved in the announcement (the newspapers and blogs), Workhorse and PAC could have simply posted their own photos to [Flickr](#) instead.

Criticism of The Underbelly Project brings to light a major disconnect among some street art fans. On the one hand, fans are excited to see that [Phlegm](#) has painted a new work in an abandoned factory that only a handful of adventurous people will ever see in person. But many of those same fans are upset that The Underbelly Project is not available for everyone to visit. Whereas Phlegm will take a few photos of his hard-to-find work and post them online without addressing the issue of the work's physical accessibility, Workhorse and PAC made a conscious effort to let people know about The Underbelly Project while emphasizing it would probably be dangerous to visit it in person.

For Workhorse and PAC, the project is not about street art or making the city look better; it is about doing something cool and adventurous. And, as they pointed out, if you do something cool, you generally want to tell people about it.

PAC explained:

“Is this about creating some sort of mural project that ends up on the internet, or is it about the experience of hanging out with these two crazy dudes who found this space, going

in, potentially having experiences with other artists, and in the process of doing that creating something amazing? Ultimately, what's paramount in the project is the adventure.”

Workhorse also pointed out that graffiti writers have taken photos of their work for decades simply as a way to remember those moments. But while those photos were originally traded between other writers at a writers' bench, Workhorse and PAC coupled that same motivation with the means to give the entire world access to their photos.



*Work by Roa at The Underbelly Project in New York City. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

If The Underbelly Project is not another street art project, why was it treated like one? Perhaps it's just because many of the artists involved are connected to street art or graffiti. But it may be more than that.

The photos of [Roa's](#) work in The Underbelly Project are not substantially different from photos that Roa takes of his work in abandoned factories in Belgium. And the means of distribution are the same. Roa's Belgian work might not appear in *The New York Times*, but those photographs will appear alongside Underbelly photos in the same independent and social media outlets. A viewer who doesn't know

better might assume the photos were taken in the same location. To the average online viewer, or even someone reading *The New York Times* in print, the difference between photos of Roa's Underbelly piece and a piece in Belgium is inconsequential. They are never going to see either piece in person.

The difference is that The Underbelly Project is a more extreme example of what the internet has done for street art. It initially seems to be exclusive because the physical space is a restricted location, but photographs of the project spread worldwide and had greater reach than works in more accessible public locations. The Underbelly Project is a case where geography and physical access no longer matter. Only the documentation and the distribution of that documentation matter. While most fans accept this approach when the art being documented and distributed is more clearly street art, it's less acceptable for work that is less accessible. Suddenly, some people see the process as distasteful and inauthentic. And if it is, then so be it, but then it's not just The Underbelly Project at fault. Any street artist who submits photographs of their work to a blog or maintains a social media presence would be at fault too.

One thing The Underbelly Project accomplished that a lot of street art aims for but falls short of achieving is to enter the realm of folklore. There are only a handful of instances over the last thirty or so years where street art and graffiti projects have left such a mark. These are the projects that force people to think differently and consider their surroundings in a new way whether they witnessed the projects in person or not. A few standout examples include the [Miss Rockaway Armada](#), [Chris Pape aka Freedom's Freedom Tunnel](#), [Improv Everywhere's Frozen Grand Central](#) and [No Pants Subway Ride](#), [Philippe Petit crossing the World Trade Center twin towers by highwire](#), [Charles Simonds' Dwellings](#) and [Fairey's OBEY Giant campaign](#).

[Caledonia Curry aka Swoon](#) says that one of the things she enjoyed about The Underbelly Project was the opportunity to make "something which very rarely people will stumble upon, and which still somehow exists, a silent power in the dark." For her, The Underbelly



*Swoon wheatpaste in the foreground at The Underbelly Project in New York City.  
Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

Project is for the occasional person who stumbles upon it, but also “for idea of creating something which is almost only there in spirit.”

There are few people better than Curry to explain the power of art turning into folklore. In my interview with Workhorse and PAC, they mentioned Curry’s essay in their book *We Own the Night: The Art of the Underbelly Project* as a way of explaining that power:

“I was standing on a street corner in St. Louis yesterday, and someone said to me, “Did you hear about that thing that happened where there is a time capsule under New York City, and all of this amazing art is entombed there forever and no one knows where it is?” I happened to be standing next to one of the rascals who organized said miraculous event right as those words floated through the air into my ears, and all I could do was kick him a little and laugh.

What I loved about this moment was how quickly the thing had been distilled into legend, how accessible the beauty and strangeness of such an endeavor was to people who were only just hearing about it. It became a perfect

silver strand plucked from the atmosphere, lovely as the sound of bells reaching you from off in the distance. No fuss, no muss, just a little pearl under the dark sea.

Standing between Mr. Secret Organizer and this recounter of the story, I felt the awesome dissonance between what goes into making something like this, and what the thing becomes in the minds of people.”

For PAC, the idea that The Underbelly Project could become a part of the city’s folklore and get people to think about “the magic that’s behind every wall” was part of why he did the project. He sees the project as something that “expands one’s expectations of what’s available in the urban environment in a way that very few other projects do.”

The Underbelly Project might not be a mural on a wall, but for so many it has had a greater impact and spurred them to think more magically (to borrow from Curry again) about the city. Projects like Petit’s crossing of the twin towers and Simonds’ *Dwellings* were able to enter the popular imagination without internet promotion, but The Underbelly Project needed the internet, or at least the internet helped things *a lot*. With photos hinting at the project, the project’s legend was able to develop. That legend has since reached millions of people and inspired them to think about the possibilities of cities and the human spirit – as so much street art tries to do – and The Underbelly Project did it better than just about any legal mural I’ve ever seen.

It was essential to this particular myth that the project happened where nobody could see it. Many other projects that became myths only took place for a short period of time. If you didn’t see the Miss Rockaway Armada when it visited your town, you missed it. If you didn’t see The Underbelly Project, you missed it. All you have are the myths and the documentation, which are different experiences from the “real thing.” There are no myths about [Wynwood Walls](#). It’s a gated park in Miami that you can visit anytime. Even though I argue that location doesn’t matter with street art the same way once did, context still matters.

**Talking to the web**



*The entrance to Wynwood Walls in Wynwood, Miami with work by Kenny Scharf inside. Photo by [Joe Anzalone](#).*

In [Eloquent Vandals: A History of Nuart Norway](#), [Steven Harrington](#) and [Jaime Rojo](#) of [Brooklyn Street Art](#) write “Going from ‘All City’ to ‘All Timezones’ has radically transformed how Street Artists perceive their work and their audience, with the concept of ‘place’ profoundly altered.”<sup>22</sup> Since work can travel the world almost instantly regardless of the location of the physical piece, place no longer means a physical wall but, rather, a url.

[Roa](#), [JR](#) and the artists who participated in [The Underbelly Project](#) may have made work intended primarily for a digital audience, but those pieces still made sense to a passerby. The work I will highlight next does not do this. It addresses such a restricted digital audience that it would be nearly meaningless to most people who would chance upon it on the street. Before the internet, such street art

22. Rojo, Jaime, and Steven Harrington. "Freed from the Wall, Street Art Travels the World." *Eloquent Vandals: A History of Nuart Norway*. Ed. Victoria Bugge Øye, Marte Danielsen Jølbo, and Martyn Reed. Oslo: Kontur, 2011. N. pag. Print.

would be essentially pointless to make, but now it can be distributed online to reach a geographically disperse niche audience.



*Fine* by Elfo. Photo by [Elfo](#).

[Elfo](#)'s piece *Fine* (which references [this work](#) by [Giuseppe Chiari](#)) appears to be located somewhere in the countryside where few people will ever see it, much like other work in abandoned places. Most work in abandoned places either does not relate to the location, or it does so in some creepy way. With *Fine*, Elfo was more creative. The work's text questions the direction street art is headed, saying "Street art is finished, stop all together." Yet by painting in an abandoned space and then posting a photo of the piece online, Elfo is engaging in the very practices that cause some to say that street art is finished. Who, then, is the work for? Presumably it's for people who are already street art fans or practitioners. Elfo's demand is meaningless to a viewer with no connection to street art. While *Fine* could have been painted in the middle of Rome, the middle of the countryside works just as well, since either site would be equally suitable for taking a photograph to share online.





Sever's *Death of Street Art* piece in Hamtramck, Michigan references Shepard Fairey, Os Gêmeos, Barry McGee, Banksy, Futura and KAWS. Photo by [Brian Knowles](#).

One of the most popular examples of street art or graffiti for an internet audience is [Sever's \*Death of Street Art\*](#), painted in Hamtramck, Michigan (outside of Detroit) in the spring of 2012. Most residents of Hamtramck or any other city wouldn't have recognized all six of the street art and graffiti legends referenced in the piece, but fans on the internet did. Photos of the piece went viral, and it was one of the most talked-about murals of 2012 within the street art and graffiti communities. The piece was clearly not for an audience in Hamtramck, and the fact that it was painted there hardly matters. Like *Fine*, the mural was for a subset of the Bored at Work Network familiar with street art and graffiti. Its location is "the internet" more than "Hamtramck."

Elfo and Sever's pieces address specific but geographically dispersed communities, not the entire Bored at Work Network or the average passerby. In both of these cases, the artists are communicating with people who are familiar with the figureheads and internal politics of street art and graffiti. The same principle would apply had they

been targeting fans of a cult television program from the 1960's or any other niche group with an online presence. Whatever the target audience, the internet becomes a game changer for niche content, and that carries over into street art and graffiti. The people who like [Star Trek](#) and graffiti can only be reached online. And it's not just Elfo and Sever. Many contemporary street artists and graffiti writers are comfortable making work that is completely disconnected from its physical location because they know that they can relocate it within an online community.

### Banksy painting for the media and the web



*A 2008 piece by Banksy in Mali referencing British tabloid fixture Peaches Geldof. Photo from [banksy.co.uk](http://banksy.co.uk).*

Even the king of street art, [Banksy](#), has made work where it's clear that he intends for the primary audience to see the work through a photograph. These works may not even make sense when viewed on the street. The most obvious example of this is a piece Banksy is believed to have painted around January 2009 in Mali.<sup>23</sup> The stencil

23. Zakdblair, Olly Courtney, and Melfeasance. "Banksy vs Bristol Musuem." flickr. Yahoo!, 15 June 2009. Web. 30 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pixplosion/3629337369/>>.

depicts an African child holding a red charity collection tin and (according to the sign stenciled next to him) he is raising money for Peaches Geldof. While those not living in England may be unaware who Peaches is, she is a household name in the U.K. Peaches is the daughter of musician and political activist Bob Geldof, the man behind the Live Aid and Live 8 charity concerts and the song "Do They Know It's Christmas?".<sup>24</sup> Other than that, Peaches is basically an English socialite / famous for being famous.

It's a funny stencil, but do most people walking by it every day get the reference? Since Peaches' fame is primarily in the UK, it seems unlikely many people in Mali know who she is. The piece wouldn't have made much more sense to residents of New York City either, but putting the piece in Africa created context that enhanced the joke, if you got the reference to begin with. And Banksy took a photo of the piece to bring back to England. The photo first surfaced outside of Mali as part of installation at Banksy's *Banksy versus The Bristol Museum* show in 2009.<sup>24</sup> In Bristol, the joke worked. Most visitors to the show would have known who Peaches Geldof is. Sometime after the show opened, a photo of the piece was also posted to Banksy's website, along with other work from his trip to Mali. The Peaches Geldof piece began traveling around the web, where an audience who understood the British cultural reference shared the photo. All Banksy had to do was post a photo of his work on the internet. The Bored at Work Network took care of the rest.

While it can be nice when a great piece by Banksy lasts longer on the street than expected, in the case of the Peaches Geldof stencil, it hardly matters if the piece lasted two days after Banksy left town. He had his photograph. This particular piece may have had a larger impact online than if it remained visible and untouched on the street for ten years without photographic documentation.

In fact, the piece didn't stay untouched for long. Through a representative, Banksy stated: "After I finished the piece and had a coffee I thought it was a bit obscure – they don't even speak English

24. Melfeasance, Ray182, Shell Shock, Lusername, and Eddiedangerous. "Hunting the Wild Banksy in Africa." flickr. Yahoo!, n.d. Web. 30 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.flickr.com/groups/banksy/discuss/72157620466452332/>>.

there – it’s a former French colony. So I went back and painted over the Peaches bit and put a red heart on the board instead. I said to my local fixer, ‘I hope this connects more with the locals. He shrugged and said, ‘I think it was preferred before when you could tell it really meant something.’”

Given Banksy’s story, I may not be giving the local residents in Mali enough credit. Whether or not the locals understood the specific reference, they got the joke. But for people to get the reference, Banksy still had to post the photo online. While some street artists would just spray out a stencil anywhere they can find space, Banksy used geographic context to set a scene for the viewer back home in England.



Work put up by Ron English and [Faile](#) on the separation wall in the West Bank as part of Banksy’s [Santa’s Ghetto](#) project in Bethlehem. Photo by [eddie dangerous](#).

On a related note, it’s worth mentioning Banksy’s [Santa’s Ghetto project in Bethlehem, Palestine](#), which took place in 2007. Although at first [Santa’s Ghetto](#) might not appear to be much like [JR](#)’s work in Rio de Janeiro, it was quite similar and perhaps even more brilliantly

organized and executed. Banksy got together a group of street artists to paint the separation wall that Israel is building in the West Bank. Of the project, [Ron English](#) (one of the participants) says, “Banksy’s idea was that there’s this group of street artists, and wherever they go, here comes the press taking pictures. So his idea was, ‘Well, fuck it. Let’s go to Palestine. If they’re all gonna follow us wherever we go and take pictures, and disseminate them, let’s go to Palestine. Let them see what the fuck’s going on there.’” The event got international media coverage. Images of the works were published online and in major newspapers around the world and sparked discussion about the Israel/Palestine conflict. The artwork even led to a small industry in Bethlehem showing tourists around to point out all the local street art.

### A brief interview with C215



*Work by C215 in Venice, Italy. Photo by [Son of Groucho](#).*

[Christian Guémy](#) aka C215 is a French stencil artist who has been working with stencils on the street since the mid-2000’s. I believe his career blossomed largely thanks to combination of a great deal of travel and a healthy appreciation for the internet. As a typical contemporary street artist it’s useful to get his thoughts on what the internet has done for his work and street art in general.

RJ: How do you define street art?

Guémy: Street art is nothing else but urban poetry that catches someone's eye. Being a street artist is impossible, because the city itself is the artist. Street art is a collective thing, participative and interactive, extremely linked to web 2.0 culture.

RJ: What do you mean when you say that street art is "extremely linked to 2.0 culture"? Can you expand on that thought? How is it linked?

Guémy: Like the streets, the internet is not considered by most as venue for art. It is simultaneously an interactive and participative place, as streets can be. You go into the streets, leave something that you paint, that you sampled from reality through a photograph. It creates a real installation. Then street photographers will pass by and take a picture of your installation and put it immediately onto web, spreading it online. You can then see how your work has been altered by the photographer, putting a new spin on it. Some of them get real artistic pictures that just include a piece of yours. This is the process of street art.

RJ: You make it sound as though taking photos and posting them online is nearly as important a part of your artistic process as cutting and spraying the stencils. Is that the case? If so, why?

Guémy: This is the only new thing: Painters have been painting since forever, doing murals since antiquity, using spray cans for a long time now. So what is new if not the internet thing? On the internet you are your own gallerist, theoretician, photographer and videomaker. On the internet you can interact with your public without being physically present, as it should be with graffiti. If we are contemporary artists, it is because we use the internet.

RJ: Do you think that being in Paris led you to working with stencils?

Guémy: Sure! Paris has such a long history with street art and that is mainly through stencils that appeared in the

80's. Apparently more than 120 stencil artists were already painting in the streets of Paris in the mid-80's. I feel that I am just one of the numerous french stencil artists, and I am proud to get credit in such a competition.

RJ: How do you find source material for your stencils?

Guémy: Anywhere on the web if I need a picture for the streets, but for my gallery works, since my works recently became valuable, I pay attention to using pictures of mine or pictures I got the rights to use.

RJ: How do you generate publicity for your projects and why do you use the strategy that you do?

Guémy: In the streets and on internet, because these places are the most beautiful galleries ever. We are now entering the "hypermediation" culture. No medias anymore, we need nobody and we do art where you not expect it, outside of anyone's control. The streets and the internet are strongly linked to freedom.

RJ: How do most people see your work? Online or in person? If they see it online, how do they come across it?

Guémy: Physically for sure, and with no comparison, but in the streets people see mainly one artwork, not a whole body of work or the brand identification that you get on internet, where each artist more or less organizes his own virtual perception, while street works keep it real. It is a balanced story, between art and life, reality and abstraction.

RJ: At what point did you realize that the internet was making an impact in street art and graffiti?

Guémy: The day my 9 years daughter said to me that she read most of my past interviews using google on her iPod.

Some final thoughts on location

[Faith47](#), a street artist living in South Africa who paints all over the world, sums up well the positives of the loss of geographic context for street art:



*A piece by Faith47 in Johannesburg, part of her series “the long wait”. Photo by Faith47.*

“People are now forced to look at work of artists from all over the world, because the internet does not recognise the political borders on a map. It removes the physical divide, which for an art form which is totally site specific, has been the pivotal force in allowing it to expand into the global movement that it is today. One’s work can be totally local, but can at the same time infiltrate and inspire internationally. The internet is like a parallel reality where we all exist in the same room.”

I once spotted an example of this parallel reality on [Juxtapoz’s](#) blog. In December 2012, there was [a post on their blog with the simple headline “Horfe x Spone,”](#) and the question: “We wonder where the talents of Horfe and SPone came together?” The accompanying photograph showed two throw-ups next to each other, one by [Horfe](#) and one by [SP.One, aka Greg Lamarche](#). The work is interesting, but the photograph provides little context for where these pieces actually



exist (or existed) and the blogger provides no credits for the photograph. Even if Horfe or Lamarche come forward to explain the context, there's no turning back now: People have seen that photograph and spread around the internet without any information about the work's location — a piece of information which would seem to be crucial if the community believes that street art and graffiti can only truly exist within the context of a location. A blogger at Juxtapoz apparently disagreed and felt the image was worth sharing even without that information.

Even though cities become full of Banksy-hunters when a new piece appears on his website, some of his work has appeared online but never discovered on the street by fans. Two Banksy pieces that were posted on his site just in time for the 2012 Olympics in London were never located, neither were the teaser image or the *Staten Island* video for his 2013 New York City “residency” show *Better Out Than In*. Those works appeared on Banksy's website and in some sense they only exist online, even though the implied geographic location is relevant to all four of them.

When street art and graffiti were first developing, location was a defining characteristic of the work. Books and magazines changed that somewhat, but getting information from those sources was a slow process. With the popularity of street art and graffiti on the internet, location has become practically irrelevant. Because there is an unprecedented level of interconnectivity among all these artists even though they work in cities all over the world, Pedro Alonzo considers street art to be the first global art genre. That interconnectivity has been made possible by the internet.

People report seeing work on Wooster Collective during the site's early days which had clearly been put up in the artist's backyard, only to be replaced a month later by a new piece in the same spot. I haven't been able to find an example of this and Marc and Sara Schiller don't recall it happening, but just the fact that fans of the site tell that story says something about the way blogs have changed people's idea of location. Today, blogs and forums and social media profiles are the locations that matter, and conversations between distant artists take place online. The web is where the eyeballs street artists are trying

to reach are found. In many cases, posting a photograph has become more important than the work itself, particularly among young street artists in cities without a strong street art community or artists using techniques that are best rendered in a photograph or a video.

Today, Wooster Collective is a location more highly prized by street artists than nearly any street corner in the world except perhaps New York City's [Bowery and Houston mural](#). And while bloggers have become the new gatekeepers in a sense, artists can also reach out to their fans directly thanks to services like [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). [Evan Roth](#) [stated it quite bluntly](#): "The internet has eyeballs."<sup>25</sup> As a result, the internet has made the location of some street art and graffiti obsolete. If you don't get a photo before your piece gets buffed, it may not matter whether it's in a most highly visible spot in a densely populated city or an alleyway in a suburb. While it can still be helpful to get up in Brooklyn rather than Columbus, Ohio, it isn't essential. The difference between getting up in Columbus versus San Francisco isn't as important as it once was. Often, the most important function of the location of street art and graffiti today is to provide context for the piece, rather than eyeballs. People's attention is online rather than on the city streets, and it's only logical that street artists and graffiti writers go where their audience can be found. After all, an audience is exactly what so many of them are seeking. The internet is the only place where an artist in Ohio can share a photograph of a stencil he painted in an alleyway, a fan in Australia can see the piece and re-share it with her friends, and an artist in Tel Aviv can see that photo thanks to the woman in Australia and make a piece influenced by it only hours after the artist in Ohio sprayed that stencil.

Location is still important for street art and graffiti, but the locations that matter don't exist in the real world anymore. The audiences for graffiti and street are they same people they've always been, but they're looking at art from their desks rather than from the sidewalk. Some artists have adapted as their works have moved from cityscape to screenscape, and that's what the next two chapters will highlight.

25. Evan Roth Presentation, Storytelling, Kitchen Budapest. Perf. Evan Roth. YouTube. Kitchenbudapest, 26 Feb. 2012. Web. 13 Feb. 2013.

## Chapter 2.5: An interview with Brooklyn Street Art



*Skewville in Bushwick. Photo by [Jaime Rojo](#).*

Steve Harrington and Jaime Rojo run the [Brooklyn Street Art](#) blog, cover street art for the [Huffington Post](#), and have had two of their [books](#) about street art published by [Prestel](#). The duo are two of the street art community's best-loved advocates. Some of their ideas about the internet and street art as expressed in *Freed from the Wall*, *Street Art Travels the World*, their chapter of the book [Eloquent Vandals](#), helped to inspire this project, so I asked them some questions about street art, the internet and their work as advocates for the scene.

RJ: What has been, in your opinions, the greatest positive change in street art due to the internet?

BSA: The internet has made it possible for the artists and the public to have a greater direct, relatively unfiltered relationship to one another. Sharing of images through websites, blogs, and social media have enabled Street Artists to go directly to the audience without the

filtering of gatekeepers who got their position through class, education, or silver spoon. A greater share of the public than ever before have an opportunity, albeit virtual, to see new work that they simply would not have had access to ten years earlier.



*Olek in New York City. Photo by [Jaime Rojo](#).*

RJ: What has been, in your opinions, the greatest negative change in street art due to the internet?

BSA: It's hard to think of a negative consequence, with the possible exception of the rather explosive growth of work that mimics the good stuff, but that has always been true across creative culture. It just goes faster now. Also there have been more commercial interests weaving their way through the scene, but that is as much a feature of the society and our monetary system as anything else.

RJ: Is anything of the actual artwork lost or gained when photographs of street art are taken and posted online, compared to seeing the work in person?

BSA: As good as photographic technology is, seeing the piece in real life is always a different experience, and there is value in understanding it in the original habitat. The art that is put on the streets often is contextual and placement is key. Like any other kind of plastic

art, Street Art is best when one has the opportunity, luck or luxury to enjoy it in situ. The art itself may not gain anything by photographers taking photos of it. The artist, on the other hand, may.

RJ: Is anything of the actual artwork lost or gained when photographs of street art are taken and posted online, compared to seeing the work in person?

BSA: New and interesting are not always hand in hand, but we see a lot of fresh stuff on the streets every week in New York. Every city has its hot spots for Street Artists to get up, including those walls that get hit daily – we call them magnet walls. But as far as finding it, we're just like everybody else; get on your bike, go for walks, squeeze through fences, run down railroad tracks, climb up to roofs – that's how you find it. It helps if you are mobile and rolling and keeping your eyes peeled in neighborhoods or blocks that have been neglected or simply have a higher population of the creative class. We have to scan the city for possible new places and sometime we are lucky and other times we are not. Of course we have a large readership globally so there are always tips from fans and artists, but we still like to discover stuff ourselves. That's the best!

RJ: How did geography play a role in what/who you knew/saw/did with regard to art before street art blogging and photo-sharing became so popular? After?

BSA: In the beginning, there was geography. Walking is the primary mode of transportation in New York unlike many other cities, so we really noticed the uptick in Street Art immediately in the late 90s. You might have carried a camera, but most people didn't so the typical experience was momentary, personal, immediate, and local. After 9/11 when we walked through the streets of our artist-heavy neighborhood of Williamsburg just to clear our heads and try to process the madness, we found that Street Art was also very local, very personal. The things we saw didn't always feel like they were made for a large audience, just for the one who would discover it. This was shortly before Flickr and blogs took hold, so the scene in this industrial, largely abandoned neighborhood was active but the streets were desolate and there were only a few photographers documenting the art. You could walk for 5 blocks without seeing someone, let alone a photographer. As Jaime

continued snapping pictures we just knew that something exciting was happening on the streets and we knew that the most desolate, filthy and interesting neighborhoods were the places to go to find art. After Flickr fired up and blogging took off, photographers began uploading their stuff and sharing and commenting and with their followers and the very behaviors of Street Artists shifted radically. Suddenly it was as if many became aware that their work could be seen by a huge unknowable audience of people so they courted the “Flickrati” who hit the streets with those new digital cameras with ever higher pixel counts. By virtue of having command of the new technology, the photographers of that period became celebrities of a sort for a while. In reality, the internet blew up the entire game and reorganized roles, rules and peoples priorities. Hot debates flared in the graffiti and Street Art “community” about whether photographers were aiding artists or aiding police in locating and compiling databases of evidence. Others criticized the new phenomena for helping people who had beef in locating your stuff so they could destroy it. Photographers became curators with some voice by selecting and overlooking, collectors began skipping the middleman and contacting artists directly, and artists began marketing directly via the internet and even adding “.com” to their pieces.

Obviously, we could write a book about the major importance of the influence of internet in completely unmooring Street Art images from the confines of their physical location, but suffice to say that the sense of “place” has been radically altered over the last decade.

RJ: Do you think that street art is ideally free, ephemeral, accessible and illegal?

BSA: Yes. That’s the true nature of Street Art. Illegal, while romantic in the disaffected “loner” sense of the word and a driving force for many on the scene, is not entirely necessary for Street Art to be relevant or of value.

RJ: Why do you have a blog and how do you use it?

BSA: After we published our first book, *Brooklyn Street Art* in the Spring of 2008, Steve decided to start a blog to promote it. But we couldn’t stop ourselves from talking and shooting and interviewing and asking questions and meeting more and more really interesting



*JAVS at the Gowanus Batcave in Brooklyn. Photo by [Jaime Rojo](#).*

people. As artists, we have a deep respect for the creative spirit and an interest in the myriad ways in how it gets expressed. It's impossible to estimate how much we love having a site where we can share with the rest of the world our passion for art and our interest for Street Art in particular.

RJ: Why do you take photos of street art and post them online?

BSA: We think that BSA, and other sites like it, help promote the culture of art in general and we know for a fact that we have assisted many artists to get more opportunities, meet each other, meet collectors, build their practice and build an audience. We use it as a platform and as a bridge. It is also a way to bring different communities



*A wheatpaste by Swoon in Brooklyn. Photo by [Jaime Rojo](#).*

together and to tell young artists in small towns that there are other people in other parts of the globe thinking and doing the same things they are doing, feeling the same stuff they're feeling. We've never found it particularly interesting or valuable to tear people down and this approach has brought a lot of like-minded people our way.

Now we take photos of Street Art and post them because we have a site that needs to be fed daily and because we see it as a mission of the site. Sharing online is a way to document this moment on the timeline of a really important explosion of the global creative culture. We think that the seeds for much of tomorrow are right here. We like to share the new ideas and proposals the artists are putting forward with our readers who otherwise would not have any other way of experience Street Art.

RJ: Do you know of any cases where posts on BSA or the Huffington Post have led to opportunities for artists?



BSA: Yes. Sometimes it's obvious and direct, other times it's cumulative for artists. There is now a steady stream of requests from galleries, collectors, art institutions, TV shows, magazines and newspapers that would like to work with the artists whose work we have shown and talked about on BSA or The Huffington Post. Many times we simply forward these requests to the artists and they follow up if interested. Other times we've given people their first time in a show, or their first interview, or introduced them to someone, which later helped them to close deals on other opportunities. Not everyone tells us that we have played a role, but we're gratified to know that we helped many.

RJ: Can you imagine blogging about artwork on BSA if the art was intended primarily to be seen by a digital audience? Have you done so?

BSA: Perhaps this wouldn't interest us. We have not done it before.

RJ: When did you realize that the internet was affecting street art and graffiti?

BSA: When we were doing research for our first little book; *Brooklyn Street Art*. We realized then that the internet was going to change the way in which artists and public experienced Street Art. Up until then we thought it was just a personal experience. Then we realized that there was an entire digital ecosystem that ever widened.

As the blog grew we gradually saw people were becoming more explicit in their contact information and sophisticated in their communications. Some Street Artists are occasionally sanctimonious about their peers dropping the name of their website on their piece, but the truth that is signing your name or your tag is equally effective thanks to powerful "search" technology. In recent years it's been fun to see fully-formed press releases and newsletters coming from Street Artists who we've never once heard of assuring us they are really well known on the New York scene (or LA, Berlin, or Paris). Not that we know everybody – that would be impossible. And we all know of at least one or two Street Artists whose entire practice is predicated on how well the work has been marketed through the internet rather than

the more traditional means of, say, doing cool work on the street that gets discovered.

RJ: If you were a street artist starting out in this day and age, how would you go about publicizing your work?

BSA: First, we would make sure we had actually honed some skills and developed something of relative value or to be fairly interesting. Then, we would put it up a lot. Then we would let other people know about it using all those various means that we all now know about. But the question presupposes that all Street Artists are using their work on the street for the same reason. Some are just figuring things out creatively, using the street as a sketchbook. Some are actually unaware of the “scene” and are just content to interact with the passing public. Others are just doing it on a lark, or deeply in love with somebody, or are in psychological or emotional distress.

RJ: Do you ever get contacted by artists who want you to write about their work and get the sense that they view you solely as tools to be manipulated so that they can get publicity? If so, how often and what is that like?

BSA: Yes that happens very often. We try to look at the art first and if we like what we see we give it a chance. Still we like for the artists to at least say “hello” first when they send us their work. This is a minimum courtesy, and a nice way to ask someone for a favor. Other times we have simply been ordered by someone who regards us as employees or pawns, an extension of their marketing effort or their PR machine. That’s always entertaining because we don’t make any money from our site and they obviously haven’t done their due diligence. We have our own regular jobs where we need to put up with those behaviors.

RJ: Do you prefer to look at street art in person or through photographs?

BSA: In person.

RJ: Are bloggers acting as gatekeepers for street artists in the same way that gallerists and museum directors act as gatekeepers? If so, is the gatekeeping effective or productive?

BSA: We don’t see us as gatekeepers. Bloggers and gallerists are a totally different breed. Gallerists are dealers that use the internet

to make sales. They usually have a blog as a component of their gallery's site but that's different from a Street Art site. We share what attracts us and report on what we see in our features and editorials and interviews. The site has a calendar of events and we use it to inform the readers of shows, art events and art festivals and art fairs. We also use the site to provide free banners to causes and events that we think would benefit from our traffic when we like their mission and goals. Gate-keeping is sadly antiquated and a relic from those days of clubby academic artworld exclusivity – which no one really can respect anymore. Anyone with a computer can start a blog in about 15 minutes. Of course, not everyone has a computer, so in that way there is an element of exclusivity.

RJ: Of your all-time favorite pieces of street art, how many have you seen in-person and how many have you only seen photos or video of?

BSA: Most of our favorites in NYC we have seen in person, and we feel really lucky to say so. Globally we depend primarily on other people's eyes and accounts.

RJ: When did you begin posting things on BSA that did not happen in New York? Why the change?

BSA: Street Art is a global art movement so we like to report on it as an integral part of the site as a service to our readers to and help us all understand it a bit better. Since a Street Artist in Brooklyn may easily consider someone in London or LA to be one of his or her fans or peers today, we think we should be just as open to the free exchange of art and ideas. Of course its only from our perspective, we're no Wikipedia. We began reporting on worldwide Street Art almost since the beginning of BSA, but certainly not as often as now. Now it is kind of part of our DNA.

RJ: In *Freed from the Wall, Street Art Travels the World*, you mention "the plastic nature of Street Art." What do you mean by that? What do you imagine street art morphing into in the coming years?

BSA: Street Art is part of the plastic arts – the ever-stretching morphing blob that reflects us and prods us, and dances past borders. Its unsanctioned nature and accessibility to all levels of society will keep it fresh and challenging, but we all know how money can have a



A stencil by Bast. Photo by [Jaime Rojo](#).

huge impact. The Europeans and the Americas have been always more respectful and embracing of art and Street Art in particular. But in the US, with its unquestioning trust of corporations and its reverence for capitalism and commercialism more thoroughly pulsing through every thing, you can count on seeing more sneakers and backpacks and “art products” and legal walls and commissioned pieces in the future. The proliferation of Street Art Festivals already is a clear indication of the way we are heading; It seems that there is a new Street Art/Urban Festival every year in a new city. So far, it still feels pretty fresh, and unpredictable.

RJ: Is a digital public as legitimate an audience for street art as a physical public, giving the typical goals of most street artists as you understand them?

BSA: Yes. Making one more legit than the other would be missing the point. The artists use the streets as a laboratory to experiment with

their art and their offerings are for the global audience as much as the local audience. Some times their intentions are commercial but we hesitate to characterize the intentions of every artist – it is a free-for-all out there and they don't need us to give them labels or permission to do anything.

RJ: To what extent are photographers of street art collaborating with the artists whose work they are documenting and redistributing online?

BSA: When an artist invites a photographer to tag along on a day or night of putting work up that's a collaboration. More often however, we would say that the relationship is complementary, since we regard photographers as artists at least as often as they are documentarians. Each player has the capacity to benefit directly and indirectly from the talent and industry of the other. But collaborating in the sense of being on the employ of the artist? No. No self respecting photographer thinks that way any more than a sports photographer thinks Serena Williams is collaborating with him or a White House photographer thinks the president is collaborating with her or a starving head of cattle in an arid land is somehow collaborating. We are recording. We are making art. We are saving a moment in a timeline.



*WK Interact in the Lower East Side. Photo by [Jaime Rojo](#).*

## Chapter 3: Styles for the global track



*Piece in London by mobstr. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

*Instead of being sequestered into galleries and museums, visual art has to travel the same routes as any other content on the internet, and it adopts similar strategies to reach its audience. – [Kyle Chayka](#)<sup>1</sup>*

The previous chapter was about how the importance of physical locations has changed thanks to the internet, the global track. That shift tends to be the default response when you ask people what the internet has done for graffiti and street art. People often get to thinking about style, about how styles are meshing and spreading around the world as local styles disappear or at least become less geographically focused. But that's only one component of how the internet has affected street art and graffiti stylistically.

1. Chayka, Kyle. "How Going Viral Has Changed Art." Web log post. The Creators Project. Vice Media, 14 June 2012. Web. 5 Nov. 2013.

What might not be so immediately apparent and what doesn't always come up in those conversations are the trends in style that the internet facilitates, not styles that have spread to new cities because somebody saw something online and decided to try it out, but styles that beg for documentation and an effective mode of sharing. These are styles whose popularity is largely due to the internet, styles of work which, although perhaps possible 20 years ago, would have not been able to catch anyone's attention, but now they have. In a sense, I've already touched on this a bit with examples like JR's work in Kenya and Brazil or the active choice to work in abandoned spaces, but the styles and techniques I want to highlight in this chapter go beyond just messing with location or dislocation, although that can play into it. Specifically, I'm talking about styles like ad takeovers, [op-art](#) on the street, tape art, [yarn bombing](#), videos and conceptual street art and graffiti.

It would be a shame to pretend that everything the internet has done for street art and graffiti has been for the better. This chapter ends with a brief but serious look at some of the criticisms of the structures supporting these cultures online and what the internet has done to the fans, the artists and the artwork. We're moving, but are we moving forward?

[Kyle Chayka](#) [has highlighted](#) some examples of how traditional visual artists have adapted to the potential for their work to be distributed online and go viral.<sup>2</sup> If Chayka is right that this is essentially an inevitable evolution, shouldn't street artists and graffiti writers be making similar adaptations? The street artists and graffiti writers pioneering and embracing the stylistic changes that I'll cover in this chapter are the ones who have begun to adapt their art to the global track just like early street artists and graffiti writers had to adapt their art to the realities of working outdoors and illegally.

### **Conceptual and abstract street art**

There are of course a lot of street artists whose work has a grounding in conceptual art, but until recently many of those artists' were producing

2. Chayka, Kyle. "How Going Viral Has Changed Art." Web log post. The Creators Project. Vice Media, 14 June 2012. Web. 5 Nov. 2013.

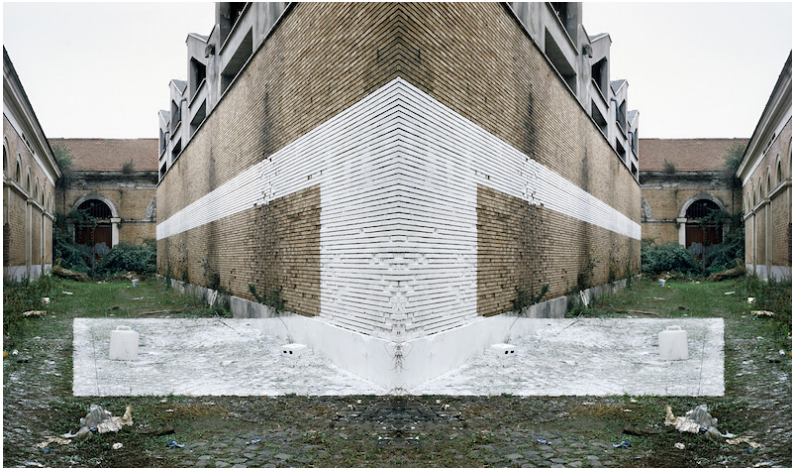




*Detail of a mural by MOMO. Photo by [r2hox](#).*

work that balanced conceptual elements with aesthetics. For example, [Shepard Fairey's OBEY Giant campaign](#) is a massive ongoing conceptual artwork, but many individual components of the campaign involve good design and aesthetically pleasing or at least eye-catching imagery. In 2011, [Carolina A. Miranda](#) wrote [a story for ARTnews](#) about the growing popularity of abstract and/or conceptual street art, but she doesn't attribute those trends to the internet. With regard to artists like [Ron-English](#) and Fairey who mix conceptual art and pop art, the internet has been nice, but it hasn't been essential to their success. On the other hand, artists like Brad Downey who do conceptual street interventions or [MOMO](#) who paint abstract work rather than figurative pop icons seen in so much traditional street art seem to have been helped along greatly by the internet, and have also had the chance to influence the work of many more artists than they would have been able to without the web. Although Miranda doesn't say so, I think the trend that she picked up on can be attributed, at least in part, to the internet.

### Op art



*Corner the Mirror by Mimmo Rubino. Photo by [Mimmo Rubino](#).*

Some of the most popular viral images of all-time have to be the photos that circulate of [3d chalk art](#). 3d chalk art is the chalk art drawn on streets which, from one very specific angle, looks like the image is popping off of the ground and into three dimensions. From any other angle, the work looks oddly stretched out and misshapen. The technique is so popular that there are [a handful of artists who have become well-known for it](#). There's no doubt that the internet has helped these artists, but I don't really consider them street artists. I just bring them up to give a very well-known example of op art (art that involves optical illusions) on the street. Real street artists are doing op art on the street too though, and I think the internet has probably been even more helpful to them (after all, when you're doing a legal chalk drawing, you can explain to a crowd exactly what you're doing, a luxury that most street artists do not have).

[Mimmo Rubino aka Rub Kandy](#) paints geometric artworks that can really only be properly seen from one quite particular angle/perspective, often painting in abandoned spaces where few people are likely to visit. It's only in the last few years and thanks to the internet that someone like Rubino can come along to make this kind of work and reach a large audience without institutional or government support. Looking at it from anywhere else, Rubino's murals might be

quite easy to disregard as random and meaningless paint on the wall or ground. Without photographs, much of Rubino's work is effectively invisible, but with the internet, those photographs and the otherwise invisible art he documents can be shared with enormous audiences.

Although most street artists don't like to admit it, Rubino [acknowledged to IdN Magazine](#) that some of his street work is "made up to be photographed." When you begin to understand how Rubino approaches his work, that perspective (and his honesty about it) makes sense. In the same interview, he explained his thoughts on the web and street art:

About evolution... There's another important issue: the development of Web. Street art, after all, is not such news. The news is, instead, what we've seen in the last ten years: the development of Web.

Thanks to social networks, Internet sites and journalism culture spreads all over. There were fanzines before, but Internet is a hundred times stronger and this is influencing the art works. A weird mutation is happening in street art and in Public Art in general. Works are often projected to be photographed and posted on the Web, you can see a new form of street art in which photography or video are fundamental. Nowadays often the street art piece of work lives just in the pictures and Web pages that show it.

I don't know if you can still call it street art but that's what is happening to it. The circle of leaves that Spy created in the centre of a concrete pitch is doomed to be deleted by the wind and will live just in the picture. Pictures and Web take away charm from some pieces of work, but they make it possible to create other kinds of works, more ephemeral and conceptual ones or works like my anamorphosis that you have to look only from some angles. In fact we see a heavy return to optical illusion. My series of anamorphosis, for example, couldn't exist without photography, it is most of all photography, you can prove intervention that would disappear in few days and work where nobody ever enter. Thanks to the Web I can show them to you in Honk Kong

and don't give a damn about old curators living round the corner of my house. The world changes, the artist has to be a mutant.

After reading that interview, I asked Rubino if he made works specifically to be seen online. His response is insightful:

Most people interested in art, when it's not possible to visit the works in person, find information on the internet, so it's normal to think that artists work also planning to spread their artwork on the internet. This does not mean that artists prefer for people to see their works on the internet instead of the street, but only that artists are aware of the increased visibility for their work on the internet.

Rubino isn't doing anything that would have been impossible 20 years ago. The difference is that 20 years ago nobody could have cared or really seen their work compared to today, except in a very limited art-world setting like what [Felice Varini](#) has done. The internet has opened up the door for illegal op art on the street, allowing artists to display their work online in the way that it is intended, rather than letting it sit on the street ignored because the vast majority of the potential audience for the work doesn't happen to stand at the perfect spot to see it.

### Super ephemeral

Some pieces push street art and graffiti's ephemeral nature to extremes. This kind of work falls into a category that I call "super ephemeral art." Super ephemeral art often barely lasts longer than it needs to for the work to be preserved in a video or photograph. Just as so much street art and graffiti has escaped geographic constraints through the internet, the internet facilitated the removal of temporal constraints and many forms of super ephemeral art have become a viable option for artists working outdoor. Ephemerality doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that the work was documented. The next few sections detail six of the sub-genres and variations of super ephemeral art: Buffable offenses; ad disruptions; tape art and yarn



*CHiRi by Mimmo Rubino. Photo by [Mimmo Rubino](#).*

bombing; install, document and dismantle; performances; and performing graffiti or street art.

### **Buffable offenses**

Street art can be buffed or dismantled in an instant, but if it's been photographed, it never really goes away. Some street artists, most notably [Blu](#) and the Russian collective [Voïna](#), have made artwork that ended up causing such controversy that it was quickly painted over, but not before photos were taken. Even when the physical art is covered with a new layer of paint or it gets power-washed away, the work lived on in photographs. While some people might say, "You should have just painted something less offensive. You could still have made most of whatever point you were trying to make without

upsetting people so much that now your work is gone and nobody will see it,” a buffed piece with good documentation can actually get a lot more attention than a less politically charged piece that stays up. Voina’s painting *Dick Captured by the KGB* was never going to last long. The piece was done illegal and was a very clear “Fuck you!” to the Russian government. The collective painted the shape of a giant penis on a drawbridge so that, when the drawbridge rose, the dick faced directly towards the former headquarters of the KGB. But the group captured the entire action *on video* and got plenty of photographs as well. *Dick Captured by the KGB* thrust Voina into the international spotlight. 20 years ago, a similar action might not have gotten the same attention, but now it hardly matters that the piece was removed or how quickly since Voina had documentation and a way to distribute their video and photographs around the world quickly and cheaply.



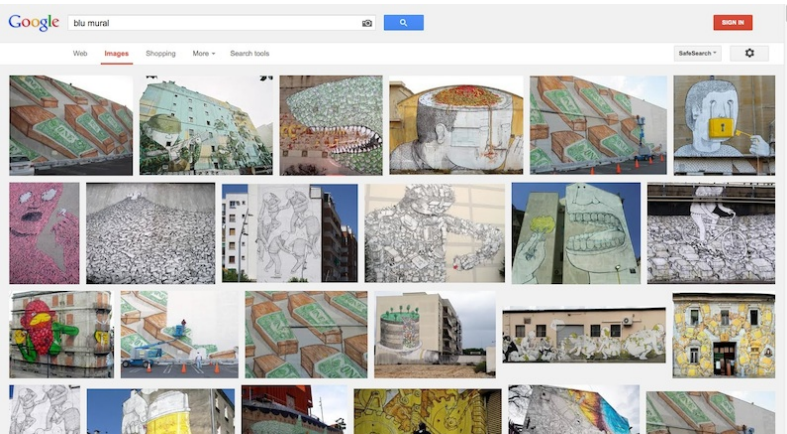
*Художники ебут ФСБ хуем*

Although it’s not the only mural of his to be painted over for controversial content, *the removal of Blu’s piece at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles* brought about the most criticism

and got the most press. As a result, the piece eventually became one of his best-known works, probably only second to his film *Mutto*. So what happened at MOCA? In late 2010, Blu went to Los Angeles to paint a mural on the outside of The Geffen Contemporary, the site of MOCA's *Art in the Streets* show which was due to open in 2011. While Blu was painting, museum director Jeffrey Deitch was in Miami for Art Basel Miami Beach and the events surrounding that. When Blu was nearly finished with his mural, Deitch ordered it painted over. Blu had painted rows and rows of massive coffins draped in \$1 bills. The work was quickly buffed, but not before photographs were taken. The removal of Blu's mural caused a national controversy and accusations of censorship, with the removal being almost universally criticized as a poor decision. One protest of the buffing even included projecting a photograph of the mural back onto the wall where it was originally painted, and a protestor at that event acknowledged that the removal of Blu's mural had likely boosted its popularity. Tensions were still high months later when the wall was eventually repainted just before the opening of *Art in the Streets*, and it took more than half a dozen artists working together on a mural at that spot to diffuse responsibility. Lee Quinones, leading the group on the new mural, even admitted "for me to do it alone might have been a diss to Blu," and that getting a large group together to paint the mural was his way of avoid that issue.

Nearly three years after the mural was buffed, 5 of the first 20 images in a Google image search for "Blu mural" are of the MOCA mural, and the image is etched into the minds of street art fans around the world. Okay, so Blu did not finish his mural at MOCA, but it seems that more people saw it and were really invested in it because it was photographed and removed than would have ever cared about it if it had just stayed up. If MOCA had not destroyed it, the piece probably would have just been another mural by Blu to be enjoyed, maybe thought about, and then probably forgotten. This is not to say that Deitch was right or wrong to remove the mural, just that removing it ended up drawing more attention to the piece.

By pushing beyond acceptable boundaries (intentionally or not) but making sure to document their work, street artists may actually get



Even in 2013, years after Blu's work was buffed at MOCA, [Casey Caplowe's](#) images of that mural are some of the top Google results for the search "blu mural". Screenshot of a Google Images search conducted on September 15th, 2013.

more attention for it and bring about more important discussions than if they make less controversial and longer-lasting pieces.

### Ad takeovers

[Ron English](#), [Evereman](#), [John Fekner](#), [Keith Haring](#), [Shepard Fairey](#), [Brian Donnelly aka Kaws](#), [Barry McGee](#)... These artists and many others put their work up in place of or alongside outdoor advertisements like billboards and ads in bus shelters before distribution and documentation of such work online was commonplace. So I'm not trying to say that it was impossible to take over billboards before [Art Crimes](#) launched, but an individual ad takeover means a lot more today than it did 20 years ago, as each takeover that is shared online can spawn imitators worldwide. The effects of any individual takeover can be felt long after it has been taken down and replaced by yet another poster for yet another pop album or crappy tv show.

Ad takeovers are a form of street art and graffiti where the artist puts their work up in place of an advertisement or alongside an advertisement, or they modify an existing advertisement to change the message. Such takeovers have been going on at least since the mid-1970's, when the [San Francisco Suicide Club](#) modified two billboards and inspired the formation of the [Billboard Liberation](#)





A 2005 ad takeover by Ron English in San Francisco. Photo by [Lisa Müllerauh](#).

Front,<sup>3</sup> and the concept has its roots in the [Letterist International](#) and [Situationist International](#) idea of a [détournement](#). Shorter after the BLF began their work, English also began modifying billboards or replacing them with entirely new messages and artwork (English had been doing street art for a number of years already and was at the time unaware of the BLF, but they would eventually discover each other's work and become friends and collaborators). [One of Fairey's early projects](#) with the [Andre the Giant image](#) was to wheatpaste Andre's face over a billboard advertising a felonious politician running for mayor of Providence, Rhode Island. In the 1990's, graffiti writers such as Donnelly and McGee took up the idea of installing art in bus shelter advertising booths. Donnelly in particular change things around a bit when he began inserting his name and iconography into existing advertisements and reinstalling them as though the modifications were legitimately placed there by the companies designing the ads. But

3. "History and Timeline." Billboard Liberation Front Creative Group. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Dec. 2012.

the takeovers that I'm thinking about are along the lines of work by the BLF, English, or Fairey: Artworks that are installed to critique or question advertising in some way.

The problem with most ad takeovers is that they generally do not last very long. The company that owns the ad location and the companies buying ads do not usually like ad takeovers, and they try to get them removed and replaced as soon as possible. Of course, the artists doing these takeovers, much like [Blu](#) and members of [Voïna](#), know that. The BLF and English even liked to leave a bottle of whisky or a six-pack of beer at the top of the billboards as a sort of tip to the unlucky guys who would have to come in on short notice to take down their work.

So what good are ad takeovers besides a fun way to irritate billboard companies? A single takeover has little impact on the behemoth that is the advertising industry. To some, ad takeovers must seem like pointless and futile efforts to change the status quo that really do little more than force working class men and women to come into work on a Sunday morning to change out an ad. Before the internet came along, the worst case scenario for an artist reclaiming an ad space was that they were caught and arrested, and the best case scenario was that the newspapers got a photo of their work before it was taken down. While I do not want to diminish the work of those early billboard reclaimers, I must admit that I find that a quite limited impact compared to today when doing billboard takeovers can bring down entire companies and inspire actions globally.

To some, taking over a billboard probably sounds quite difficult intimidating first hear the concept. The internet begun to change that, particularly sites like the [PublicAdCampaign-blog](#) that specialize in sharing news about ad takeovers, and now artists all over are being inspired to eliminate public advertising one takeover at a time, posting their results of their work online for all to see. Those actions then inspire even more people by showing them how easy, fun and important it is to reclaim public advertising spaces.

### **OX, ad takeovers and the internet**

[OX](#) is an artist who does a lot of ad takeovers in France. When I interviewed him for this project, his answers to two of my questions



*A 2013 ad takeover by OX in Dammarie-lès-Lys. Photo by [OX](#).*

seem to sum up the attitudes of many ad takeover artists I've spoken with:

RJ: How do most people see your work? Online or in person?

OX: Most people see it online because of its short lifetime, and they come to my work through visiting websites that show urban art.

RJ: Can you imagine making work with the intention that it would be primarily for a digital audience?

OX: No, it is essential that this work be confronted with the reality of public space for which it is intended. While in practice the majority of viewers are online, the foundation of my work is painting and all the uncertainties related to the practice of collage. Photography for the internet is just the last step!

Artists like OX are trying to do something in the real world, but just as their work must “be confronted with the reality of public space,” OX is confronted with the reality that most of his audience will see his work online. That doesn’t mean he stops taking over billboards, but it does mean that documentation and online distribution is an important consideration if he ever wants people to see his interventions.



*A 2013 ad takeover by OX in Villeneuve-st-Georges, France. Photo by [OX](#).*

## Jordan Seiler’s megaphone

[Jordan Seiler’s PublicAdCampaign blog](#) spreads the word about activism against public advertising by showcasing not just Seiler’s own work but also the work of artists like [OX](#) and everyday people doing ad takeovers around the world. Photographs of ad takeovers stay online indefinitely as both documentation of what he or another artist has done and a call-to-action for new activists to start replacing ads with art wherever they are. The posts on the PublicAdCampaign blog allow ad takeovers to break free of both the geographic and temporal constraints that activists reclaiming advertising space have faced for decades.



An ad takeover by Jordan Seiler for his “Iselin” series in 2013. Photo by [Jordan Seiler](#).



An ad takeover by Jordan Seiler in Stavanger, Norway for the Nuart festival in 2012. Photo by [Jordan Seiler](#).

Much like how seeing the work of [Caledonia Curry aka Swoon](#) and others on the streets of New York City and online inspired more artists to try making large linoblock prints to wheatpaste, showing people that ad takeovers happen seems to have spurred on more ad takeovers. Except that a Swoon wheatpaste lasts for months on the street, whereas takeovers might only last a few hours. For this reason, the internet has been even more essential for spreading ad takeovers than it was for spreading the Block Partier style. I can't prove that the number of ad takeovers going up today is more than it was 15 years ago, but Seiler says that he gets emails regularly from people asking him how to reclaim advertising space or telling him that they have tried to takeover advertisements after seeing other people try it. It seems a safe bet to say that without Seiler's PublicAdCampaign blog, many of those people writing to him would not have ever thought to takeover an advertising space.

One example of how Seiler's blogging has inspired action is the [Madrid Street Advertising Takeover \(MaSAT\)](#). The project was organized largely online by Seiler in cooperation with artists and activists in Madrid. MaSAT came about because Neko (one of two local organizers of MaSAT) reached out via email after seeing other takeovers that Seiler had a hand in. Neko wanted to try something similar in Madrid. According to Seiler, "That probably would not have happened via phone call or some other older technology because they would not have been able to witness visually [[the New York Street Advertising Takeover](#)]" and decide that that was something that they wanted to bring to their city."

With MaSAT, the internet also placed a crucial role in the creation of the artwork and the viral distribution of photos of the installed project. Over 100 people submitted text-based content to the project that was then printed out at bus-shelter ad size and installed in Madrid. Most of the contributors were not in Madrid for the takeover, and contributions were solicited via email. [My own contribution to the project](#) was even tweaked when some of the volunteers suggested a slight edit, which Seiler told me about via email from Madrid while I was in the USA. Once the pieces were installed, MaSAT naturally had over 100 people ready to share the results and photographs that

were posted on the MaSAT website. Ron English's contribution spoke directly to this point. It simply said "You are not here" (for which the MaSAT website provided translations in Spanish and French), and it was right. MaSAT was organized largely over the internet for the people of Madrid, but also for an online audience that might be inspired to take further action. English's piece might just as well have said, "You can do this in your city too."

### **An interview with Poster Boy**



*An ad disruption by Poster Boy. Photo by Poster Boy.*

But it is impossible to talk about contemporary ad takeovers without mentioning Poster Boy. Poster Boy is an anonymous collective of artists/vandals/activists who disrupt advertising. Their most famous works involve using a razor blade to cut up and recombine advertisements on New York City subway station platforms until they have new and twisted messages. For example, there was the ad for the television show Children's Hospital with a scary looking clown wearing a doctor's scrubs to which Poster Boy added a small McDonald's logo. Because their work does not last long, documentation and online distribution is essential to its effectiveness,

something Poster Boy readily acknowledges. I can say quite confidently that I would not have heard of Poster Boy or seen their work without the internet, and many blogs have become enamored with their work, launching it into the public spotlight. There are certainly many street artists and graffiti writers who are more prolific, but few have caught the Bored at Work Network's imagination like Poster Boy.

I emailed with a Poster Boy for an interview:

RJ: How do you think [Flickr](#), other photo sites and blogs have affected graffiti and street art?

Poster Boy: Social media has opened new doors for graf and street art, but accessibility is a two-way street because Big Brother also reads the blogs.

RJ: Why do [you have a Flickr](#), and how do you use it?

Poster Boy: Flickr is the new writer's bench. We use it to communicate our ideas with people who might not have the chance to experience it otherwise. The social media sites have become just as important as the work itself.

RJ: How do you generate publicity for your projects and why do you use the strategy you do?

Poster Boy: We've always maintained that Poster Boy is about manipulation of media. Generating publicity IS the project. Sometimes the physical work is secondary.

RJ: Have you found the internet to be helpful, harmful or neither when it comes to promoting your projects?

Poster Boy: The internet is an unpredictable beast, but if you're quick you can tame it.

RJ: When did Poster Boy begin?

Poster Boy: When the blogs started writing about it.

RJ: How do most people see your work? Online or in person? If they see it online, how do they come across it?

Poster Boy: I'd say 20% of it is experienced in person, because the physical work never lasts long. However, the opposite happens online. All you need is one piece to ignite a wildfire. Sorta gives new meaning to the word tagging.



RJ: Can you imagine making work with the intention that it would be primarily for a digital audience?

Poster Boy: We kinda already do.

RJ: Why do you cover billboards?

Poster Boy: Because deep down inside everyone wants to do it.

RJ: How long do your pieces usually last on the street?

Poster Boy: Depends on how clean the piece is. Usually not very long at all.

RJ: Why do you photograph your work and post it online?

Poster Boy: Even though we come off as very anti-everything the urge to communicate is too great. Poster Boy always has ulterior motives which are hinted at with the political undertones of the work.

RJ: How much of your work ends up documented, and how much of that documentation ends up online?

Poster Boy: It's too difficult to determine because some of us document the before and after, while others leave documentation to commuters.

RJ: Do you think it is particularly important for people who take over billboards to document their work?

Poster Boy: Yes, because billboard pieces are specifically political which means they'll get buffed quicker. It's important that we not feel alone in our struggle with consumerism.

RJ: Do you prefer to look at street art in person or through photographs?

Poster Boy: Even [Martha Cooper's](#) photos don't smell like paint.

### Conclusion on ad takeovers

The internet has also allowed for a situation where ad takeovers no longer disappear as soon as they are discovered and replaced with fresh advertisements. Instead, they have a lasting life, perhaps reaching more people through photographs than they do while they are still "live." The short lifespan of these works hardly matters anymore, because

each one is seen by so many that the message carries on and inspires other similar actions. While the act of removing the ad still matters, that anyone actually noticed it on the street or not really doesn't, since people will see it online. This new life doesn't just preserve interesting art work or act as encouragement for artists to put more time into their short-lived takeovers, it seems to inspire more of it. The contemporary popularity of ad takeovers is a result of the internet making them more well-known and worthwhile to make, with each takeover potentially having a global ripple effect.

### Tape art and yarn bombing



*Hot Tea yarn bombed the pedestrian section of the Williamsburg Bridge. Photo by [Jaime Rojo](#).*

Tape art and [yarn bombing](#) are two similar styles of street art that, like ad takeovers, have experienced growing popularity facilitated by the internet. Both tape art and yarn bombs generally have a short lifespan. Although the pieces may stay up for a while, their decay is often quick and ugly. While a [Swoon wheatpaste](#) can be revisited again and again as it ages like a fine wine, a yarn bombs and tape art tend to rot. The best time to see them is moments after they have been installed, which is why good documentation is so essential to such a work's success.

In the fall of 2012, I was in Stavanger, Norway for the [Nuart](#) festival. While walking around Stavanger one evening, I stumbled upon a piece by the tape artist [Aakash Nihalani](#). It couldn't have been more than a couple of days old, but it already looked like crap. In [Ian Cox's photo of the piece](#), it looks like classic work by Nihalani. It looks fun and site-specific, and the photo even includes a young boy interacting with the piece. [As Cox says](#), "so simple yet so effective." Unfortunately, by the time I found the same piece in person, it was already falling apart. The illusion was destroyed and now there was just dayglo tape falling off a wall.



*Relatively fresh street art made of tape by Aakash Nihalani. Photo by [Ray Mock](#).*

Street artists working with yarn, generally under the umbrella of yarn bombing, have a similar problem. Artists like [Hot Tea](#) or [Spidertag](#) have the best-case scenario since their work quickly goes from [this](#) or [this](#), to [something like this](#). In those cases, at least the work falls away without becoming a complete eyesore. More traditional yarn bombs start out [looking like this](#), but decay to something more like [this](#) or [this](#). Decayed yarn bombs do not always look terrible, but they definitely look best on day one, and it isn't long before the decay begins and the yarn bomb turns into a strange sort of urban mold that can last

for months. Maybe you don't mind a decaying yarn bomb and I'm just hater, but I've never seen photos depicting a months-old yarn bomb shared on [Facebook](#) with the caption "This thing looks so cool. I'm glad it's stayed up for so long."

Street art is ephemeral, it decays. But most good street art decays with a sort of grace, looking interesting or sometimes even better as it seems to sink into the wall and into the urban cacophony. Yarn bombs and tape art don't do that. They are at their most beautiful and interesting from the moment they are put up until it rains, and then they are practically trash. But many of the artists working in these mediums are smart enough to take good photos of their work as soon as it is up, and those photos can be shared online to show the piece in an eternally pristine state. Without the internet, I think it's unlikely that either of these mediums, particularly tape art (since yarn bombing also has a feminist appeal), would be as popular as they are.

### **Install, document and dismantle**

When looking at street art online, we typically only see one or two photos of a piece. Maybe there will also be a some photos or a video showing how the piece was painted, but once the photos of the completed piece have been taken, what more is there? As beautiful as some pieces can be as they age, it seems most people online don't want to see weekly updates on how even their favorite pieces are aging when there's always brand new pieces to see too. Everyone wants to see the photo of the finished piece. And everyone is a global audience. By this point, it's clear that there are street artists making work for that audience, but some artists take things a step further. There are many street artists out there who install work, document it, and then quickly dismantle it. Sometimes this install/document/dismantle process is evident, such as when artists say that it's happened or when the work is clearly not attached to anything in a permanent manner, but it's not always so easy to know if the artist left their work in place after they got the shot they needed, or if they packed it up so as to save some money on art supplies and not cause a disturbance. I'll give a few examples.

### **Jeice2's very ephemeral poster**



*Taped-up "Rayo" poster by Jeice2. Photo by [Jeice2](#).*

In April of 2012, [Jeice2](#) posted a photograph [on his Flickr](#) of a piece that he did on a shop's security gate. At first glance, it looked like a wheatpaste covering up some tags. I wrote [a post on Vandalog](#) about how Jeice2's piece exemplified why so many graffiti writers hate street art. As it turns out, Jeice2 actually just taped his poster to the shutters, took the photo, and then removed his work. Take a second look at the photograph, and you can clearly see the tape around the edges of the piece.

I asked Jeice2 about his decision to install and document his work in such an unorthodox way. Here is what he said:

My personal conception of graffiti is that it is completely linked to bombing the city, the struggle for the best spots, the best letters, the most elaborated piece in the most difficult place and done in the shortest time possible. Graffiti is savage and direct, a piece by an important graffiti writer won't get as media coverage as one by a renowned street artist will, which will be published and commented on instantly. Tags and throw up still are part of a wild urban language.

Half a year ago, I did little research through blogs and graffiti websites. I just followed my favorite national and international artists and a few websites, but not many of them. I was nearly completely focused on my hometown's walls. I began doing street art when I started university. I discovered a new means of expression and tried to extrapolate traditional easel art to the city. It was with [Lollypop Street](#) that I discovered the world of the internet and the blogs. Pieces of art were going viral. When a renowned blog published me, I could see how in a two-week period other blogs started publishing my works. To me, that phenomenon was so bizarre. I then focused on different things, not on the style of the letters of my throw ups or their emplacement. My objective became to be creative and explore my artistic self.

But that made me think. I ask myself who my public is or who sees my works. I know who sees the graffiti I spray

in my city, but for street art I suppose that the public might be mainly on the internet. Street art is on a boom and, to me, it is a new world.

When I dove into street art world, I imposed a premise on myself: There's no limits for experimentation. I've done a few experimental settings and this is just one more of them. I drew the face of a wolf and I thought it would be great if it was employed for an ephemeral installation where the main elements in that moment were the lightning, the emplacement and the context. An art happening. I didn't want to make it permanent.

I wanted to crystallize what a happening was. A remembrance or an illustration captured in a precise moment. I may keep sticking that face in some privileged spots to then make a composition or a small project about ephemeral street art.

There are street artists who stick photographs on the walls. There are photographers who take pictures of other people's street art. I was trying to make some ephemeral street art, to intervene the urban space for a short time, trying to fool anyone. It was simply one more creative means of expression. The poster is real, the alley is real, the moment was real. If you like photography, street art and happening art and you can merge it, you aren't tricking anyone, you're expressing yourself in a different way. I really like the final result.

While there was some criticism of Joice2 for posting a photo of his piece without making entirely clear that it had only been installed temporarily, leading some (including myself) to assume that it had been wheatpasted, clearly Joice2 thought his actions through. He considered the realities of who looks at street art these days, and made work for them.

### **Intentionally temporary yarn bombs**

One of [Olek](#)'s most famous installations has to be the time she covered the entirety of [Alamo](#) by [Tony Rosenthal](#), better known at NYC's



*Olek's takeover of Alamo by Tony Rosenthal. Photo by [Dan DeLuca](#).*

*Astor Place Cube Sculpture* or something along those lines, in crocheted yarn. The installation took place early one October morning in 2011, but Olek's work was removed by an unknown person [just a few hours later](#). Naturally, Olek and the handful of people who saw the piece before it was removed snapped plenty of photos that were promptly uploaded to the web along with a video documenting the installation process. There's no way Olek expected her work to last. For one thing, yarn is not a great material for long-lasting installations, but more importantly, she had placed her work on a major public artwork. Olek is lucky that her piece lasted as long as it did. I think this installation was more about saying "I did it" and showing the end result to an online community than actually putting smiles on the faces of the residents and tourists of New York City who might pass by Astor Place during the few hours of that Olek's intervention was in place.

A slightly more extreme example would be [Sarah Rudder's R2D2 yarn bomb](#). Rudder installed her piece twice. On the 8th and 9th of June 2012, she put the piece up for [what seems like](#) maybe a grand total



of couple of hours between the two days. Like Olek, Rudder made sure to take plenty of photos, and passersby got shots as well. Rudder left the piece up for a while she grabbed some coffee, and then removed it and took it home with her in the hopes that she could keep it and improve the piece for future installations. Olek knew her piece was going to be removed quickly, but she more or less left things up to fate. On the other hand, Rudder made sure that she was in control of her piece and kept it safe from any harm. Now, I suppose the yarn R2D2 sits in Rudder's closet while she plans its future.

### Staged photos by Elfo and The Wa



*Danger by Elfo. Photo by [Elfo](#).*

With much of [Elfo's](#) sculptural work, it's unclear if he has just set up a scene on a street somewhere, photographed it, dismantled it and posted the photos online, or if indeed his work is more traditional street art in that he leaves it on the street to be enjoyed after he has left. [Evening](#) only really works from a specific angle and at a specific time in the

same way that some op art has to be viewed from a particular angle, so he could have left the sign up, but most of the day it would just be confusing. *Invisible Elfo* would be great to stumble upon, but it probably couldn't have lasted more than a day or two even if Elfo left it up after he took his photos, and I can't imagine that he left a good hat, sunglasses, and pair of shoes on the street just in the off chance that the sculpture might surprise someone before completely falling apart. *This piece* certainly makes for a great photo and is a good use of that particular location, but again there's no indication how long the intervention lasted. Finally, *Danger* is another sculpture that just wouldn't make sense to leave lying around since the key component of the piece (a wicker basket) isn't the sort of thing that you get for free and it's actually useful. Will all of these pieces, Elfo could have left the work in place after he got his photos, but why would he, and how would we know either way?



Credits by The Wa. Photo by Coopervane and courtesy of *The Wa*.

*The Wa* is probably best-known for a piece called *Credits*, made in the summer of 2012 at the *Dockville* festival in Hamburg, Germany. *Credits* is made out of trash bags full of trash from the festival, which were spread out across a field of dirt to spell out the phrase "That's all

Folks!” in the same font as the old Loony Tunes closing bit. It’s an interesting project, but it surprised me a bit that so many people readily accepted it as street art and spread it around the web so quickly. After all, it took a drone with a camera attached to get a photo of the piece. I’m not sure how long *Credits* remained in place for, but a responsible festival would never let trash bags stay out in a field like that for very long.

While not as well-known of an artwork, The Wa’s *Atlas* is perhaps the most super ephemeral / do it for the photo / install, document and dismantle piece of street art I’ve come across. I can just about guarantee that a lot of people who read this will contest that *Atlas* is even street art, and maybe they’re right, but it was done in public by a street artist, so that alone means something. Basically, what The Wa got a plastic globe that blew up like a beach ball and tossed in in the air at the site of Maurizio Cattelan’s *L.O.V.E.* sculpture in Milan (yes, that’s the name of the giant middle finger in a public square in Milan). He took photos of this and one of the photos, the one he posted online, makes it look like the globe is balancing on the middle finger of Cattelan’s sculpture. Did people see this piece being made? Sure, and they probably thought The Wa was a bit strange. But it’s really only those who saw the documentation of the work who have seen what The Wa was really going for with *Atlas*. Yes, it’s a piece that was made in public without permission much like street art and The Wa is a street artist, but *Atlas* is really all about the photo capturing a split second perfect moment, which was then shared online. With a split-second look at the photo on a blog, it’s funny and most people probably wouldn’t question it. Most viewers would probably think “The Wa guy found a giant globe, tossed it in the air a few times, and took this perfect photo.” But what if The Wa didn’t use a giant globe, but just played a trick of perspective with a beach-ball sized globe close to the camera and the statue far away? From the photograph alone, there’s no way to tell. *Atlas* is an extreme example, but it’s not all that different from any other piece of install, document and dismantle street art.

Is this kind of work street art? In a physical space, maybe not. But once *Atlas* and *Credits* were online, the works appeared on street art



*Atlas by The Wa. Photo by Davide Marconcini and courtesy of [The Wa.](#)*

blogs and were shared just the same as any of The Wa's work that clearly qualifies as street art.

Sometimes we know for sure, but often it's quite unclear how long a piece of street art lasts these days. Particularly with sculptural work, there's at least a suspicion with a lot of it that the artist installed the work, took a photo, and immediately removed the work, and often it's impossible to prove either way, so instead we just have to love the work for whatever it appears to be. The install, document and dismantle artists use the street like a set and build a scene to photograph, with the intent of distributing the photograph online. That's definitely not the same as going out and putting up hundreds or thousands of wheatpastes, but it's a valid way to make art and reach people today.

### The story of an artwork gone viral



*A hipster trap by Jeff Greenspan and Hunter Fine. Photo by Hunter Fine.*

One day in March of 2011, Jeff Greenspan and Hunter Fine set out to catch a hipster. They had built a trap out of cardboard, but it looked like a bear trap. They chained the trap to a sign in New York City, loaded it up with a few hipster essentials (a can of PBR, a yellow bike chain, a pair of wayfarer sunglasses, and a pack of Natural American Spirit cigarettes), and got ready to wait. But before they could get in

position to watch their trap somewhat slyly, a man approached the pair and asked if the trap was theirs and if it was “a hipster trap.” Fine and Greenspan were excited that someone immediately identified their trap as exactly what they had intended it to be and explained that they put it up but now it belonged to the street. Then, the man took a quick photo and they all exchanged contact information.

Later that same day, the man got back in touch with Greenspan and Fine to say that his photo was picking up traction [on reddit](#). Will Simon, aka [gigaface](#) on [reddit](#), had set things in motion for the hipster traps to go viral.<sup>4</sup> The story had made it onto reddit’s front page and the photo has subsequently gotten over 1 million hits [on Imgur](#). Soon, major media outlets like [The Village Voice](#), [Gothamist](#), and [Time](#) were picking up the story too.

~~The hipster traps (and subsequent variations like the Tea Party trap which were collectively termed Urban Traps) were pretty temporary works. The traps held real items with real monetary value. At least one hipster trap even included a [Holga](#) camera. Those items probably weren’t going to last too long on the street. Sometimes, if Greenspan and Fine noticed that a trap wasn’t getting much attention, they picked it up and moved it somewhere else.~~

One thing that Greenspan thinks the internet has done for street art is to make it permanent. Cardboard hipster traps are pretty ephemeral on the street, but a photograph online is (more or less) forever. It’s not that these traps weren’t meant to or couldn’t be enjoyed by people seeing them on the street, but the number of people who saw them in person is greatly overshadowed by the number who saw a photo or two online. For Greenspan, this leads to the question of whether or not the hipster traps should even be considered street art, since they were consumed primarily online. But by that standard, most street art wouldn’t be considered street art.

Greenspan also notes that the risk/reward ratio for projects like the hipster traps is way out of whack compared to the risk/reward ratio of street art and graffiti before the internet. Most of the time Greenspan and Fine were installing the traps, Greenspan didn’t think they were

4. Webley, Kayla. "Hipster Hunter Sets Cardboard 'Trap' in New York City." *Time Newsfeed*. Time, 14 Mar. 2011. Web. 31 Mar. 2013.

taking as big a risk as a street artist putting up a wheatpaste or spraying a stencil, and it was the very first trap they installed that made the project world-famous. [Shepard Fairey](#) had to put up [Andre the Giant](#) and [OBEY Giant](#) work prolifically for years to get noticed in the same way without the internet to help him. Hipster traps are one example of how street artists can take minimal risk and not repeat themselves at all and still get massive amounts of attention. This idea seems to make Greenspan a bit uncomfortable because it means he's being called a street artist when he's done these low-risk projects. He doesn't consider himself a street artist, and he has respect for the street artists have made their names getting up again and again and taking more significant risks to get their work in front of people.

While Greenspan and Fine weren't going to keep the traps to themselves and they did want to tell people about them, in this case it was an outsider who got the ball rolling. As Greenspan sees it, reddit alerted mainstream media to the story and proved that it was interesting, so they picked it up. Simon's photograph and a bit of luck with his reddit submission resulted in millions of people hearing about hipster traps, far more than could have heard about them or seen them if they were made before the internet and social media were so prevalent.

### **Performance**

Many people do not realize is that street art can take the form of a performance. It does not have to be the illegal application to a medium to a surface. Generally though, street art performances only happen once, and they don't last very long. Because of that, video documentation is essential to spreading the word about any performance after the fact.

[Improv Everywhere](#) are masters of performance-based street art. They put on unique performances that absolutely astound their unassuming audiences. One example is [Frozen Grand Central](#), probably the group's most famous performance and one of their most impressive. For the piece, they gathered about 200 people into New York City's Grand Central Station who, at a specified time, froze still as if time had stopped, and then, again simultaneously, unfroze and carried on as if nothing had happened.<sup>5</sup> If you were there, I'm sure it was amazing.



*Frozen Grand Central*

But given that the video documenting the action has tens of millions of views on YouTube, it's obvious that most of the people who have seen *Frozen Grand Central* saw it on video, not live. [Charlie Todd](#), Improv Everywhere's founder, credits the group's success and popularity largely to YouTube. He has said, "When YouTube came along, it was just the greatest thing that could have possibly happened to us because the only way you could see these projects is you would have to come to my apartment, I would take my tape out, put it in my camera, and make you watch it. The audience was just me and one friend at a time. I could get together with my friends, come up with an idea, go execute it with no permission, with no authorization, with no one's approval or green light, and we could record it ourselves, and we could upload it to YouTube, spend virtually no money, maybe no money, and potentially have it seen by millions of people."<sup>6</sup> Once again, sharing documentation online took something from local event

5. Banksy, and Jaimie D'Cruz, dirs. *The Antics Roadshow*. N.d. Netflix.com. Web. 31 Dec. 2012.



to global phenomenon, with a 5-minute long performance initially witnessed by maybe just a few hundred people becoming one of the most seen artworks of the decade.



*F.A.T. Lab's version of the Google Street View car. Photo courtesy of [F.A.T. Lab](#).*

A variation on unauthorized public performance with more of a conscious involvement of the Bored at Work Network as audience and participants was [F.A.T. Lab's fake Google Street View car project](#), which took place in Berlin in 2010. The F.A.T. Lab members rented a car and outfitted it to look nearly identical to the cars used by Google for their [Google Street View](#) feature. They simultaneously tweeted that they had spotted a Google Street View car and [had equipped it with a GPS tracking device that would upload the location of the car to a publicly accessible website](#). [Craziness ensued](#). The lab's fake Street View car and its operators blocked traffic, almost ran into people, got heckled, and just generally behaved in ways that Google would not appreciate its employees behaving. Members of the public (and press)

6. Banksy, and Jaimie D'Cruz, dirs. *The Antics Roadshow*. N.d. Netflix.com. Web. 31 Dec. 2012.

reacted with gusto to F.A.T. Lab's news and the actions of the supposed Google employees. A discussion about privacy and Google Street View was brought into the media spotlight, and it appears that members of the public tracked down the car to get caught on camera making obscene gestures or walking around with their pants down in protest of Google (or just for fun). The performance took place both online and offline, and it relied on the internet for much of the audience and media attention that F.A.T. Lab was aiming for, and now the video of the in-person antics can be seen online, continuing the debate that F.A.T. Lab wished to spark even after the work has been revealed as a hoax.

### **Performing graffiti and street art**

Many graffiti writers consider the act of graffiti to be a performance. If graffiti is a performance and more than just something static to be looked at after the fact, then it seems only natural that there would be videos showing graffiti being made/performed. While tapes of graffiti writers circulated underground for years and there were things like the *Videograffiti* series of tapes in the 1990's, it is now common for graffiti writers to be filmed in action and have their activities uploaded to the web. Sometimes, these videos are short documentaries like Will Robson-Scott's *Crack and Shine* series, but the really interesting videos are those that are artworks/graffiti in and of themselves. Kidult, Nug, Pike, and KATSU are probably the writers best known for taking videos of graffiti beyond documentation for a niche audience to self-contained works with a wide appeal outside of the graffiti community. In these videos, the physical byproducts of the performances (paint on a surface) might be considered secondary to the performances themselves. Two things differentiate this category from the performances of a group like *Improv Everywhere*: 1. These performances are often not meant to be witnessed except through documentation, so the ideal viewer of these videos is the online viewer; and 2. The performances by *Improv Everywhere* leave no trace, but these performances generally do leave a trace. For many of these performances, that trace may also be a buffable offense, but not always.

### **Nug and Pike's videos**

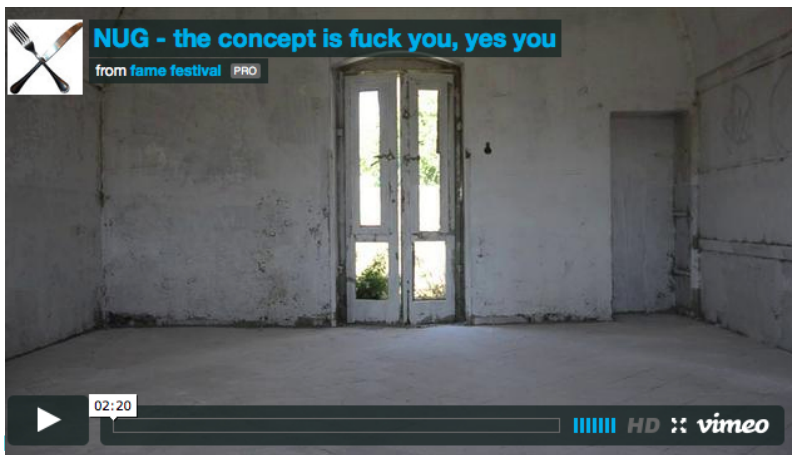


*King of The Line – All 3 Movies*

Nug and Pike's film *It's So Fresh I Can't Take It* and Nug's film *Territorial Pissing* depict graffiti in perhaps its most raw form: A person letting themselves free to mark any surface they want in any way they want. In both of these films, the performance and the act is much more interesting than the aesthetics of the final product. The films are about showing the act of graffiti, and beyond that Nug says that his films are about "trying to translate how it feels to do it" into different mediums ("it" being the act of graffiti as well as the other activities associated with the life of a graffiti writer, and the feeling being a rush of energy and freedom). Nug and Pike's videos are not big-budget affairs, but they get the point across. As for if the videos transcend documentation and are art on their own, this is not the strongest point, but I suppose it's worth pointing out that their films have been shown in art galleries.

Angelo Milano, the organizer of FAME Festival, says that Nug was invited to FAME Festival in 2011 because Milano had seen and loved some of Nug's videos on YouTube. Nug organized two painting sessions at FAME Festival, each of which resulted in a film.

For Nug's film *the concept is fuck you, yes you*, he basically facilitated a reenactment of *It's So Fresh I Can't Take It* in FAME Festival's legendary abandoned monastery by a crowd of Grottaglie, Italy residents. Just like in *It's So Fresh I Can't Take It*, the viewer gets excited watching the video and a bit of the rush of writing graffiti or just going wild, but the piece really shows how Nug's efforts to share that feeling with others are central to his work, since he got a bunch of random people with no background in graffiti involved in the creation of the piece. But since not all of Nug's potential audience could participate in the creation of that piece, a video was still released online.



*NUG – the concept is fuck you, yes you*

The same or a similar crew also painted a wall in the middle of Grottaglie under Nug's direction. Milano, had this to say about that wall, "i didnt [sic] hear one single positive comment about it, if not from the people that joined painting it, for how liberating it was to actually make it." Although Milano had perhaps not intended it, he had arranged for Nug to paint two walls essentially for Nug and FAME Festival's global online fanbases, who seem to have appreciated Nug's work in Grottaglie more than the local residents did.

### KATSU's videos



*NUG for Fame Festival 2011*



*An extinguisher fill-in piece by KATSU. Photo by [Jason Taellious](#).*

[KATSU](#) is a pioneer of fire extinguisher graffiti, pieces made by filling up a fire extinguisher with paint and spraying that rather than a spray can. With fire extinguishers, one can paint something in a matter of seconds that might take hours to do by any other means. In 2007, after mastering this method himself, [KATSU](#) posted a how-to guide on [Instructables.com](#). This gave anyone with a passing interest in

the subject the know-how to turn a fire extinguisher into a massive paint sprayer. Then, in 2009, [Artprimo.com](#) posted two videos on their [YouTube](#) account showing KATSU in action. The first, *The KATSU Extinguisher Video*, shows KATSU and Moral painting with fire extinguishers in New York City and is set to a classical piano track. While it was essentially showing graffiti writers what they already knew, it helped to explain to the general public how such massive pieces were being painted in much the same way that *Style Wars* helped the general public understand how graffiti on trains was made. The second video was *The KATSU Extinguisher Fill-In Video*, which showed writers that KATSU could take things further than the standard extinguisher piece. The video shows how KATSU made a “fill-in” with an extinguisher. Whereas most extinguisher pieces up to that point had essentially been massive tags, KATSU’s piece in this video resembled and was executed like a filled-in throw-up or a roller piece, but was made entirely with extinguishers. KATSU’s method was subsequently emulated very successfully ([also on video](#)) by [Demos](#) and [Dekor](#) in Canada in 2011.



*The Katsu Extinguisher Video*

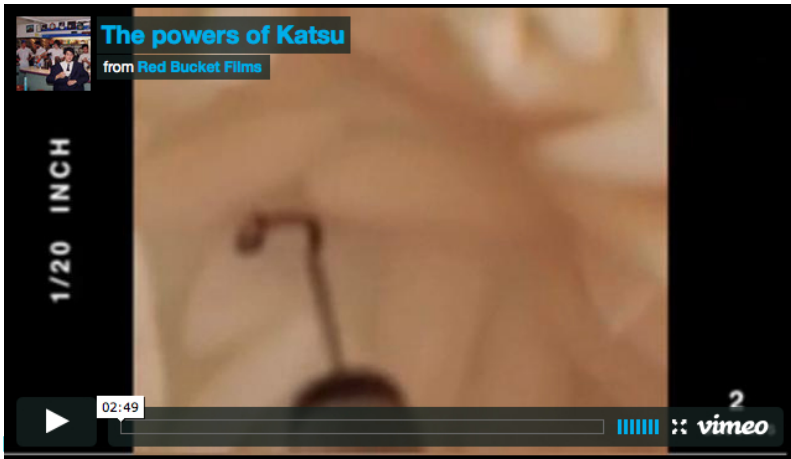
But it was another video of KATSU released in 2009 that really took things beyond the traditional bombing video posted to YouTube and gave KATSU a popular appeal while at the same time highlighting the



*The Katsu Extinguisher Fill-In Video*

performative nature of graffiti: *The Powers of KATSU* by [Red Bucket Films](#). The video is a KATSU-style homage to *Powers of Ten: A Film Dealing with the Relative Size of Things in the Universe and the Effect of Adding Another Zero*, the classic film by [Charles and Ray Eames](#). First, KATSU tags a grain of rice, then a piece of paper (twice), then a piece of metal, then a small wall... on an on with implements from an extremely fine-tipped pen to a fire extinguisher to whatever spraying device KATSU uses to paint his logo on a rooftop at a size of about 120 x 120 feet. Despite the relatively old reference, [Evan Roth](#) considers *The Powers of KATSU* to be the ultimate in graffiti meets mass appeal and popular culture.

KATSU's work had been on the streets of New York City and the world for years and he is well-respected among the graffiti community, but I think it's fair to say that his videos are what first helped to expose his work to an audience that do not write or follow graffiti, and certainly they helped to spread his name around the world more than the occasional piece in any given city could have done. With these videos, KATSU could continue primarily working in New York City while keeping his name on the minds of people everywhere. I don't think that a typical video of a graffiti writer doing traditional graffiti



*The powers of Katsu*

and not promoting it rigorously online could have done that. KATSU's videos were successful because the performances clearly and simply illustrate the techniques behind graffiti that are still such mysteries to the everyday viewer, although it also helped that he linked his work to pop culture.

KATSU has also used video to document and distribute super ephemeral work. Although fire extinguisher pieces usually last a while since they are a complete pain in the ass to remove, they are not impossible to buff if necessary. One instance where certain people felt that it was necessary to remove a fire extinguisher tag by KATSU was at the [Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles](#), just a few days before the opening of their show [Art in the Streets](#), which it was billed as a show about street art and graffiti. In a sort of test of MOCA's commitment to true street art and graffiti, KATSU wrote his name on the wall that everyone entering the museum would see, the wall that [Os Gêmeos](#) had been scheduled to paint. News of KATSU's piece hit on April 11th when [AVONE aka DESTROYREBUILDNY](#) posted a video [to his YouTube account](#) of KATSU in action on the outside of MOCA in broad daylight. [KATSU tags MoCA](#) is a simple video, but it shows KATSU using a fire extinguisher to tag MOCA's [Geffen Contemporary](#) building, and that's all it needed to do. The



piece was very quickly buffed and photographs of the unbuffed piece did not surface right away. Because KATSU's work disappeared so quickly and there was no independent coverage of the incident until [Martha Cooper wrote about it more than a week later](#), it was essential that KATSU get that video published. AVONE's video allowed word of KATSU's actions to spread quickly as it was immediately posted to many street art and graffiti blogs. I doubt KATSU expected this particular piece to last, but he had the documentation and that counted for a lot.



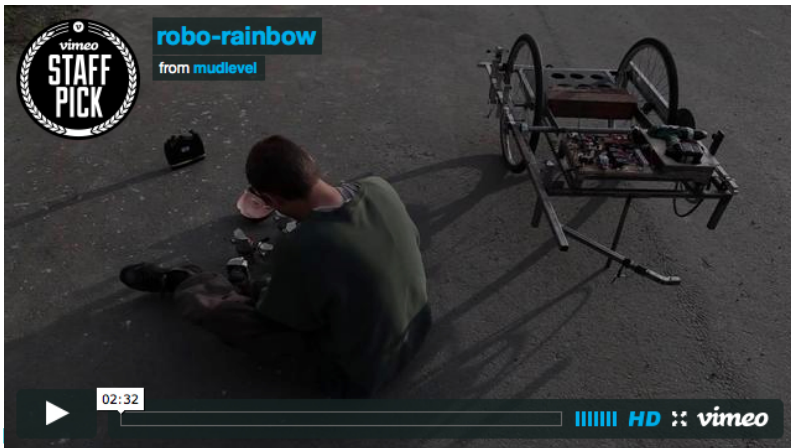
*KATSU tags MoCA*

### **Brad Downey and Akay's videos**

Although performance is typically more important when it comes to graffiti than street art, there are some cases where the most effective presentation of street art is the one that highlights the performance over or in addition to the finished piece.

[Akay](#) and [Brad Downey](#) might resist the term street art to describe what they do, but I think they have made some videos that fall squarely into this category of street art performed for video.

On his own, Akay is best known for the device captured in the film *robo-rainbow*. The film shows Akay assembling a contraption of a remote controlled arm fitted with spray cans and attached to the back of a bike. Only about two minutes into the 2 and a half minute long video does it become clear just what the device does: It allows Akay to paint a 6-color rainbows about 10 feet high in a matter of a few seconds by pressing a button. As Akay describes it, the device is a “complicated technical solution to aide in simple acts of vandalism.” I can’t imagine too many people noticed the rainbow that Akay painted with his device in real life and a photo of the rainbow would be of only minor interest without knowledge of the device, but the video has over 1 million hits on [Vimeo](#). It is the build-up, the understated performance and the joy of finally seeing Akay’s device in action that make the video so much interesting than a photograph or seeing the piece in person. As Akay says, the actual finished rainbows he can make with his device are just “simple acts of vandalism.”



*robo-rainbow*

As collaborators, Downey and Akay have worked together in Vienna, Austria at the [BLK River Festival](#) and in Grottaglie, Italy at [FAME Festival](#). At FAME, they have made a few video pieces together. My two favorites are *tipping point 2* and *Dripping Point*. In both pieces, as in *robo-rainbow*, the end result is an improvement of sorts to the

environment, but only a relatively minor one. Also like *robo-rainbow*, the most interesting thing in the videos is how the improvements are made. In *tipping point 2*, buckets full of paint are knocked off a ledge and spilled onto the street one by one in a domino effect thanks to gravity and a bit of rope. In *Dripping Point*, bottles filled with paint are made to pressurize and then explode in an empty building, spreading paint everywhere and making a drab gray space a bit more colorful. But hey, as nice as a bit more color on abandoned grey walls or the streets of Grottaglie can be, the joy and viral potential of the pieces comes from seeing stuff spill and blow up in cool ways. Its appeal is about how the color spreads, not what it looks like when it dries.



*tipping point 2*

### Performing as Maismenos

Maismenos' video [± THE OILY LAND ±](#) certainly has a finished artwork on a wall which is essential to the overall piece, but that doesn't mean the piece is any less about the performance and the video as the end result. Throughout the video, there are extremely short clips of politicians, soldiers, terrorism and war, including a few clips that can be identified as tied to wars in the Middle East. Maismenos appears dressed in an all-black outfit reminiscent of that of a Medieval crusader. Using a special pole with an attachment in the shape of his logo (this



*Dripping Point*



± *THE OILY LAND* ±

symbol: ±) which magnetically attaches to large letter-shaped stamps, Maismenos stamps out the phrase “THE CRUDESADÉS” onto a wall before posing proudly in front of the finished piece. There seem to be no hints in the video as to where the piece might be located, but it doesn’t seem to be in a particularly populated area. That hardly matters though, since anyone who does see the phrase in real life would only get the partial experience. They would not get news footage fed to

them at a rapid pace. They would not get Maismenos in costume. They would not get to see the piece being installed in an odd way. Even photographs would not fully capture the experience of ± *THE OILY LAND* ±. What Maismenos did was make a piece of video art that happens to include a piece of street art in it.

### The Astoria Scum River Bridge



*The Astoria Scum River Bridge* by Jason Eppink and Posterchild. Photo by [Jason Eppink](#).

The evolution of a wall or of an individual piece of street art as it is installed, modified by nature and human intervention and eventually destroyed can be extremely interesting, but the full lifecycle is rarely captured. [Jason Eppink](#) and [Posterchild](#)'s [Astoria Scum River Bridge](#) video captures something close to that. The video tells the story of a piece that the artists made and what happened after it was installed. Eppink and Posterchild build and installed a little bridge of sorts that they called the Astoria Scum River Bridge. Ostensibly, it was meant to allow people to walk safely over a "scum river" caused by a broken drain system which interrupted a busy sidewalk in New York City. Of course, Eppink and Posterchild were no strangers to the power that

street art could have, and so I think they knew exactly what could happen thanks to their bridge: The attention caused by the bridge could force whoever was in charge of it to fix the drain system and the scum river could disappear. And that's is exactly what happened. Once the scum river was no more, the bridge was no longer needed and it was removed. The artists' video tells that story from start to finish. In this case, the performance that the video could show was not just about the artists installing their artwork as it was about the entire story of the piece from beginning to end, with performers including Amtrak workers, pedestrians, the artists and a city council member. Once again, video is used by street artists to make their work about more than just the experience of seeing it in situ.



*Astoria Scum River Bridge*

### **SWEATSHOPPE's videos**

**SWEATSHOPPE** is a duo with yet another approach to the idea of performing street art for video. **SWEATSHOPPE's** approach to street art may remind some people of **Graffiti Research Lab's** *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* project. The duo uses special light up “rollers” as the equivalent

to GRL's lasers to paint a video projection onto a wall in any shape that they might desire. In the early versions of SWEATSHOPPE performances, that was pretty much it. Now, they can also layer different videos on top of one another with their roller, remixing and mashing up their imagery in real time.



*SWEATSHOPPE, The Landing*

While SWEATSHOPPE are sometimes booked to perform at art events, the performances that they do on their own are not seen live by many people, and they aren't meant to be. Instead, these independent performances are filmed and edited together, with the resulting videos released online. Bruno Levy, half of SWEATSHOPPE, says that they do not consider what they do to be close to graffiti at all, since graffiti is about mark-making and they are performing, but, he says, they went outside because they needed to perform on walls larger than they had access to indoors. For SWEATSHOPPE, making videos of their work was necessary because otherwise nobody would see it, and they wanted to get jobs performing as SWEATSHOPPE, which the videos have helped them do.

One thing that SWEATSHOPPE enjoy about people seeing their work is the “what the hell” moment that many viewers have, which Levy believes can happen when the occasional person does stumble across a piece as it is being performed outside, or through the videos,

but he thinks that's a bit harder to get at scheduled performances. When SWEATSHOPPE are booked to perform somewhere, the audience generally has some idea of what they are about to see, and Levy thinks that can dull the experience somewhat.

SWEATSHOPPE's videos take place on the street and the actions of the SWEATSHOPPE performers emulate graffiti writers and street artists, but really it's a demonstration of art combining with a generally unfamiliar technology, and that could take place anywhere. But by sharing it on the web, SWEATSHOPPE have been able to touch people in the same way that street art and graffiti can touch people, and get some work for themselves in the process. For SWEATSHOPPE, it is clear that the web is where they have been able to reach the largest audience, the same sort of audience that street artists are trying to reach when they put up wheatpastes in the same alleyways where SWEATSHOPPE performs or release videos on the same video platforms.



*SWEATSHOPPE Video Painting Europe*

### Conclusion on super ephemeral art

Tanley Wong, a founder and editor of [Arrested Motion](#), has said, "I'm a firm believer that if something happened one hundred years ago but it wasn't documented in a book, it almost never happened, and the books of our generation are on the internet... It's your responsibility



as a graffiti writer not only to find the most prominent locations, but once your work is up, also do what [Banksy](#) does and take that picture.”

Wong’s advice applies to street art and graffiti in general, but it’s even more pertinent to super ephemeral art. Without documentation, super ephemeral art is gone almost instantly, maybe witnessed by a few or maybe witnessed by no one but the artist. With documentation, its life is effectively infinite. Super ephemeral art is a sub-genre of street art and graffiti so common that today it hardly registers as abnormal. Maybe it’s always been around in one form or another, bubbling beneath the surface, but super ephemeral art could not be as successful as it is without the internet and associated technologies.

### Incomplete on the street



*Why dont you just go home... by Lush. Photo montage by [Lush](#).*

Super ephemeral street art is definitely aided by documentation, but documentation isn’t always essential to understanding the work. A performance by [Improv Everywhere](#) still means something to the live audience even if there’s no video to post afterwards, just as the lucky few who got to see [Olek](#)’s [yarnbomb of Alamo](#) could still enjoy and understand the work just as well as anyone at home seeing photos of it on their computer screen. But there are also some artists who are doing work that most street art fans and experts consider without-a-doubt to be street art, but the work is nonetheless essentially incomplete or incomprehensible without documentation. For this kind of art, a person seeing it on the street might only be seeing a part of the final

artwork, or they might not be able to see the artwork/intervention at all. It's only through looking at the documentation, typically shared online, that these kinds of artworks can be fully understood and appreciated.

### Activated on your screen



*REBLOG THIS by mobstr. Photo by mobstr.*

These pieces by mobstr, Ron English and Banksy have to be seen online to be seen properly and really come alive. The work's purpose is to be documented and shown online, and only then is it displayed in its intended environment and capable of being fully appreciated.

For mobstr, the piece that most exemplifies this idea is *REBLOG THIS*, which simply says "REBLOG THIS." The piece only lasted a few hours before getting buffed, but that hardly matters. It's boring, effectively dead, on the street anyway. Anyone taking a photo would be doing so so that they could share it online. It takes Tumblr and that site's "reblog" feature for easy resharing of content for this piece to be activated and exist as intended, with every reblog extending the artwork's reach and lifetime.



*Hijacked billboard by Ron English in Reynosa, Mexico. Photo courtesy of [Ron English](#).*

In April 2011, Ron English put up this billboard along the U.S./Mexico border. A photograph of the billboard, along with photos of some of English's other hijinks at the border, were published online. In explaining his idea behind the piece, English said, "Even if you're well-informed, you having a well-informed opinion is not the same as being there." Presumably, most of the people who saw the photograph of this billboard takeover do not spend a lot of time along the U.S./Mexico border, but they might still have some pretty strong opinions about issues related to the border. English intended for people to see the billboard online, not in person. That's where the message makes sense.

Banksy even tried this style of street art during his *Better Out Than In* project, despite the project's overall focus on away from keyboard interactions between fan and artwork. On one level, Banksy's piece works on that particular wall and seeing it away from keyboard because of the buffed graffiti beneath it, but "site" has a double meaning here. It's both the wall where the piece was painted, and whatever website the image is being posted on. Whether it's Instagram and Facebook removing content that they deem to be offensive or a personal blog



*Banksy in Greenpoint, Brooklyn during his Better Out Than In project. Photo by [Scott Lynch](#).*

where the author only gives their own opinion, or self-censors their work for any number of reasons, pretty much every site on the internet has messages that are blocked in some way. Or, I suppose a site like [WikiLeaks](#) or [Illegal Art](#) could take up this image as a badge of pride for publishing content that has been blocked elsewhere.

The best street art is about good placement, and the proper placement of all of these pieces is on websites and social media networks, not the away from keyboard locations where they were initially installed. These works are activated by the context that documentation and sharing creates, not by being on a wall or a billboard.

### **Bumblebeelovesyou's physical/digital comic**

In 2009 and 2010, [Bumblebeelovesyou](#) installed diorama-like sculptures in newspaper bins around Los Angeles. On their own and on the street, these sculptures are interesting. They are cute little scenes. But the work really comes alive online. Each diorama is actually a



Screenshot of the third “page” in Bumblebeelovesyou’s “*The Story of How Things Came to Bee*,” with one of the captions (which exist as “notes” on Flickr) displayed. Photo by [Bumblebeelovesyou](#).

frame in a photo-based web comic by Bumblebeelovesyou called [“\*The Story of How Things Came to Bee\*”](#). After installing the works in a public place, Bumblebeelovesyou photographed them and uploaded the photos to [Flickr](#).

So far, pretty standard. I suppose it wasn’t even all that crazy that the works should form a cohesive story that could be read online by viewing one photo after another. Certainly that alone would be an interesting use of the internet facilitating something that would be difficult to do in real life (and the next section features something similar), but Bumblebeelovesyou took things a step further.

By using Flickr’s note feature, which allows users to tag specific parts of a photo with text boxes that pop up when you scroll over the right parts of a photo, Bumblebeelovesyou was able to add in captions to each photo/frame so that *The Story of How Things Came to Bee* could include dialog rather than just images. That dialog can only be read when you view the frames of the story on Bumblebeelovesyou’s Flickr, so the only way to really get the full experience of the work is to go online. This piece is similar to the “Activated on your screen,” piece, but goes one step further because while those pieces can still be viewed in their entirety on the street, even if that is out of context.

Unfortunately, only 10 frames of *The Story of How Things Came to Bee* were posted before Bumblebeelovesyou seemingly abandoned the project, but the idea is an interesting one in the way it combines the physical with the digital to create a single cohesive work.

### Multi-photo pieces

mobstr likes to play games with people who remove street art and graffiti. I want to highlight two pieces from 2010 and 2012/2013 that did this particularly well. They are part of mobstr's *Progressions* series. For these two pieces, mobstr returned again and again to a specific location where he knew that his work would get buffed pretty quickly with some poorly-matched paint, painting a stenciled phrase and taking a photo each time of his work and of the subsequent buff-jobs. He then collected all of those photos and sent them out together, with the finished piece really being about how the wall changed over time rather than how it looked at any individual moment.

In the 2010 piece, mobstr began by asking "Is this shade of grey acceptable?" in grey stenciled text. But the buffman deemed mobstr's work unacceptable and painted over it. mobstr continued enquiring about various shades of grey in the same manner each time his question was painted over, but the buffman continued to remove mobstr's work no matter what shade of grey he used (despite grey being the stereotypical paint color used to cover graffiti). The back and forth is one of the most brilliant "fuck you Mr. Buffman" artworks I've ever seen, mobstr was poking the buffman with a very clever stick.

In 2012, mobstr returned to the streets with a similar idea for *The Question Mark*. In *The Question Mark*, mobstr worked with the buffman to create a shape on a wall out of buff paint. That shape was, of course, a question mark. By painting small words suggesting where the buffman should paint over next, mobstr used the buff to paint something on the wall that wouldn't be removed, since it would be made out of buffmarks. The buffman was covering street art, but he creating some in the process too. The piece began to take shape in October 2012 and was finally completed in July 2013. The end result is two-fold: In person you see can the finished question mark that is unlikely to be



*The Question Mark by mobstr, stage 1. Photo by [mobstr](#).*



*The Question Mark by mobstr, stage 2. Photo by [mobstr](#).*





*The Question Mark by mobstr, stage 3. Photo by [mobstr](#).*



*The Question Mark by mobstr, stage 4. Photo by [mobstr](#).*

buffed, but to really see and understand *The Question Mark*, you need to see it online in a series of photos.



*The Question Mark* by mobstr, stage 5. Photo by [mobstr](#).



*The Question Mark by mobstr, stage 6. Photo by [mobstr](#).*

The works in mobstr's *Progression* series could be seen in person, and of course the buffman does see them in person, but most people probably don't catch the entirety of the exchanges in person as they happen. And that's alright. The pieces are designed to be seen online in a series of photographs rather than in person or as one photograph. I posted the shades of grey piece to Vandalog and it got so popular on StumbleUpon that it's still one of the most popular posts on Vandalog some months, around three years later. Hundreds of thousands of people have seen it. mobstr would have had to paint the series on a billboard in the middle of New York City for a similar reach in the physical world. The internet didn't make these pieces by mobstr possible, but it did allow for a situation in which they weren't almost completely irrational to make.

In a similar vein to mobstr's *Progression* pieces, Lush has made a handful of pieces that poke fun at the lack of relevance that geographic location now has for graffiti. Writers can paint pieces in their backyards or abandoned factories and get more views of the work than if they paint at a local hall of fame spot, so long as their pieces are well-documented and well-distributed online. Lush's method of pointing this out is seen with *Why dont you just go home...*, a piece that physically consists of 12 throw-ups presumably painted in different locations. Each piece was photographed and those photos were stitched together into one image to read "WHY DONT YOU JUST GO HOME AND DO IT ON A CANVAS".

As I wrote on Complex.com, "With stitched-together pieces like this one, Lush had made work that exists in the physical world, but really makes no sense there. Any one of those words seen individually wouldn't even make sense as graffiti, since it's not a name or a slogan or anything really meaningful. It would just be a random word. Put together though, the complete piece is hilarious... Lush has modified what he does on the street so that it is best viewed online instead of in the flesh."

*Why dont you just go home...* certainly exists on the street, but it is incomplete there because it's unlikely that anyone would ever see the complete sentence and put it together. It take documentation and online distribution for it to make much sense for artists to create

these kinds of multi-part pieces. Another piece by Lush in the same vein asks “WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO STREET ART ON THE STREET”. Lush’s examples intentionally take things to an absurd extreme, but there’s no reason that non-absurd works can’t be made using a similar method, or absurd pieces where the absurdity is not a critique of the method.



*What ever happened by Lush. Photo montage by [Lush](#).*

### Street animations

Although credit must be given to [David Ellis](#) (with whom [Blu](#) eventually collaborated) for the motion paintings like this one that Ellis was creating long before Blu’s animations, they are not as well known among average street art fans, are not usually made on the street and are not always easy to find online. Really, Blu popularized street animations.

With his film [Muto](#), Blu astounded the world by combining murals and animation, with each frame of the film being a still photograph which combined to animate a series of murals on the streets of Buenos Aires. Except that with each frame, the previous frame was at least partially destroyed, so rather than leaving hundreds



*Remnants of Combo, an animation by David Ellis and Blu. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

of murals around the city, what remained was mostly just patches of white paint.



*MUTO a wall-painted animation by BLU*

While Blu was working on *Muto*, it was probably very interesting to watch and a person walking by him a few times a day could see something different each time, but once Blu left, the work was essentially gone as well. It seems odd to even call *Muto* and other street animations street art, since the more complex animations do not give much to the people who see individual frames on the street. The work isn't meant to be seen that way. It's clearly meant to be seen as a finished video. Even if the individual frames were interesting, *Muto* is a story, and no single frame of *Muto* tells the entire story.

Without a doubt, *Muto* is a masterpiece, and I do not mean to belittle its importance just because it is not street art in the same way that Blu's murals are. Rather, I would like to acknowledge that difference and applaud Blu for using both the street and the internet in a great way in order to get his ideas out. The individual frames of *Muto* hardly matter except that they make up the finished product, the film, which Blu posted online. It has since been seen by millions of people.

### GIFs



A GIF-iti mural painted by INSA at Unit44 in Newcastle, UK. Animation by [INSA](#).



In a similar vein to [Blu's](#) street animations, some street artists and graffiti writers have turned their art into animated [GIFs](#). As interesting as [GIFs of Retna painting](#) can be, that's not what I mean. A handful of artists, with [INSA](#) being the best-known for this and also probably the first to do it, are painting each frame of a GIF onto a wall similar to how Blu paints his animations. INSA calls his animations GIF-iti, and he's been doing them [since mid-2010](#). For a GIF-iti piece, INSA paints a wall, shoots a photo of it, repaints the wall for the next frame, shoots another photo from the same place, and repeats this process until he has enough frames to make a looping animation. The result are pieces of art that appear to move or light up or be animated in some way while staying in place on a wall.

While you *could* go and see these GIF-iti pieces in person, since (unlike with Blu's animations) there is something left to see, the true finished piece is not just the single frame that you might be able to visit but the entire animation, which INSA posts online. The vast majority of graffiti-related GIFs available today are essentially stills from videos that have been turned into short GIFs, but GIF-iti goes beyond that with artwork painted on the street but made for the internet. [Unit44's White Walls Project](#) in Newcastle, UK [describes the importance of INSA's GIF-iti quite well](#):

“The beauty of INSA's GIF-iti is that it only truly lives when viewed online, where these days most street art ends up being viewed, and it exaggerates the ephemeral nature of graffiti as each layer is painted instantly over the last. Mixing retro internet technology and labour intensive painting, INSA creates slices of infinite un-reality, cutting edge art for the Tumblr generation.”

INSA's GIFs pop when you're scrolling through [Tumblr](#) looking at static photo after static photo of graffiti. While some street artists and graffiti writers reject digital fame as inferior to fame through traditional saturation in the “real world,” it's the artists who see beyond that who have a chance to use the internet like they have traditionally used subway cars and walls. INSA clearly sees value in fame gained through



*Truck GIF-iti painted by INSA. Animation by [INSA](#).*

tumblr likes, and by accepting that unashamedly, he's been able to push his graffiti forward in a way that fits with the online environment.

Anyone can paint a piece, take a photo and share it, but GIF-iti is something specifically designed for the internet. And that makes sense. Graffiti and street art are about reaching eyeballs and there are more eyeballs interested in his work online than anywhere INSA might paint, so he made something to specifically reach those eyeballs. For many writers, graffiti has always been about communicating to other writers, not the general public. By producing work for an online audience, INSA can directly reach out to that audience of fellow writers and graffiti fans rather than hoping that some small percentage of the people who pass by his GIF-iti murals in person are the people he is hoping to address. Sure, in INSA could also paint in spots like abandoned buildings where most of the people visiting are his target audience, but perhaps nobody will visit. GIF-iti is a form of graffiti where the audience is targeted by interest but not limited by

geography. For this reason, INSA's GIF-iti is one of the most important advances in graffiti and street art in the last decade.

In January 2013, INSA's work was [highlighted on The Atlantic Cities](#) in an article with the headline "Is It Still Street Art If You Can Only See It Online?" In that article, INSA explained his GIFs, saying, "I love the fact [that the Internet] enables me to see new work that is being painted all over the world — I flash through hundreds of amazing creations daily. But in the same breath this means I don't really take any of the works in." Rebecca Rosen, the author of the article, also calls INSA's GIFs "public Internet art," an important distinction from traditional internet art, and also a phrase that ties the GIFs closely to street art, graffiti and more traditional public art.



*A collaborative GIF-iti mural painted by INSA and Kid Zoom in Los Angeles, USA. Animation by [INSA](#).*

While INSA is the main person making GIF-iti so far, many of INSA's GIF-iti pieces are collaborations. He's worked with [Inkie](#), [Kid-Zoom](#), [Stanley Donwood](#), [Unga-of-Broken-Fingaz](#) and others. After Unga collaborated on a GIF with INSA, he took the idea to Vienna and [collaborated with fellow Broken Fingaz crew member Tant on a piece of GIF-iti](#) (animation was not entirely foreign to Broken Fingaz,

as they had previously made [this video](#)). GIF-iti is a time intensive process, but as more artists pick up on the idea, it could be one way for street artists and graffiti writers to stay relevant in an increasingly digital world.

### Manifestos

Related to performing graffiti, there are at least two writers who have essentially used footage of their performances and expanded upon that to record video manifestos or video graffiti: [KATSU](#) and [Kidult](#). Although both writers might seem similar to outsiders, they are actually quite different. KATSU, a member of the BTM crew, is a globally graffiti writer, undoubtedly a king. No one would question his legitimacy. Kidult, on the other hand, is someone whose work and character I have a love/hate relationship with. Whereas KATSU seems to just go out and do amazing graffiti, Kidult seems to have a Holden Caulfield-like obsession with corporate brands and authenticity. The whole thing leaves me with the suspicion that the person behind Kidult works as model or a designer for one of the brands that the character of Kidult so reviles and it has been suggested that perhaps Kidult gets hired by the brands he attacks as a form of guerrilla marketing. Whatever their motivations or differences, KATSU and Kidult have both been pushing graffiti forward and attracting online audiences in a similar way with their viral video manifestos. These videos are not just documentation of graffiti, they are video art or video graffiti, much like the zines that go beyond documentation of art and become artwork themselves.

Kidult is best known for painting his name or other words on the outside of luxury fashion brands' shops around the United States and Europe and using a fire extinguisher filled with paint to do the job. Although Kidult's fire extinguisher pieces are difficult to miss if you happen to catch them before they get buffed, documenting the performance is an essential part of his practice. For one thing, most shops treat Kidult's work like billboard companies treat ad disruptions and remove it as soon as possible, which is sort of Kidult's point. The brands whose shops he hits are brands that have at times claimed to support graffiti culture, generally through clothing collaborations with graffiti writers. When the shops buff Kidult's work, it is meant to show



*Kidult's work on the agnès b. homme store in Paris. Photo by [totordenamur](#).*

the brand's hypocrisy for only supporting graffiti culture when they can co-opt and monetize it. At least, that seems to be Kidult's point. He had said, "All these retail outlets have once used graffiti as a commercial tool to get more money and be 'cool' without knowing anything about the culture. I didn't simply say 'hello' to them. If they really like graffiti, I just gave them what they love." Some of Kidult's videos are [standard bombing videos](#), basically just proof that he did hit a store and that any photos aren't just Photoshopped fakes, but other videos go further, bringing to mind [Maismenos'](#) [± THE OILY LAND ±](#) with their performance aspect as well as the random news clips interspersed throughout.



*KIDULT x AGNES B graffiti extinguisher*

Frankly, a lot of Kidult's videos are overproduced to the point where I'm not sure if they are parody or not. One is actually [a music video for a song by Prince 85 called \*Heaven\*](#). In *Heaven*, Kidult toss a molotov cocktail made in a champagne bottle, rides a motorcycle through the streets at night, wears his trademark skull bandana and a slick leather jacket, tags multiple stores, and walks around with his shoes on fire. The whole thing is kind of ridiculous, but it's also a ready-to-go-viral introduction to Kidult. In the video, the actual pieces are less important than Kidult's personality, his accessories, and the way he could not look any more ballsy when he walks up to a storefront and paints all over it. To a certain crowd, a crowd that would probably care less about his simpler videos or the pieces themselves, Kidult probably looks cool as fuck.

For Kidult's 2011 video showing his tag on New York City's Supreme store, there's more footage of Kidult standing around looking cool, tagging a subway wall or spouting off vaguely revolutionary anti-art and anti-corporate platitudes in a distorted voice than footage of the actual piece on [Supreme's](#) store. If videos like this one and *Heaven* are anything to go by, it seems that for Kidult, the piece is important and the performance is important, but the most important thing to get across is the persona behind it all. And why not? It's an alluring



*Prince 85 "Heaven" – ?? ?+?*

persona even for someone not at all interested in graffiti, and there is a much larger audience around the world for interesting personalities than interesting graffiti.



*KIDULT x SUPREME NY*

The Supreme video included a lot of Kidult's philosophy and character, but at the end of the day it was ostensibly about Kidult painting his piece on that store. With his videos [Illegal World part 1](#), [Illegal](#)

*World part II*, and *Visual Dictatorship*, makes no real attempt to make it seem like the videos are about the vandalism. Yes, it's there, but now Kidult hardly even pretends that it is the focus of the videos. In *Visual Dictatorship*, he starts with a series of video clips superimposed with corporate logos. It's Kidult video art. Really, I think that's what all his videos are: Video art that includes clips of Kidult doing graffiti, that's what set them apart from typical graffiti videos.



*KIDULT " Visual Dictatorship"*

Kidult's videos, with the focus on a cool look and personality coupled with anti-establishment platitudes, seem to be designed to appeal to an audience who are buying the brands he is critiquing. Despite coming off corny at times, it's an interesting strategy. What's the point in hitting the store and posting a traditional video shot with a crappy camera if that's only going to reach an audience who already agrees that brands like agnès b. and Supreme co-opt graffiti culture and should be avoided? Kidult has been interviewed by Highsnobiety and Hypebeast. He is trying to reach an audience of Supreme-wearing kids. He's ~~called his work propaganda~~, and it is. It's propaganda designed to reach the people who buy products at the stores he is hitting. Most of that audience probably don't take what he is doing to heart and just go buy another pair of Supreme-branded nunchucks, but maybe a few people who wouldn't have otherwise seen his work are forced



to reconsider their habits as consumers. Using video, Kidult has taken an extremely ephemeral and geographically precise act and made a product unrestricted by time or geography.



*Sticker by KATSU. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

It should already be clear that KATSU is pretty spectacular and innovative both on the street and with his videos, and while I'll get to what I think is his most groundbreaking video work in next chapter, there's one more worth mentioning now: KATSU's episode of *Crack and Shine*. Most episodes in the *Crack and Shine* series come from footage that [Will Robson-Scott](#) has taken on his adventures videoing and photographing some of the best graffiti talent around the world. But the KATSU video is different. In the credits, instead of having "A film by Will Robson-Scott," what appears is "A film by Katsu." It seems that Robson-Scott contacted KATSU about being in the *Crack and Shine* video series and KATSU responded by sending this video instead of having Robson-Scott follow him around.



*Crack & Shine – Katsu*

The video is difficult to describe, but it's something like a combination of advertisement, bombing video, propaganda and manifesto all rolled into one. With a distorted voice, KATSU explains who he is, what his crew (BTM) does, his views on graffiti's relationship with art and society, his graffiti practice and his goals as a writer. In about three minutes, KATSU sums up what it means to be KATSU and what he has done in his graffiti career. While all this is going on, there are video clips of him tagging, putting up stickers, playing a violent video game, using his iPhone app and doing throw-ups, as well as photos of him writing graffiti, finished pieces, coverage of his work in major online publications, KATSU tattoos and other assorted graphics. Sometimes, bold text is overlaid onto the imagery to emphasize what KATSU is saying at the moment and there are flashing images of his skull logo throughout the video which seem like not-so-subliminal advertising along the lines of those HeadOn (apply directly to the forehead) advertisements.

Moreso than Kidult's manifesto videos, KATSU's manifesto video feels like a piece of graffiti. Okay, yes, the viewer chooses to watch the video and it's not illegal like graffiti, but, particularly if the viewer is familiar with the previous *Crack and Shine* videos, he or she is definitely not expecting the sensory bombardment that KATSU delivers. And

it's not random that KATSU released this video through *Crack and Shine* (a series sponsored by [Vans](#)) instead of just releasing it on his own. The decision was yet another way to up his reputation and get his name out there. He says, "There's many ways to credentialize a graffiti writer. One of those ways is to pair a graffiti writer name with a respected corporate brand. It has the ability to signify a certain degree of importance a specific graffiti writer has." KATSU's episode of *Crack and Shine* is one of the best in the series in terms of exploring graffiti culture, not because it is a great documentary about an impressive writer, but because it shows KATSU co-opting a brand that is attempting to co-opt him. KATSU used Vans' resources to release an advertisement for himself.

### Invisible pieces



A series of security gates painted by Stephen "ESPO" Powers. Photo by [Jake Dobkin](#).

In [The Adventures of Darius & Downey: & Other True Tales of Street Art as Told to Ed Zepco](#), there's a story told about the time when [Leon Reid IV](#) (Darius) is hanging out in Cincinnati with his friend Merz and being shown photographs of graffiti, including some work by [Stephen Powers aka ESPO](#). There was a photo of one [Powers's](#) famous gates, but Reid had never seen anything from the series before, nor had they

heard about the series. Merz told Reid to “think big,” as Reid examined the photo and tried to figure out what the hell he was meant to be looking at. Finally, it clicked: Powers had painted his name on the security gates in a subtle way that didn’t look at all like graffiti. If you didn’t know what you were looking for, you probably wouldn’t see anything. And when you figured out what was going on, your mind was blown. With the gates, it really took a photograph for things to become clear. Flick trading and word of mouth ended up working out fine for Powers in this case, but I can’t even imagine how popular those images would have been had the internet been more widely used when he developed that style.



*An ad takeover by Jordan Seiler from his Weave It! series, which he describes as “an ongoing collaboration between PublicAdCampaign, National Promotions of America and its sister company Contest Promotions.” Photo by Jordan Seiler.*

Jordan Seiler has done some pieces that seem to me to relate to Powers’ gates. I mention Seiler’s Weave It! series in this section because, like some op art, the series involved simple geometric patterns, but also because the pieces created a sort of illusion in public space that public advertising did not exist there. If you were looking for it and happened to pass by one, you might have noticed one of Seiler’s Weave It! ad

takeovers. But if you weren't paying attention, the pieces were easy to miss, blending right into the background of the city. These were not as eye-catching as big black and red wheatpastes by [Shepard Fairey](#). Maybe one of Seiler's takeovers would catch your attention for whatever reason and you would realize that the simple construction-paper pieces must have been the act of an activist rather than the billboard company, but I'm doubtful that many people had that experience in person.

I think most people who passed by a *Weave It!* takeover just got to go on with their lives with less advertising bombarding them and didn't have to think much of it. And that's okay. Seiler was able to remove advertisements without turning his anti-ads into advertisements for his own work. Instead, he documented the takeover with photographs and posted those photos online, calling attention to his actions in a way that lasts longer and reaches more people than a poorly documented ad takeover saying "FUCK BILLBOARDS" can do.



"Untitled" by Know Hope. Photo by [Know Hope](#).

Know Hope's outdoor installations are like subtle performances, but even as the work changes over time (both due to the artist's hand and otherwise), viewers may not realize that the changes are part of the art, or that the piece is an artwork at all. Know Hope is perhaps best known for his paintings and wheatpastes, but he has also done a number of sculptural installations outdoors that are designed to change over time. These installations often involve a combination of a sculptural element and text written on a nearby wall. The installations can be super-ephemeral or at least change over time because the sculptural elements are particularly temporary and subject to being removed. For the piece shown above Know Hope wrote text on a wall and then went back after three days to modify the work slightly by placing a flag sculpture on the ground near the text. This was done with the hope of "fabricating a coincidence" or slightly strange situation for a viewer who would be unlikely to identify the work as an art installation but might have seen the site before Know Hope installed the piece, after the initial installation, and after he modified it. Whereas a mural signals "I am here on this wall and I am a complete artwork contained within these boundaries," Know Hope's goal with these types of pieces is to require the viewer to actively participate and identify the installation for themselves by connecting the various components of the piece that may be distributed throughout a space. Know Hope claims that the work is really for the person seeing it in the flesh though, saying, "Because of the ephemeral nature of everything, I make sure to get a photo, but I think I would still be doing the same work even if I couldn't share the photos online." I don't doubt Know Hope, and as viewers online, we only get the finished photograph as documentation of the installation, but that photograph can still spread around the internet and reach a lot more people who will identify what Know Hope is doing as art and that counts for something. Without the photographs, Know Hope might just be some anonymous and unnoticed guy in Tel Aviv arranging stuff on the street in an effort to surprise a handful of people. That's an interesting idea in theory, but doing the exact same thing and documenting it opens up the possibility of a successful art career rather than complete obscurity.

Admittedly, these are not examples of truly invisible artwork. The pieces still identifiable as art by those particular artists if you know what you're looking for, which is kind of the point, particularly for Powers' gates. Some street artists have taken things beyond that though, to interventions that are effectively invisible once completed.

I should note that by "invisible" I mean to say that these are artistic interventions that could not be identified as such without assistance and therefore effectively invisible, although still not necessarily actually invisible. This kind of work is almost entirely a subset of conceptual street art.

My favorite example of effectively invisible street art is [Brad Downey's work dismantling fake CCTV cameras](#). Because there's a video of the piece, anyone who views it can more or less figure out what's happened: Downey learned that many property owners just buy the casings for CCTV security cameras as a crime deterrent rather than buying and maintaining actual cameras and he also learned what the fake cameras tend to look like, so he decided to uninstall some of the fake cameras that he found around London. However, if you've never seen the video and you're just walking around London, you would never know what Downey did, and although it could be argued that the piece was a performance, he wasn't performing for a live audience but rather the audience that would see the resulting video. Someone who encounter's the results of Downey's intervention might feel more or less comfortable walking past a building when you notice that it seems to be the only one around with no CCTV cameras, but they couldn't possibly attribute that to Downey's actions. Since it's an intervention on the street and it's art, I think it's fair to call the work street art, but it's also effectively invisible in the traditional ways that we would consider street art visible. Downey's work begs the question; does an intervention have to be noticeable as one for it to be a true intervention? I say no. Even if nobody notes Downey's work as an intervention, he's still changed the city. It's a bit like asking if it's worth picking up a piece of litter off the ground if there's nobody around to see you do it.

[Lee Walton's video \*Making Changes\*](#) is similar and almost as awesome. Walton is not generally classified as a street artist, but he does make

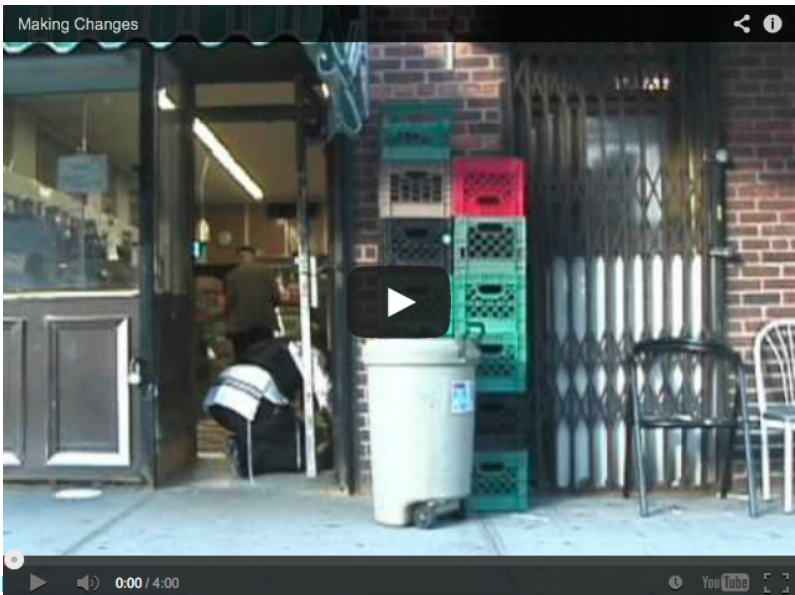


*CCTV Takedown*

artworks in public spaces, some of which are done without any permission. In *Making Changes*, which takes place outdoors throughout New York City, Walton is shown repeatedly walking into the frame of a shot, moving around one or two objects that he finds himself in front of to a different place or into a different position and walking out of frame. This pattern repeats itself in different locations for nearly four minutes. The people I've shown this video to tend to fall into two camps: They either think it is ridiculously stupid and probably not art, or it's amazing. Personally, I like the piece so much because I dance between those two camps, and that's interesting to me. Walton isn't doing anything so rebellious or activist as protesting CCTV cameras, but he is intervening in very small ways in public space. And although his interventions may seem meaningless (what does it matter if Walton swaps the locations of a blue and a green trash can placed right next to one another?), at least one of Walton's changes had an almost immediate effect that gets captured on the video. This is the change where Walton closes the glass door at the entrance of the "City Barn



Antiques” store, a door that appears to have been kept open by a hook attaching the handle of the door to the wall. As the door closes, a couple walks up to it, looks inside of the shop. The shot ends before we see if the couple enters or not, but I think it’s safe to say that their decision could have been different if the door had already been open. Maybe Walton’s seemingly simple change resulted in a sale, or a loss of a sale, for City Barn Antiques. Like Downey with his *CCTV Takedown* intervention, most of Walton’s changes would hardly be noticed and certainly none would be recognized as the result of conscious art making after he has left the area, but documentation of the performances illuminates the practically invisible physical interventions.



*Making Changes*

Maybe many street artists have been doing work like this for a long time. Downey and Walton certainly were not the first that we know of to make this kind of street art. [Don Leicht](#) was doing practically invisible street art, abstract mark-making to be more specific, in the late 1970’s in New York City, but of course almost nobody saw it and now

very few people know that it happened. Similarly, [Dan Witz](#) describes creating “shrinelike displays” like *Pocket Realms* outdoors around the same time out of random bits and bobs that he would find on the street and carry around in his pocket.



“Pocket Realms” (re-created 2010) by [Dan Witz](#). Photo by [Dan Witz](#).

Similarly, one Witz’ famous pranks was so subtle that I doubt many people, even those who saw it and laughed, recognized it as an illegal intervention and not just something the property owner had done themselves: Witz painted the the word “EXCITEDLY” beneath a sign on a garage door that said “OPEN BLOWN HORN” in precisely the right font and color for the word to blend in to the rest of the sign. Luckily, a photo of that piece does exist. While these interventions are addition to space rather than subtractions like in *CCTV Takedown* or neither additions or subtractions like in *Making Changes*, Witz’ interventions are still invisible because they are difficult for most people to identify as artistic interventions without the context that documentation provides.



*In 1984, Dan Witz added the word “EXCITEDLY” to this sign in New York City.  
Photo by Dan Witz.*

I hate to be the asshole to say that artwork only matters if people see it, but, for better or worse, we live in an age of “pics or it didn’t happen,” but it would be a difficult argument to make that the undocumented invisible works are more than a very interesting footnote in the history of street art while the highly visible and well-documented street art and graffiti made around the same time have had an enormous affect on contemporary and future work.

It’s only in the last few years that artists have been able to make invisible street art that does not disappear completely into the ether. Of course, the things that have facilitated this new age of possibility are cheap cameras and the internet. Before the internet, I imagine that countless artists, some associated with street art and many not, created invisible street art. I suppose that a land artist like Richard Long could fall into this category, but if that work was documented and presented somewhere, it was presented to a stuffy art world outside the orbit of street art or the general public. Before the internet, even if invisible street art was documented, there was really no way for it to reach the

general public, only the art world. Now, anyone can make invisible street art and share it with the world.

### **Manipulated photography**

Stylistic trends even go beyond the actual street art and graffiti and into styles of documentation. Between [Instagram](#), [Flickr](#), [high dynamic range \(HDR\) photography](#), [Photoshop](#), and the general availability of quality digital cameras for cheap coupled with even cheaper memory space, photography has become part of many a street artist's practice. Whether the photograph is taken by the artist themselves or by a fan, it is now possible for a piece of street art or graffiti to be photographed and quickly altered to the point where it is barely recognizable. Work that is relatively humdrum in person can appear absolutely amazing in a photograph and for work that looks amazing exactly as the artist intended can be distorted into something completely different (sometimes for better, sometimes for worse). With some of these photos, a new but not entirely separate artwork is arguably created, with these distorted photos often being noticed by more fans than the physical piece.

Instagram has been a strange innovation for street art, and its popularity among artists and fans has certainly been one of the most significant shifts in street art since Flickr. The addition of simple photo filters (either in Instagram, [Hipstamatic](#) or other smartphone applications) has elevated fans to the level of artist collaborators and filters plus the low resolution of Instagram photos have forced artists to consider their work in a very different way. Before Instagram, some artists were considering the photos of their artwork as art in and of themselves, but now that Instagram has become the go-to place for posting or viewing photographs of street art, that consideration is practically a given. It's obvious to any Instagram user, but bears stating outright, that a piece of street art (or anything for that matters) looks very different in person than it does when photographed and uploaded with a Toaster filter and the Lux feature enabled. Just as Instagram can make mediocre snapshots look like they've come from professional photoshoots, Instagram can make mediocre street art look world-class and world-class street art look inconsequential.



*A wheatpaste by Don't Fret. The photo has been heavily manipulated in the Hipstamatic application. Photo by [Seth Anderson](#).*

An extreme example of photos having more impact than the actual work, as well as the distortion of the work to the point where photos are no longer pure documentation, are the images on [Jeremy Gibbs' Flickr page](#). Gibbs has taken many stunning HDR photographs of street art and graffiti in abandoned places, the best of which made it into his book *Out of Sight*. Gibbs has photographed pieces by artists like the [Burning Candy crew](#) and [Roa](#) that would otherwise be seen by almost nobody, and he's photographed the work with great skill. As Gibbs notes in *Out of Sight*, painting in abandoned places affords artists opportunities to take all the time they need and to experiment in ways that are not possible when they are putting up work in

highly-trafficked areas. Combine that freedom with Gibbs' skills as a photographer and you have the recipe for some great art. But some might argue that it is not street art, since much of what Gibbs photographs in these abandoned locations was not really painted to be seen in person. I say that this work is street art though, and that Gibbs' Flickr is a street corner with giant spotlights shining on the wall at all hours so that the work looks as good as it possibly can. That's a possibility that the internet has opened up: Street art that you won't see in person which becomes popular in part because it is so well photographed, and because those photos are distributed freely and quickly online.



*"the taming of the beasts" by Faith47 in Shanghai. Photo by [Faith47](#).*

Some artists seem to have caught onto this trend and take full advantage of it. One example is [Faith47](#). While she lives in South Africa and began her street art and muralism there (although now she travels extensively and paints wherever she goes), her work has been regularly featured on blogs like [Wooster Collective](#) for years. Faith47's work is good. But there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of street artists who produce good work. One thing that has set Faith47 apart are her efforts to document her work well. While Faith47 can be equally happy

painting in the middle of a busy city or in a township where there are no other people painting walls or even abandoned places where few people are likely to ever see the work, proper documentation of the finished product is a key part of her process. When I look at photographs that Faith47 has taken of her work, I consider the entire photograph as a composition, not as documentation of a mural. This puts Faith47 at a huge advantage over other street artists whose photographs are not as well-produced and are just about documentation. This sounds lazy, but with the photographs of those other artists, the viewer has to strain slightly to consider the work in the context of its location and imagine what finer details of a piece may have been lost. With Faith47's photographs, there is no such strain, just enjoyment. It's the difference between a play with a makeshift set and a Hollywood film. Faith47's photographs provide a richer experience of her murals, many of which her fans are unlikely to ever see in person.



*Work by Aryz in Richmond, Virginia where the photographer appears to have boosted the saturation of the image. Photo by [Bill Dickinson](#).*

Not all artists are so fond of the way work is being documented these days, particularly when there is heavy photomanipulation. The Spanish artist [Aryz](#) has said:

“[Sometimes] the photographers brighten the photos and start to touch the colours in HDR and some strange things, and in the end it ceases to be a photo that documents [the artwork] and becomes the work of the photographer. I have seen photos on the internet of one of my works where the guy who took the photo has saturated the colours and maybe a pink has become a red then it ceases to be your work but the people at home don’t notice it because they don’t know what the colours were like in the original artwork. I try to have a photo that reflects the scene and the colours as well as possible.”

These edits are so common and expected that Aryz takes them into account when he posts his own photos of his work, speculating on how others will take his photographs and change them before reposting, saying in the same interview, “Normally I tend to unsaturate [my photographs] because later people start to saturate them, and I prefer that they are unsaturated.”

Photomanipulation is now a part of the distribution of street art. Photographs are taken by artists and fans, and while some are faithful representations of the work, it is tempting to manipulate photographs and improve them to the point where the colors and contrast are significantly different from the original work. In these photos, the artwork can look better or worse than it does in person, poor photography can be masked and something distinctly different from the physical artwork is created. It is this new and distinctly different product that ends up representing the artwork online. We have reached a point where these sort of manipulations are now a stylistic choice for artists and fans. A manipulated photo can look better than a true documentation, and so that new photo may look better online and be more shareable despite the lack of accuracy. Although maybe these photographs are not lies, but rather a new truth. Artists have to ask themselves, “Would I rather a truthful documentation of my outdoor



work, or a distorted representation of it that may be seen by many more people?”

### **Conclusion on street art and graffiti designed for the global track**

The intended audience for the pieces in this chapter is not the public on the street but rather the public on the internet, the Bored At Work Network. Who cares if anyone ever sees any of those pieces in person? And yet, these pieces were done by street artists and graffiti writers and include elements that are generally consistent with street art and graffiti.

What unites these 21st century artists is not just the knowledge that the internet is now where most street art and graffiti is seen, but the willingness to run with that knowledge and let it inform their art practices. These artists do work on the street and document it, which is nothing new, but they have also begun to use the internet like they have traditionally used the street.

### **But maybe the internet isn't so great**

As I've spoken with friends about the themes of this book, I've come up against a lot of criticism from people who don't like idea of looking at street art or graffiti online or of glorifying that activity. And I don't mean only to glorify it, but it's the way we live now, so I've tried to examine it. I think the internet has done a lot of good for street art, and much of the most interesting street art and graffiti that I see online or otherwise takes advantage of the internet in some way. That said, there are criticisms of street art and graffiti's relationships with the internet that must be addressed. Some people see the internet as a massive cheat, facilitating the rise of artists who have not put in their dues on the street and who do not really believe in giving art to the people. Others are frustrated with street art that's done solely to get a photograph that can be posted online. Still others miss the local styles and variations that seem to disappear when work from around the world is available on the internet. Almost everyone argues that the viewing experience is subpar or at least much different from seeing street art or graffiti on the street. Even most of those who criticize the internet have, perhaps begrudgingly, hopped on the bandwagon

eventually, but that does not mean that their critiques are entirely without merit. Nothing's perfect and only good.

### **Cheating**

One of the most common complaints I hear about street art being so popular and easy-to-share online is that documenting your street art well and sharing it effectively online is somehow cheating. Last time I checked, a big part of street art was reaching an audience who might not otherwise see great art on a daily basis or might not visit art galleries or museums often. So what's wrong with sharing work online and having it reach even more people? Like most things, the internet can be used for good, but also it can be used to "cheat" by tricking people into thinking that an artist is more popular or more prolific than they are or takes bigger risks than they do. The typical audience on the street probably won't differentiate much between a piece by [Swoon](#), who has put in years of work on the street and in the studio, and a similar piece by a younger artist influenced by Swoon, and similarly [reddit](#) or [Imgur](#) users might not care or be able to tell the difference between a piece by [Banksy](#) and a piece by one of the many Banksy clones doing similar work, and so somebody like the young stencil artist imitating Banksy can get accolades that those in-the-know might think the artist is undeserving of. On the internet, a piece by a well-marketed one-hit-wonder can often get more traction than that of an artist who has really put in the time to make original artwork over the course of a lifetime. That seems to be what people are complaining about, but I find that problematic. On the one hand, yes, it is frustrating when I know of great artists who aren't getting the attention they deserve because some other artists hired agents and press teams or got lucky when putting their work on a social media platform, but, on the other hand, if that frustrates us, then it would seem that we have created the same sort of hierarchical system that exists in the mainstream art world and which many street artists supposedly set out to reject or at least circumvent.

Yes, the web has facilitated the rise of some pretty terrible street artists, but it's not entirely fair to prioritize the street over the internet if you're really trying to value art that reaches as many people as possible. This should really only be a problem when artists start to weave false

narratives about the extent and daringness of their street art, which is certainly possible online. If an artist in Chicago updates their [Instagram](#) every day, it might appear to someone like me in Philadelphia that they are busy and one of the most active street artists in Chicago, but the only way to know for sure it is to go to Chicago and walk around. The internet has certainly opened up a door for artists to appear to be more up and better-respected than they are. Artists can use the internet to cheat, but I don't think that promoting your work online is inherently cheating any more than showing your work on the street rather than in a gallery is inherently cheating because it is a more effective way of getting your art in front of an audience.

### **Rise of the gatekeepers**

Similarly, it's been pointed out to me on numerous occasions that bloggers and photographers have become gatekeepers for the street art community. As I mentioned in chapter 2, there is a degree to which I agree with that assessment, but I think things are a lot better than they used to be and they are getting better still. No blogger or photographer can control what goes up on the street. Any artist, or person for that matter, who can find paint and a wall can put up a piece of street art or graffiti. It's simple, and there's nothing any blogger can do to stop that from happening. So in that sense, no, we are not gatekeepers. An important part of street art is the elimination of gatekeepers, and the same methods of getting up that bypassed traditional art-world gatekeepers 10 or 20 or even 40 years ago still work today. And even online we are not very effective gatekeepers. Artists without the attention of respected photographers or bloggers can still amass thousands of followers on their own social media accounts.

If that criticism of bloggers or photographers as gatekeepers is more about having influence over who shows in galleries, how successful those shows are, or who gets invited to the mural festivals, the critics may be more correct. Bloggers and photographers can be gatekeepers in that sense. We don't block people from having their work seen in the way that traditional gatekeepers could when art had to be hung in a gallery or it wasn't seen at all, but we do make choices about what work to promote and what work to ignore or criticize, so in that sense we act as gatekeepers. I can't stop [Steve Lazarides](#) from

looking around the streets of London for his next star artist, but if his staff reads [Vandalog](#) and respects my opinion, I might be able to save them some time and give them some ideas about who I think is interesting. Personally, it's a position that I both desire and am very uncomfortable about. Have I stopped a good artist from getting a show because I didn't post enough of their work? I hope not. Luckily, there are enough blogs and photographers and fans all distributing information today that the route to success is not through any one individual. Additionally, [Shepard Fairey](#) (who is not generally a fan or avid reader of blogs or forums about street art) gave me some food for thought on this subject:

“Influence is influence, and bloggers have influence. That's unavoidable. When there's entrenched power in a system, then that power looks out for itself, and that happens in the art world. Even if somebody says that they are the alternative to that power structure, once they gain some power, a lot of times that mentality kicks in... Once something has a following, there's always the potential for it to be seen as dictating what's good and what's not good, controlling the culture, being a gatekeeper, but I like I said, I think that's unavoidable. If I were to say to you that my criticism of you is that now you're just a gatekeeper like the people from the system that started off to be an alternative to, that's such a self-defeating thing. The whole reason you became a gatekeeper is that you built credibility; you established something. It's the same when people say to me ‘You're a sell out. You're art doesn't have any credibility because you've gotten big and a lot of people know who you are and you sell stuff.’ It's sorta self-defeating. It's like saying, ‘don't evolve to the point where you actually have a platform to do something with and try to do something good with it.’ It's just self-defeating I think.”

### **Do-it-for-the-photo street art**

Another common complaint is that a lot of street art that appears across the online street art community is clearly put up just for the sake

of getting a cool photo. The work is so temporary that hardly anyone would see it without seeing it in a photo. That definitely happens. Hell, I've written about that practice over and over in this chapter as a potentially innovative and interesting way of making art. People do street art for the purpose of taking a photo of it and posting that photo online where a blog might pick it up or where their worldwide social media fanbase can see it.

The install, document and dismantle category of street art is a subcategory of for-the-photo street art, and while that sort of work can be really interesting, segments of that community catch a lot of shit from the rest of the street art world about how they utilize the street and the street cred that comes from being associated with street art. It seems that this animosity has to do with the idea that these artists aren't *really* street artists, but are instead just trying to get fame and money riding the coattails of *real* street artists who risk their freedom and to put up art for the public. I'm sure there's an element of that with some artists doing install, document and dismantle work. After all, that's the sort of thing people do when a subculture becomes cool and potentially financially lucrative. At the same time though, I think a lot of the artists doing install, document and dismantle work are actually doing amazing work, it's just not necessarily intended to be seen on the street.

In a discussion over [Twitter](#) in October 2012 between [Conrad Benner \(@StreetsDept\)](#), [Caroline Caldwell \(@DIRT\\_WORSHIP\)](#), [Chris M Clark \(@chrismclark\)](#), and [Jason Eppink \(@jasoneppink\)](#), Benner asked how someone could write off the entire medium of yarn bombing. Caldwell and Clark both pointed to yarn bombing's limited legal risk compared to other forms of street art even though practitioners of yarn bombing often try to associate themselves with street art, and Caldwell and Eppink both noted the super-temporary nature of the medium with [Eppink going so far as to tweet](#), "Yarn bombing exemplifies the 'do it for the photo' method of street art. There's a disingenuousness." I think that, for many people, these same reasons for negativity about yarn bombing probably extend to other



*This yarn bomb by [Ishknits](#) probably didn't last too long. Another piece she installed on the same sculpture [only lasted a few minutes](#). Photo by [Ahd Photography](#).*

forms of install, document and dismantle street art and for-the-photo street art in general.

The unverified stories about work appearing on blogs as street art even though the pieces were clearly done in the artist's backyard describe the epitome of for-the-photo street art that people love to hate. It seems that those artists, if indeed they actually existed, cared less about people seeing their work on the street. They wanted people to get their art on a major blog. One loophole for work put up in abandoned spaces must be noted here: Yes, that work could be considered by some to be for-the-photo street art, but it's more respected because it still involves an element of risk that some people see as essential to street art and graffiti, even if the work won't be seen by everyday passersby. Plus, abandoned spots are cool.



*A portion of Hyuro's mural in Atlanta, the entirety of which has since been removed.*  
 Photo [nickmickolas](#).

The most serious problem I see with for-the-photo street art is that the artists sometimes forget about the community in which they are painting, which is problematic when for-the-photo work is not also intended as install, document and dismantle work. There seems to be a trend, particularly among street art festivals, of this bigger-is-better mentality where every artist wants to paint the biggest mural ever. That is coupled with a trend of artists just flying into town, painting a mural based on a random sketch pulled from their sketchbook that has nothing to do with the particular spot they are painting or the local community and then leaving forever. The result of these two trends combined are massive these cookie-cutter murals with no site-specificity popping up in cities everywhere at mural festival after mural festival. It's like the 21st century version of those stupid [pop-art](#) abstract sculptures that you see in city centers, except that instead of being the result of art-by-committee, these cookie-cutter murals are the result of art-by-internet-appeal. After all, these works do like great in a photo.

These trends are, arguably, what led to the problem that the [Living Walls](#) program in Atlanta faced in 2012 when two of their murals ([one by Hyuro](#) and [one by Roti](#)) were painted over after

neighborhood residents objected to them and both murals were subsequently vandalized. While I supported keeping both murals, it may have been wrong of me to do so. An essential question that the street art community is grappling with right now is what obligations, if any, artists and mural organizers have in making sure that artists engage with the communities in which they are painting and abide by any requests that community members make, particularly when thinking about legal walls. On the one hand there's artistic freedom and on the other the needs of the community. I'm not sure what the answer is, but I think it's clear that it is possible to go too far towards doing work for an online audience which neglects the people who have to walk by the piece every day (for example, writing "FUCK SCHOOL" 20-feet tall on an elementary school is probably unwise no matter how cool it may look in a photograph). For now, there's not much more I can say. We don't yet know exactly where that line between artistic freedom and responsiveness to the community is. Finding the exact balance is likely the next big question that street artists and their supporters will have to tackle.

For now, I guess the question is, "Is for-the-photo street art a good thing?" A lot of people would say that it's not. I say that it depends. Sometimes for-the-photo street art is amazing. Other times, it's completely terrible and poorly executed. Sending a drone into the air to photograph a message you've written on the ground or setting up a sculpture that will excite a few passersby but then taking it home with you can be great. Wheatpasting something over a piece of graffiti on a wall of fame just for a video is a dick move.

### **The death of local styles**

Particularly in segments of the graffiti community, there's a concern that the proliferation of street art and graffiti photos online has led to the death of local styles. It's a concern that has been around even from the early days of graffiti being online and something that Caleb Neelon touched on in his essay about graffiti on the internet from 1994-2004. These concerned writers have a point. Traditionally, styles were developed at a local level and passed down between generations of graffiti writers, but the internet has led to the disappearance of some local styles. Instead of looking at the kings and other elders



in their own backyard, writers are looking all around the world for stylistic inspiration. New styles of graffiti are no longer nearly as tied to particularly geographic regions because they can spread around to the rest of the world almost instantly.

That's not always the case though. One reason that certain styles and techniques are still somewhat tied to local tradition is that every city is different, and different styles and techniques suit different locations. Atlanta is never going to have nearly as much sticker art or sticker-based graffiti as Philadelphia has seen over the last decade because Atlanta is a driving city where nobody is going to see stickers, whereas people see stickers when they walk around Philadelphia and many walls that might otherwise be prime locations for larger street art or graffiti are covered with public art arranged by Philadelphia's [Mural Arts Program](#). Artists in Atlanta can adapt to their surroundings by going big and making work that can be seen even if you're driving by in a car. Graffiti writers and street artists still have to make work for specific environments, and so some local irregularities will still exist, or at least they will if the artists in those communities are smart enough to pick up on how to best work with the architecture and style of city they are in.

### **A subpar experience**

I think one of the strongest criticisms of looking at and sharing street art and graffiti online is that the work is generally meant to be viewed in person and that the experience of viewing work through a photograph on a screen is not as good as being there. This point is brought up quite often, probably because it's often true. Or, at least, the experiences is different. Although I've debated with [Carlo McCormick](#) on this topic and I do think there's a lot that the internet has to offer, I will concede that what it offers is at least different and often not as good as what can be discovered when seeing a piece of street art on the street, particularly when a piece takes you by surprise.

McCormick told me this about looking at street art:

“I still believe in the primacy of experience... There's something about seeing it... The most rupturous experiences I've had, the way I think it really works, is when it creates this situation that either makes you laugh

at your surroundings or question your surroundings, and that's, to me, the power that art in public places, which is unexpected and unasked for, can really have... especially as public spaces become such a consensus reality and such a homogenized and commodified space. These little ruptures, these little rifts, are important to me, and I'm not sure the web is serving that very well."



Roa at Factory Fresh in Bushwick. Photo by [Luna Park](#).

A great photograph by someone like [Katherine Lorimer aka Luna Park](#) of a piece by [Roa](#) can be powerful to see, even online, but what a viewer gets from that can be very different from actually seeing the work in person, and, most of the time, the artwork is more interesting in person than in all but the best photographs. Still, a photograph is better than nothing. I'd rather see a photo of a mural that [Franco Fasoli aka Jaz](#) has painted in Argentina than not see that mural at all. I've never been to Argentina and I'm not scheduled to visit anytime soon, so what's wrong with looking at photos of the art there, fully aware that the photos are imperfect representations? Still, it is a concern that perhaps a generation of street art fans have basically grown up on seeing street art through photos rather than

going outdoors, rounding a corner, and being surprised by something amazing. Nothing beats that feeling, yet there's a sense that many street art fans don't fully appreciate that experience. Viewing street art and graffiti through photos is certainly different from seeing it in person, and the experience of seeing a work in a photograph is usually not as good as seeing it in person, but if the option is between imperfect documentation and no documentation, I choose imperfect documentation. It's just important to keep in mind the photo's imperfections and the thrill of being surprised by street art and graffiti on the street.

Jaime Rojo and Steven Harrington, the duo behind the [Brooklyn Street Art](#) blog and also contributors to [The Huffington Post](#), told me this when I asked about what might be lost or gained when people see street art through photographs rather than on the street:

“As good as photographic technology is, seeing the piece in real life is always a different experience, and there is value in understanding it in the original habitat. The art that is put on the streets often is contextual and placement is key. Like any other kind of plastic art, Street Art is best when one has the opportunity, luck or luxury to enjoy it in situ. The art itself may not gain anything by photographers taking photos of it. The artist, on the other hand, may.”

### **Different responses to the same work, online and on the street**

And on the flip side of that criticism is yet another... that what looks good in a photo and what looks good on the street is not always the same thing. This I definitely agree is true. The experience of viewing street art and graffiti online is not always subpar to the experience of seeing it on the street, but some work photographs well and other work does not.

Some street art looks better in a photo than in person, and so it get spread on the internet like it's the shit, when really nobody who has to walk by that piece every day actually likes it because it's just plain shit. This is a similar category to for-the-photo street art, but not exactly the same. Critics bringing up this point may ask why it's good to share bad



Mural by Jaz in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Photo by [Wally Gobetz](#).

street art. I will admit that this problem has frustrated me in the past. Sometimes I have a good idea from looking at a photograph if the work will look better or worse in person, but not always. And, if I am trying to support street art on the street with my particular blog, it does seem counterproductive to be promoting work that only looks good online. Promoting street art that only looks good in photographs is dangerous because it promotes a misuse of the street. I hate to sound like a guy who thinks he can decide what should or should not be on the street, but I do think that there are good uses of wallspace and poor uses of wallspace. One really poor use of wallspace is to paint something that looks great in a photograph but maybe not so great in person. I would rather see an ugly piece of illegal graffiti on a wall than a legal mural painted on it that only looks good in a photograph.

What disappoints and frustrates me more is when I don't feel that I can share some art that I do like because the appeal won't carry over to the web. I enjoy walking around Philadelphia and looking at the handmade stickers that artists place on the newspaper bins. Keeping track of who has been where and when they were there is a fun game for me to play while I walk around the city. But most sticker art does not carry over to the web as well as some street art does, in large part I think because photos of the stickers (and the stickers themselves) all begin to look the same very quickly. That's great for building up a name on the street, but the online audience usually demands something different. I've tried [photographing stickers in the iPhone's panorama mode](#) to make things a bit more interesting, but even those photos can't compete online against a great shot of a massive mural.

[Logan Hicks](#) believes that his career was helped by the internet because his work can generally be understood on some level in a quick glance, whereas a lot of art (street art and otherwise) has been pushed aside. He says, "Anything that takes more than a half-second to look at, the internet has slowly eroded." That's an interesting point, and I think a valid one in many cases. The kind of work that people like to look at online looks good in a photograph and can be "read" quickly, whereas artwork that does not photograph well or is too complex to begin to decipher in one quick glance isn't going to get shared nearly as often.



*Stickers by various artists on a newsbin in Philadelphia. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

That said, even the complex and difficult to photograph art which isn't getting shared 50 times a second is still available online to more people than might have seen it in person before the internet, and the web has opened up possibilities for conceptual street art that requires an explanation in order for it to be properly understood.



*Handmade sticker by Cosbe along with other stickers. Photo by RJ Rushmore.*

Regardless of the quality of the photograph in comparison to what the artwork looked like in person, seeing the work online is not the same as being there and stumbling across it randomly with no context. Is there a mystique lost when work is posted online? Sure. I'll acknowledge that. There's nothing like discovering a piece of street art on the street completely unexpectedly, especially if it's good and you have no idea who the artist is. But the same piece a handful of people might discover tucked away in an alley and love can spread to so many more people online, and that global availability doesn't take away from the experiences of those who find the piece in person by accident.

### **Conclusion on traditional street art and graffiti online**

The entire world has been changed by the web, so it may seem that this little community of street art is no different than any other arts community or niche community. After all, niche communities of all kinds have connected and been built up online. That artists in New York City can inspire an artist in Arizona shouldn't surprise most people who have been paying attention these past few years. But that doesn't mean it isn't still miraculous, and it is nothing short of miraculous that street artists from around the world can now share their art with a global fan base and be inspired by art exists thousands of miles away from where they live. These advances have changed the landscape of street art and graffiti forever.

The internet and cheap cameras have also opened up unexpected doors. Street artists and graffiti writers can and practically must produce work on the street that addresses a primarily digital audience. While



*Goatse by Basik, based on the [goatse.cx meme](#). Photo by [Basik](#).*

the online consumption of street art and graffiti has closed some doors (fewer artists using local styles and fans consuming art about and in the city while sitting on their asses instead of actually walking around the city and seeing things for themselves), it has opened countless windows. Street art has had an explosive growth in popularity over the last decade, and it has also undergone significant changes in that time. As I've shown in the last two chapters, many of those changes can be linked directly to the internet, and some of that growth in popularity, particularly for street art can probably be linked as well.

Not all of the changes that the internet has brought for street art and graffiti have been positive, but here's the story of possibility that I believe trumps any negative effects that the internet has on street art or graffiti:

1. An artist in Berlin can send me a photo something they have just painted on the street.
2. Within an hour, I can post that photo to my blog while sitting in my dorm room on a college campus in the suburbs of Philadelphia.



3. My post immediately pops up in the RSS reader of a middle-school kid sitting in his room in a lame Chicago suburb.
4. That kid is inspired to create something amazing and disruptive based on what a stranger painted in Berlin.



*Wheatpaste by Faile. Photo by [urban\\_data](#).*

Despite all the possible downsides of street art appearing on the internet, it seems that many street artists do still want to have their work featured on blogs and elsewhere on the internet. [Faile's](#) Patrick Miller told me, “Blogs are a vital part of sharing work online and through social media, they can reach hundreds of thousands of people in a day. If we didn’t have the ability to share work this way, so many less people would come across our art. As much as we want to transcend street art as a label, we’re grateful there is such a huge community following and sharing the work. It can have a long life online far after it’s disappeared from the street.”

Tanley Wong of [Arrested Motion](#) argues that seeing street art online can help people to care about it in person. And that’s true. Seeing a photo of street art is kind of like seeing a [Where’s-Waldo?](#)

drawing with everything in black and white except Waldo, who is still in full color. Suddenly, something that might have been hidden is revealed. Is that as fun as a regular *Where's Waldo?* No, but it helps you know what you're looking for the next time you see a *Where's Waldo?* in full color. Although it's not always the case, seeing a photo of street art can help the viewer open their eyes to seeing street art when they are on the street, street art that they might otherwise have missed. This works on the level of street art and graffiti in general, but also at the level of individual artists and writers. There's no doubt in my mind that being conscious of street art and graffiti makes you look at cities in a different way, and that process of transformation can be jump started by documentation.

But maybe you just can't see the internet as having been a positive thing for street art or graffiti. Just because street art or graffiti that's intended to be consumed on the internet can be frustrating at times does not mean we should discard the possibility of digital street art.

Street art documentation shared online is, at worst, the manifestation of street art's annoying teenage years as it's still finding its footing in the digital environment. That photo, or a photo of graffiti, is hardly different from an animated GIF or a photo of a traditional painting once those things all end up together on [Tumblr](#). None of those artworks take full advantage of the internet, but the street art and graffiti worlds are uniquely poised to do so because the people in these scenes understand the value of and how to invade public space. Street art and graffiti still have the possibility to develop further as more people in these movements figure out how their work can exist online. Only a handful of street artists and graffiti writers have taken full advantage of the internet and used it to create work that can excite in the same way that turning a corner to come across an amazing and unexpected wheatpaste can excite. Those artists who have used the internet well are the focus of the next chapter.

In the last two chapters, I've examined many of the changes that have already occurred since the arrival of the internet. In the final chapter of this book, I want to go a step further and look at how, at a time when most street art and graffiti is seen online and some artists are adapting their work to this new situation, artists can further evolve to

create work that exists natively in digital public spaces without leaving street art or graffiti behind.

We in the street art community should expand how we understand placing art in public spaces. If the deepest values of street art and graffiti are not to be left behind in an increasingly digital world, we also have to embrace what I call viral art, art that emulates street art and graffiti in digital public spaces. Through viral art, the goals and values of street art and graffiti have a bright future online, a future that artists have only begun to explore. This chapter was about clever artists allowing the internet to mold their street art and graffiti. The final chapter is about the clever artists allowing the internet to mold their digital art and the truly brilliant artists are using their art to mold the internet.



## Chapter 3.5: An interview with KATSU



*KATSU in Brooklyn. Photo by [Mr. Harrington](#).*

[KATSU](#) is one of contemporary graffiti's most interesting writers as well as a Virtual Research Fellow at [F.A.T. Lab](#). As a member of the BTM Crew, he is a world-class writer when it comes to traditional graffiti on the street. Be it with stickers, markers, posters, spraypaint or even fire extinguishers filled with paint, KATSU has gotten up hard for years. But what really sets KATSU apart for me and for the purposes of this book are his experiments with digital graffiti. KATSU is a master of getting his brand in your head, by any means necessary. KATSU still retains some of that traditional graffiti viewpoint about the preeminence of physical work, but his thoughts and deeds regarding digital graffiti are miles beyond almost any street artist or other graffiti writer. Although KATSU is usually quite secretive, I was lucky enough to get this email interview with him.

RJ: How do you use the internet in relation to your artwork?

KATSU: I use the internet as an intimate media outlet for people of the graffiti demographic to learn about me. The internet is the medium. The internet is explored, logged and shared. Half of what I

do is based on what type of reaction my experiments get. The internet is the ultimate testing ground for my visual works.

RJ: How did you come up with the idea to make work for an entirely online audience and why make that decision?

KATSU: I took a look in the mirror and accepted that I did everything online. I looked at art, crime, news and stories all online. I couldn't lie to myself and say, "The internet is bullshit, everything is fake and not substantial." There was no question as to whether the internet was the best way to accumulate "FT's". But something I noticed was that the internet had a weird way of credentialing happenings. To see a piece of graffiti content on the web meant that that artist or that work was "validated" through being published digitally. The online audience is a new and premier audience which I highly respect.

RJ: How did you come up with the idea to make fake videos of yourself tagging things? Any connection to [Marc Ecko](#)?

KATSU: The fake videos were really a graffiti joke. I just wanted to experiment with [After Effects](#) and see if i could make a couple videos that might fool me for a second. I wanted my fellow writers to be entertained by my efforts. The [Marc Ecko](#) video had a completely different intention and I honestly can say I was not inspired by it to make mine. My fake videos were all about the resourcefulness of graffiti writers. Graffiti writers make their tools, they make their stickers and pens and create everything from scratch. I thought, "Why not put my After Effects skills to use?" I mean it also ties back to question 2, KATSU wanted to experiment with the web and it's reliability in hosting honest content.

RJ: What was the response to those videos and what did you expect or hope the response to be?

KATSU: The response was great. People were excited, annoyed and confused. The plan was to make [YouTube](#) videos like stickers. Basically to pump out content under my name and displaying my mark. I figured that I could use even the thumbnails of the unplayed videos as visual media. I really did not have any hopes for response. I only wanted to entertain and annoy my graff family. People still



*KATSU white house*

come up to me, “Yo man, on the real, how’d you get away? You’re a maniac.” or “Dude I know those are fake.”



*KATSU TAGGING OVER PICASSO*



*KATSU on the outside of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo by Martha Cooper.*

RJ: Why did you hit the outside of MOCA and why did you make a video of that piece?

KATSU: I had just finished installing the MoMA x NIKE booth campaign and was riding high on fame token fumes. I knew that the MOCA show was being installed and I knew that the curators were sugar coating the show for the general public. It was the most comprehensive show on graffiti and vandalism ever and I was not involved. I did not think that I should be but decided that I would be. I wanted to put some “real” graffiti in the show and see how Deitch and others would react. I’ve come to decide that my medium is experimentation. Whether it’s messaging or medium, I do not really have a plan. Just that I’d like to see graffiti writers and others react and activate what it is that I did.

I love to watch graffiti happen. Whether it’s looking out for my boys or watching old graff vids, I just cannot get enough action footage. The MOCA piece had to be filmed for myself. It was really hot and difficult to pull off when I did it. I needed something to refer to and show future vandals.



Graffiti is mostly about implementation, the act. What risks were taken? How did the body move? What mark was left?



*KATSU tags MoCA*

RJ: Do you think shock and awe is integral in getting noticed on the internet?

KATSU: Yes, of course it is. Why do you think videos of people fighting and hurting themselves is so popular. People want to use the internet to experience the things that are lacking in their life.

RJ: Can you be a vandal online?

KATSU: Yes, in 2 ways. First you can upload and share content that represents your tag or your tagging happening in a way that really emphasizes the criminality of the act. Just getting your tag online where people can see it is vandalism for me. It's all about what your graff represents. If it is a symbol of vandalism then getting up online can function in a similar way to defacing property. The second way you can be a vandal online is through actually marking or defacing the digital space. I've always dreamt of the day I could tag the Google homepage for .15 of a second. Just think of the number of people

worldwide that would see my tag right over the Google logo. Coming up with ways to watermark, ways of spamming and hacking will be the bridge for physical graffiti to the digital realm. Hackers and Graffiti taggers are very similar in the way they think. I think that's why [Zuckerberg](#) is so into graff... though he's more of a master identity thief.



*KATSU's self portrait, shown at Mallick Williams Gallery in 2011. Photo by [changsterdam](#).*

RJ: Is there a right or better way for writers to do gallery work while maintaining integrity? Can you talk a bit about how [your piece at Mallick Williams](#) came about?

KATSU: Yes I'm sure. I wouldn't be the one to ask about that though. I do enjoy creating designed art objects. I love to paint and experiment. Sometimes I'm asked to be in a show when I feel like being productive. The Mallick Williams piece was all about pop shock. I love large photo realism paintings. I decided to try one myself... but with

very limited time. The piece sold and the gallery asked me to create more to sell. I said no. I didn't want to lie to myself. I'm interested in FT's not \$'s yet. Experimentation and learning makes me happy, not acceptance from outer-graff-groups.

RJ: How do you think Flickr, other photo sites and blogs have affected graffiti?

KATSU: They have created a platform for the beauty and luster of graffiti to be documented and appreciated by the world.

They have created new types of photo artists and journalists who work hard to record and archive graffiti. Flickr has become an almost real-time graffiti monitoring system. If I tag something new, chances are within a day or two I can find different photographs of it. This is exciting and weird because maybe I'm tagging in order to see it online as opposed to tagging and seeing it referenced online. Flickr is a great utility. For graffiti fans the internet and sites like Flickr offer a look into a network of graffiti that you might be unaware of.

RJ: At what point did you realize that the internet was affecting graffiti?

KATSU: I think it was when I was 17. I was in Eugene, Oregon for the weekend visiting an Oregonian writer by the name of FIST. I had a hilarious discussion with him about how pathetic we were that we checked the 12ozProphet – Brick Slayers forum dozens of times a day..we checked right when we woke every morning and checked it every evening before we went to sleep. We were so amused by the fact that we had become addicted to monitoring graffiti as it happened. To us it had become an obsession knowing who was up, where and how.

Graffiti had always been a secret. You either knew where to find it or did not see it. there weren't graffiti shops or any boutique stores that sold spray paint. The only way for us to have any exposure to different writers was through magazines. These graffiti magazines came from all over the country and world. Because the magazines did not speak to the masses very few stores carried them. We would study and scan the same magazines over and over and over. trying to decrypt or find any missed details in backgrounds of photos. The internet changed how we understood the subculture. We now knew how vast, how similar and how different graffiti was in real time.



*Crack & Shine – Katsu*

RJ: Why work with [Vans](#) rather than make [that video](#) and post it on YouTube yourself?

KATSU: There's many ways to credentialize a graffiti writer. One of those ways is to pair a graffiti writer name with a respected corporate brand. It has the ability to signify a certain degree of importance a specific graffiti writer has. I should probably check myself and not do any more work with corporate sponsored projects.

RJ: Is fame gained by digital work or video work equal to fame gained by an illegal piece?

KATSU: No, it's different. It's all different... I should expand but i'm really stoned and need to get lunch BRB.

Ok I'm back. Fame gained by content graffiti and fame gained by an illegal piece are completely different. At the end of the day it's all about risk. On one hand creating a piece of creative graffiti content involves your reputation. The reputation for your brain. If you upload something dumb or boring you can never take it down and you've been painted as a toy... in that realm. People are all over my nuts right now because of my online graff and my iPhone app. It's different fame. You're nothing in graffiti if graffiti writers don't respect you. This is what keeps street artists up at night :).

RJ: Is it more effective and efficient to get fame through work that will spread virally online than through traditional physical graffiti?

KATSU: Not necessarily, there is temporary fame and notoriety and then there is fame that's established on having brand value. The graffiti consumer is made up of a wide demographic. Yes you have your middle and upper class constituency who spend the majority of their time in front of computers and not in the streets. But you also have a large portion of graffiti writers and graffiti fans who are outside walking the streets and driving the freeways who value a writer based on how much damage they cause physically. Physical graffiti and online graffiti quantities need to be balanced in order for each one to work together. People watched my videos because KATSU had created them. It added to the faith. I honestly put it in and will continue to in the streets of planet Earth. It is so challenging to do so. That challenge is the meaning of life.

RJ: Why continue to get up physically at all?

KATSU: Until the day that humans are hardwired into the internet and become a purely connected organism, the physical space will stay an extremely powerful platform for communication. There is a real sense of context when you see something painted on a building without permission. It stimulates your nervous system in a real way. Getting up physically takes risk. Risk level is an important part of the valuation of graffiti all together. People tend to think that getting internet fame is more important and makes you a more valuable writer. Those people have no respect in the streets and are not a part of the real graffiti network. The YouTube fakes I made were sort of a commentary on the valuation process we use when encountering graffiti on the internet. The videos displayed scenarios of extremely high risk but were not actually real. Because so much content online can be faked, the videos acted as a reminder to the viewer that real graffiti happens outside and the risk is real therefore the graffiti outside is real.

But graffiti will bridge, physically, into the internet through visual hacking of websites and virtual spaces that people share. The act of the hack will be the new future form of graffiti.

RJ: To what extent do you rely on photographers such as [Katherine Lorimer aka Luna Park](#) who document graffiti and post photos to Flickr, which then get picked up by blogs?

KATSU: Everytime I appear online because of a photographer or blogger I feel blessed. I'm in no way dependent on fans to express their excitement for the subculture. I can get fame tokens for myself better than anyone can do for me. I am very grateful however, for the individuals who archive my work online. It is a form of graffiti analytics where I can validate spots, techniques and styles based on their documentation. Luna Park is an amazing photographer and is extremely efficient at archiving and organizing evidence of vandalism. I have much respect for her and many others.

RJ: How did you get the word out online and in print about your ad-disruption-project and what are some of the notable places that those images spread to? How did the advertising industry react to those pieces?

KATSU: I did nothing to get the word out. I had no intention of communicating to anyone but the pedestrians of Lower Manhattan. The ads were an experiment. I thought to myself, "Well if graffiti is already illegal, why not spice it up a little with some copyright infringement and some use of celebrity personalities without licensing them?" I wanted to see how people would react to a mixture of cross-validation. I installed over 100 posters in 5 hours during the early morning hours of the day. It was very exhausting both physically and mentally. There were a fair amount of piglets out that day and I had to be very cautious of not raising awareness. Moments after I finished the last booth, images started popping up online. Then those images were shared and things started to get crazy. The install went viral. I saw them on graffiti forums and Manhattan news sites. I think the most notable place that they showed up was the Wall Street Journal the next morning. People reacted.

RJ: Is the act of making graffiti a performance art of sorts?

KATSU: Absolutely. It is a revolt against the rules and structures set up by capitalism. It displays the passion that people will always have to hack systems in creative ways. The reason people think they like street art is because of what it does to mimic graffiti.

RJ: How do you go about finding new and interesting writers or pieces of graffiti today? How is that different from a decade ago?



*A phone booth ad takeover by KATSU featuring Kurt Cobain and the Nike logo.  
Photo by [Ray Mock](#).*

KATSU: I see so much online. I'm overwhelmed by the amount of incredible vandalism that the internet perpetuates. I cannot quantify the value of what I see online however. That is something that the

internet is still working on. I need to know HOW RISKY WAS IT TO PULL THAT OFF?! New York is the mecca of graffiti and I still get the majority of my exposure to it in the streets.

A decade ago I had to explore... physically. I had to search out areas and follow writers through their journeys. I had magazines and some videos but that was it. Freight trains were really the first “internet graffiti” I experienced. Freights were postcards signed by writers and sent out into the world with no idea of where they would go or end up. I still remember driving through the snowy mountains hours outside of Seattle and spotting a SACE IRAK freight laid up in the woods next to a rushing river. It was so fucking ill.

RJ: What are your thoughts on the supposed internationalization of graffiti styles due to the internet?

KATSU: I mean there is an internet style of getting up. There are profiles, spotlights, web videos and images. The internationalization of graffiti styles will never be relevant in the streets. As long as air travel is our most efficient way to move from one part of the globe to another, graffiti styles will remain different in different regions. Real writers know this.

RJ: How do you define graffiti?

KATSU: Graffiti is human choosing a name and writing that name in the public with spray paint and markers... and stickers... with a sensitive understanding of the graffiti subculture and it’s current context. Graffiti is a staged rollout of a tag name over a substantial amount of time. This being around 3 – 10 years. The use of non-traditional graffiti methods such as internet content, outdoor print media and others can only come into effect once a name has developed a degree of “graffiti heritage” through street tagging. Once a graffiti writer is established through spray and tag, then and only then can alternative and new techniques of exposure be harnessed. At this point a writer should embrace any and all methods of occupying media space both outdoors and digitally.

RJ: How do you define street art?

KATSU: Street art is artwork installed in the public often on top or beside graffiti. Street art is intended to communicate in a decrypted language digestible by everyday people. Street art is not graffiti. Street



art involves very creative ideas based on graffiti but does not follow the same rules. Graffiti is a perpetuation of an act of revolt. Street art is a commercialized form of graffiti.

RJ: How do you generate publicity for your projects and why do you use the strategy you do?

KATSU: That's like asking me, "How do you get your tag seen?" I make sure I'm having fun and that my standards are in check. My strategy in life is to be a weirdo and experiment til the day I die. People like new things. Occasionally what I do is viewed as "something different or new." If a project is powerful enough, it needs no strategy for promotion.

RJ: Do you prefer to look at your graffiti or other people's graffiti in person or through photographs?

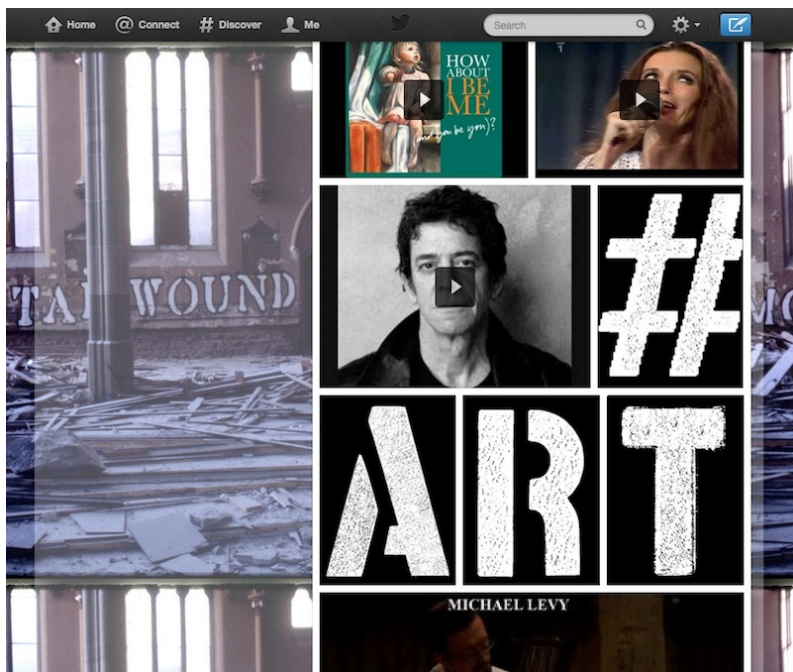
KATSU: I really do not care for my graffiti after I do it. I prefer my graffiti as it happens over any other graffiti in the world. Once it's executed, I don't give a fuck about it. I love all graffiti... if it is actual graffiti. If it is an individual who is dedicated or shows signs of having complete faith. To witness real graffiti is a powerful thing.



A KATSU throw-up. Photo by [urban\\_data](#).



## Chapter 4: Organic and Invasive Viral Art



A screenshot from the grid view of [John Fekner's](#) photo and video [uploads to Twitter](#).

*“At its core, street art is the unmediated distribution of art from artist to public.” – Pedro Alonzo*

Two of the most interesting opposing strands in contemporary street art and graffiti are the artists who are fully embracing the internet and the artists who are outright rejecting it in favor of “real-world” experiences. Most street artists and graffiti writers fall somewhere in the middle, producing work that looks beautiful on [Instagram](#) but doesn't quite leave walls behind. In the last chapter, I focused on artists in that middle ground who tend toward embracing the internet. In this chapter, I finally highlight the extreme cases: the handful of artists who treat the internet like the street, making art that I classify as viral art. Viral art is where a good chunk of street art and graffiti is heading,

or at least should be heading because we're living online now and an artist's core reasoning is often very similar whether they decide to make animated GIFs or go out wheatpasting posters.

Pedro Alonzo's succinct definition of street art, that it's about artists reaching the eyeballs of the general public without any barriers, is also the most succinct definition of viral art. But there's a hidden assumption in Alonzo's definition that by distribution he means putting art on walls. Simply change that assumption from distribution on walls to digital distribution and you get the definition of viral art: At its core, viral art is the unmediated (digital) distribution of art from artist to public.

Intentionally or not, Alonzo's definition as written implies that the "street" part of "street art" isn't really about being on a street corner. It's about unmediated distribution. That's the root of street art and graffiti. But we in the street art and graffiti communities seem to have lost that.

In order to thrive in this increasingly digital world, we have to let go of paint on walls and wheatpaste and all the other baggage of "street art" and "graffiti." The first chapter of this book began with a quote from [Evan Roth](#), who suggests that painting on the subway was a hack graffiti writers came up with to distribute their work.<sup>1</sup> Painting on the subway wasn't the goal. Distribution was the goal. I'll go further and say that all the techniques we associate with street art and graffiti are hacks. Stencils and spraypaint and wheatpaste and stickers were not originally designed to be used for street art or graffiti. They were taken up by artists and writers and hacked into art-making tools to better accomplish a goal. That's all well and good, exciting even, except that [Ian Strange aka Kid Zoom](#) believes that street artists and graffiti writers sometimes confuse the means of their practice with the ends, and I agree. We've gotten hung up on these hacks, this baggage, of street art and graffiti. Those tools are the means and not the ends, and we in the street art and graffiti communities have to stop confusing the means with the ends. We have to get back to that core goal of unmediated distribution and we have to hack new systems to do it.

1. Roth, Evan. "Evan Roth." Interview by Alexander Tarrant. Juxtapoz Oct. 2010: 124-35. Print.

Whereas once upon a time the street was the best place for unmediated distribution, now that same distribution can happen online in what Roth calls “the public space of the internet.” Still, I doubt I can convince everyone to drastically change their definition of “street art” and discard that “on the street” assumption overnight, and there’s still some usefulness in differentiating between what exists online and what exists on walls, as long as we first acknowledge the similarities. To differentiate between “on the wall” (street art and graffiti) and “on the web” (viral art) distribution, for now I’ll accept Alonzo’s implicit assumption and use the term viral art to describe the digital equivalents of street art and graffiti.

Viral art is street art for those of us who grew up in a post-America Online world. It’s art that bypasses gatekeepers, appeals to the masses and reaches our eyeballs without us having to google “art.” But what it isn’t, necessarily, is “real” in the traditional sense of the word. Viral art does not have to exist now or ever have existed in any form besides a series of ones and zeros (for simplicity’s sake, I’ll generally be contrasting between physical and digital existence in this chapter, although of course those ones and zeros are physical in a sense). In this way, viral art encompasses street art distributed on the internet like we saw in the previous two chapters, but also animated GIF art, [Twitter](#) art and more.

Viral art is art for the Bored at Work Network. Roth argues that the Bored at Work Network and the audience for street art are essentially the same and that in both scenarios (discovery on the street or online) the work is being pushed to the audience rather than the audience going out and searching for the artwork, breaking viewers out of their daily routine. Online, photos of street art and GIF animations travel on the same pipelines and appear on the same social media feeds. Differentiating between them at that point seems to serve little purpose. It’s well acknowledged that street art is not an aesthetic style, but a way of distributing art or interacting with space, and viral art is no different. It’s just that viral art uses a slightly different distribution system than traditional street art and graffiti.

When I thought up the term viral art, I did a quick search online in case the term had been used before, and indeed it has been. What I

found is kind of funny. There is a poorly written Wikipedia article for [viral art](#) that reads like an essay with a novel argument and a critique of past uses of the term rather than an encyclopedia article. The article, mostly written in January of 2008 by a user who went by the handle “The Defective Detective,” actually argues for a similar definition of viral art as what I have laid out here and will continue to expand on throughout this chapter. The Defective Detective cites street art as the start of viral art, and considers street art that has been photographed and shared online as an extension of that. The Defective Detective applauds viral art because “It takes the middleman out of the equation, e.g. the gallery owner, the museum curator, and for this reason it can be as original, activist and satirical as the artist wishes. And because it’s cheap, easy to produce, and distribute, it can be accomplished by anyone with a video camera, computer, and active imagination. It opens up art to the widest audience there is, anyone with an Internet connection.”

There are two kinds of viral art: organic viral art and invasive viral art.

Organic viral art is viral art that is distributed by people choosing to share it, such as an artist posting a photo to their website and having their fans reshare it on various social media networks. Organic viral art can definitely still be interesting and even brilliant, but it doesn’t take full advantage of internet’s potential for unmediated distribution of art from artist to public. Discovering art because it’s been shared by someone you have opted-in to follow is not the same as stumbling across art that has been installed without permission. A person sharing content on their blog or other social media outlet selects what they want to share and what they do not, so they function as micro-gatekeepers and mediate a portion of their followers’ experiences.

Most viral art is organic viral art. Indeed, “viral videos” and the vast majority of “viral media” as we know it would fall into the organic category. It’s basically the traditional idea of how we think of viral content: It spreads along natural streams of interconnected people sharing content, which is why I call it organic.

Occasionally, invasive viral art pops up. Invasive viral art is viral art that most accurately fits the requirement of unmediated distribution. The distribution of invasive viral art doesn’t have to happen along

the natural sharing streams that organic viral art travels. Invasive viral art invades space and is inserted where it “doesn’t belong,” but what differentiates it from street art and graffiti is that invasive viral art invades digital space, typically the public space of the internet.

While I will go into more depth throughout this chapter about organic viral art and how digital work like animated GIFs or viral videos can be similar to street art and graffiti, what is most exciting to me is invasive viral art; works that truly takes advantage of the internet. The artists making invasive viral art are using the internet as a street or a place to find people, rather than just a place to store or maybe share things.

### **Traditional internet art**

To understand the most forward-thinking viral art, you have to understand a bit about internet art. Not all internet art is viral art, but viral art has its roots in internet art, so it’s helpful to know a bit about it. Yes, internet art is a thing, and it’s almost as old as the internet itself. Internet art is, [according to Wikipedia](#), “a form of digital artwork distributed via the Internet. This form of art has circumvented the traditional dominance of the gallery and museum system, delivering aesthetic experiences via the Internet.” That second sentence could just as easily be describing street art or graffiti if you replace the word “Internet” with “street.” In practice though, internet art tends to deal with data and networks, as well as the nature of the internet itself. Putting some exceptions aside that I’ll get to in just a moment, all but the most recent internet art has not generally been nearly as accessible as street art, so I take issue with the Wikipedia definition on those grounds. Historically, internet artists have not been rowdy teens or artists just trying to reach the public but rather highly-educated adults with theories to test and complex ideas about art to promote among other highly-educated adult artists, which sounds like the normal art world to me. While internet art does stay somewhat outside of the commercial art world due to the difficulty (although not impossibility) of selling it, many internet artists are very familiar and comfortable with art theory, MFAs, professorships, residencies and the rest of the trappings of the esoteric spectrum of the art world.

Who comes across internet art and actually looks at this stuff? A lot of people potentially could, since there are a hell of a lot of people on the internet, but it's no secret that normal people don't look at internet art.<sup>2</sup> The audience for internet art tends to be a smallish circle of other artists and interested parties.

One thing that street art and internet art have in common is that they are both extremely uncomfortably displayed in galleries, or impossible to display in galleries at all. As pretty much any street artist will tell you, their gallery work is not street art, and taking street art off of a wall to display in a gallery (as ~~has been done~~ with ~~Banksy's~~ work) is generally not cool and against the very nature of the work (although in 2013 it seems that that attitude is changing with regard to Banksy's street work, which is now significantly more socially acceptable to remove, buy and sell than it has been). Internet art can be equally difficult to display and has traditionally been even more difficult to sell.<sup>3</sup> After all, what art collector wants to buy an easily copyable piece of computer code so that they can host it on a publicly accessible website? Street art (when not used as a marketing device) and internet art both go against the very nature of the art market.

There have been some instances where internet artists have tried to reach a wider audience than their fellow peers obsessed with databases or glitches. The best of those instances get a similar response to that of the best street art: They get everyday people who may not be embedded in the art world to think or care about something, or just smile or laugh or cry. Artists such as ~~Franco and Eva Mattes~~, ~~Spart~~, ~~Heath Bunting~~, ~~Jeff Greenspan~~ and ~~Jonah Peretti~~ have made work that is undeniably internet art, but which also draws users in and can be enjoyed or at least interacted with by people who have no art background or conception of internet art. Most of this work would fall under the banner of what Peretti calls contagious media. ~~For Peretti~~, contagious media is basically content made with the goal that people's default reaction to seeing it will be "I'm sharing this." That makes

2. Stallabrass, Julian. *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*. London: Tate Pub., 2003. Print.

3. Stallabrass, Julian. *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Culture and Commerce*. London: Tate Pub., 2003. Print.



contagious media essentially a version of organic viral art with an even more intense focus on its popularity rather than just accessibility.

### A few examples

Most historical internet art is not contagious media or anything like contagious media, and has little connection to street art either. I do not want to go into great detail listing examples upon examples of well-regarded internet art that does not appeal to a wide audience or have viral potential, but I do want to look briefly at a few examples of internet art, some that appeal to a wider audience and some that do not. The three examples with a particularly esoteric appeal are archived by [Rhizome's ArtBase](#), a curated collection of supposedly the best of internet art.

There is Bunting's 1998 piece [\\_readme](#). The piece consists of a press clipping about Bunting that has been reformatted so that many of the words are hyperlinks such that the word "hello" would include a hyperlink to "hello.com" and the word "goodbye" would include a hyperlink to "goodbye.com". As you click the links, the colors change based on which sites you have visited and which you have not. As a work of internet art for an internet art audience, this piece may be absolutely brilliant and groundbreaking. It's already found a place in art history books. But it's not viral art or contagious media. My mother could care less about it: She's not going to accidentally stumble across that page some day, her friends are not going to email her a link to the page, she's not going to tweet out a link to the page even if she does somehow end up there and I'm not even going to try to explain to her what little I understand of the theories behind the piece that might make it interesting to a small subset of the art world. [\\_readme](#) is, in my limited experience with internet art, quite a typical work with regard to its accessibility to those outside of the internet art community and Bunting's limited effort in engaging with a larger community.

Interestingly, Bunting also did a project that really captured some of the best things about street art, and it was organized online and involved a global network of participants. For *King's Cross Phone-In*, Bunting [got the word out online](#) that people should call in to all of the pay phones at the King's Cross train station in London, England on a given day at a given time. If we [trust Wikipedia](#), people ended up

calling in from around the world that day and they had conversations with random strangers who picked up the ringing pay phones (some who knew that the project was happening and some who did not). The internet made that project significantly easier to do than it might have been 10–20 years earlier, but the piece still engaged people who had no knowledge of Bunting’s work or internet art.

And then there’s *‘Button’ Element with looped Click sound* by Nathan Castle from 2000. It is a button that says “CLICK!”. You can click the button as many times as you would like. Moving on.

Jody Zellen’s 2005 piece *talking walls* is particularly interesting for the street art and graffiti communities because it involves images of street art and graffiti. It is essentially 16 photos and 16 video clips that the viewer has some control over as she moves the cursor around the page. Perhaps you find the work interesting for “exploring the visual language of wall and street markings,” as the artist suggests the piece does. Even if that’s the case, *talking walls* could exist just as easily in a gallery setting, and Zellen is using the web as a gallery in a very basic way. Anyone can go to [talking-walls.com](http://talking-walls.com) and experience the piece. Great. That’s more access than people have to the work of most artists, but still Zellen has done nothing more than exhibit in a slightly non-traditional setting. Discovery of the work still relies on traditional means, maybe a link from Zellen’s own website for example. That’s the internet-art equivalent of painting in an abandoned building, but it’s how so much internet art is housed and distributed. That’s using the internet for storage rather than distribution.

A lot of internet art, both old and new, exists only at a specific URL. Internet artist Rafaël Rozendaal has said, “My work is public by nature,” and sold multiple URL-specific works on the condition that it remain a publicly accessible website. But that URL, however awesome and sharable the link may be, is not quite public in the way that something that exists in its entirety on a social media platform (or can at least be shared there in a way that does not require leaving the walled garden) or invades your internet space is public. The URL-specific artworks of Rozendaal and others are public in a similar way to how some public museums are free, not in the way that a piece of public art is public.

When [Jonah Peretti](#) coined the term “Bored at Work Network,” we weren’t constantly connected and sharing on [Twitter](#) or [Tumblr](#) or [Facebook](#). He was making and sharing URL-specific internet art in an era when the vast majority of link-sharing was done via old-fashioned email. [Black People Love Us!](#) is a website Jonah and his sister [Chelsea Peretti](#) launched in late 2002, ostensibly the homepage of a white couple who black people just seem to love. The site is a joke, with plenty of comments from the couple’s friends like “Johnny always says: ‘I’m not racist; one of my best friends is Black!’ I think he might mean me!” I see the site’s success as evidence of most internet art’s failure to connect with people the same way street art has done, despite the opportunities to do so. BPLU is not viral art, but it did connect with people and they shared it. The piece still “went viral.” If early internet art had been similarly accessible, perhaps it too would have gone viral. All it took to go viral even before social media was a website/artwork that people want to share rather than something so strange and esoteric that sharing is near meaningless. BPLU struck a chord with the Bored at Work Network and received over 600,000 visitors [in its first month](#). BPLU is a URL-specific work of internet art that went viral, but it is not viral art and, like most URL-specific work, it does not exist in the same sort of public space that viral art exists in.

While there is enormous potential for sharing and viral art on Tumblr, [Ben Valentine has written about](#) a number of artworks that exist there and are essentially URL-specific despite existing on such a sharing-friendly platform. He describes what he calls “the dashboard-feed dilemma of Tumblr art,” where a work either essentially breaks or just being really annoying if you view it by following the blog and seeing the posts in your dashboard, the page of the site where posts from all the blogs you follow show up.

Honestly, I don’t hate traditional internet art or other internet art that isn’t viral art. It’s just that it has taken me a very long time to appreciate much of it, and I think it fails at doing the things street art and graffiti are good at, which is a shame because those things that street art and graffiti do on a city street can be done even more effectively online. Most internet art doesn’t attract an audience or force itself upon an audience in the same ways that street art, graffiti and

viral art do. Internet art has, throughout pretty much the history of the genre except perhaps very recent examples, failed to connect with the general public, and even when it does, it often exists in a self-contained URL-specific format essentially outside of the public space of the internet.

All of this background is to provide a context and set the stage for viral art and the cutting edge art that we're now seeing: Art found online that is not as isolated and esoteric as internet art has traditionally been, art that treats the internet like the street rather than the gallery, internet art for the post-social media Bored at Work Network.

### **Organic viral art**

Although a growing segment of street artists and graffiti writers are making organic viral art, there are also many artists making organic viral art who have never put up a piece of street art or tagged a wall. Much of the work from the chapter 3 is organic viral art, made by artists who were fully aware and comfortable that they were going after an online audience. As ~~Kyle Chayka has suggested is necessary~~, those artists adapted to the new environment of the internet. But they're still creating work with methods and in mediums familiar to the street art and graffiti communities. Further adaptation is possible, necessary even. Organic viral art doesn't have to exist as anything more than a jpeg or a GIF or even a string of text. Organic viral art is art made with the knowledge that it will primarily be shared through active sharing of the content by and to an unknowable group of people rather than through accidental discovery or an invasion of space. That doesn't mean it has to have ever existed on a wall or a canvas. Like street art, organic viral art is defined by distribution methods rather than aesthetic criteria or medium.

It should come as no surprise to readers of this book that graffiti writers and street artists often make work to display in galleries in addition to their ephemeral outdoor artwork. Every once in awhile, I'll meet someone who is surprised by that fact, and I'll have to explain that just because an artist works outdoors doesn't mean that they can't also work indoors, and that a given artist's indoor and outdoor artworks are often closely connected in style and content. As outdoor artists transition to making organic viral art for digital spaces, the aesthetics

and the medium may change, but keeping accessibility of the work as a driving factor stays the same, whereas that factor usually becomes significantly less important when an artist goes from primarily showing work on the street to showing in galleries.

It's not like digital art and street art have never intersected before. [John Fekner](#) was the director of the [Long Island University C. W. Post Campus' Digital Arts and Design](#) program and has made [animated computer graphic videos](#) for decades. [Shepard Fairey](#) released [a series of digital animations](#) through [s\[edition\]](#). And [Faile's](#) early websites were a lot more than just portfolios of their work. Faile approached the various iterations of their website as artworks, art experiences in and of themselves rather than simply places to find photos of their street art or their prints. But just because these street artists were making digital art does not mean they were making viral art. Fekner didn't have a good way to distribute the videos he was making until recently. [Shepard Fairey's](#) work at [s\[edition\]](#) is difficult if not impossible to share because it is protected by digital rights management and it is intended to be collected rather than shared. And [Faile's](#) early websites were closer to fun versions of early internet art than anything else. So these examples are not really viral art, just digital art by people with a street art background.

In addition to the work written about in chapter 3, street artists and graffiti writers have been making organic viral art that most people would not consider to be street art or graffiti. Many of these works would fall into the category of digital art, but this new intersection of street art, graffiti and digital art is more than just dabbling in digital art. It's the fusion of the core values of street art and graffiti with the technologies of digital art. If the artists covered in chapter 3 were beginning to adapt to the internet, the artists in this chapter have completed that process of adaptation.

### Digital Faile

While [Faile's](#) [website](#) has evolved over the years into something a bit more normal, they have not given up on putting their artwork into a digital format. Faile now has their [Faile Puzzle Boxes iPhone app](#), where you can play with images of their work just like if you are playing with one of their real puzzle boxes made of screenprinted



*A jumbled Faile puzzle box, made in the Faile Puzzle Boxes app. Composition by RJ Rushmore.*

wooden blocks, except the app allows you to share your results and it's available for free. Even if you never see a painting or print by Faile in person in your life, you can make your own design out of their

images in Faile Puzzle Boxes and share that result with your friends, both exposing new people to Faile's work and strengthening your own bond with it. Faile describes the app as a way of "planting seeds" in the minds of viewers, much like their street art does. The app itself is not organic viral art, but the results are since they can be shared on the web. Essentially, the app is an organic viral art creation device for organic viral art based on Faile's imagery.

### Evan Roth, floating between worlds



*Evan Roth at [Eyebeam](#) in NYC. Photo courtesy of [Evan Roth](#).*

[Evan Roth](#) is an absolute king of viral art. Many of his projects, whether on his own or with the art laboratories [F.A.T. Lab](#) or [Graffiti Research Lab](#), are made for the Bored at Work Network, and his projects are often designed or at least announced with the aim of going viral. Roth tries to make work that simultaneously appeals to two audiences: The art world and the Bored At Work Network. Most, but not all, of Roth's viral art projects fall under the category of organic viral art.

Roth (along with [Jamie Wilkinson](#) and [James Powderly](#)) has even taught a class on how to be "internet famous." As part of that class, [Roth wrote a blog post](#) with eight tips for going viral. An artist following Roth's tips and thinking about them from the start of a project is

probably trying to make organic viral art, even though most of the tips have little to do with the artwork itself but rather how to promote it.



*A work from Evan Roth's TSA Communication series. Photo courtesy of [Evan Roth](#).*

To highlight just one of Roth's organic viral artworks, with [TSA Communication](#) series, he took a very private artwork and turned it into something viral. Roth made a series of metal signs with text such as "NOTHING TO SEE HERE" and put them in his carry-on bag at airports so that could be read by the employee at the X-ray scanner as his bag passed through. But he didn't want only TSA employees to know what he was doing, even if the work was theirs to see on their monitors. The signs had a political motivation and needed to be shared with a wider audience. So, naturally, Roth photographed the signs and documented his experiences using them at airports, eventually posting those results online. It's really no different from a graffiti writer painting in an abandoned building and posting photos of that work online, except that I think most people probably wouldn't think of



*TSA Communications* public art, street art or graffiti. Like with [Banksy](#)'s work in Mali, the setting and the performance provided context for the component of the artwork that Roth physically manufactured and the context completed the piece. It's important to note that documentation of the *TSA Communication* series was meant to be seen by a large audience. Graffiti writers can paint in abandoned places without any intention of sharing the work, but as much as Roth might have been trying to entertain TSA employees, he was also clearly hoping to get his project in front of as many people as possible and join in a conversation.

### General Howe, from pavement to pixels



One of General Howe's early toy soldier street installations. Photo by [General Howe](#).

[General Howe](#), the artist who designed the cover of this book, has been doing street art since the summer of 2007. He is perhaps the clearest example of an artist going from making more or less traditional street art to fully-digital organic viral art while still trying to appeal to the same audience. He became known for installing little plastic army men around Brooklyn, and he's also done some wheatpasting. More recently, General Howe has transitioned from street art to making animated [GIFs](#) and posting them to his [Tumblr](#). He says that he makes the GIFs with the same mentality as when he was doing street art. From the start he's been trying to reach a broader public and make art

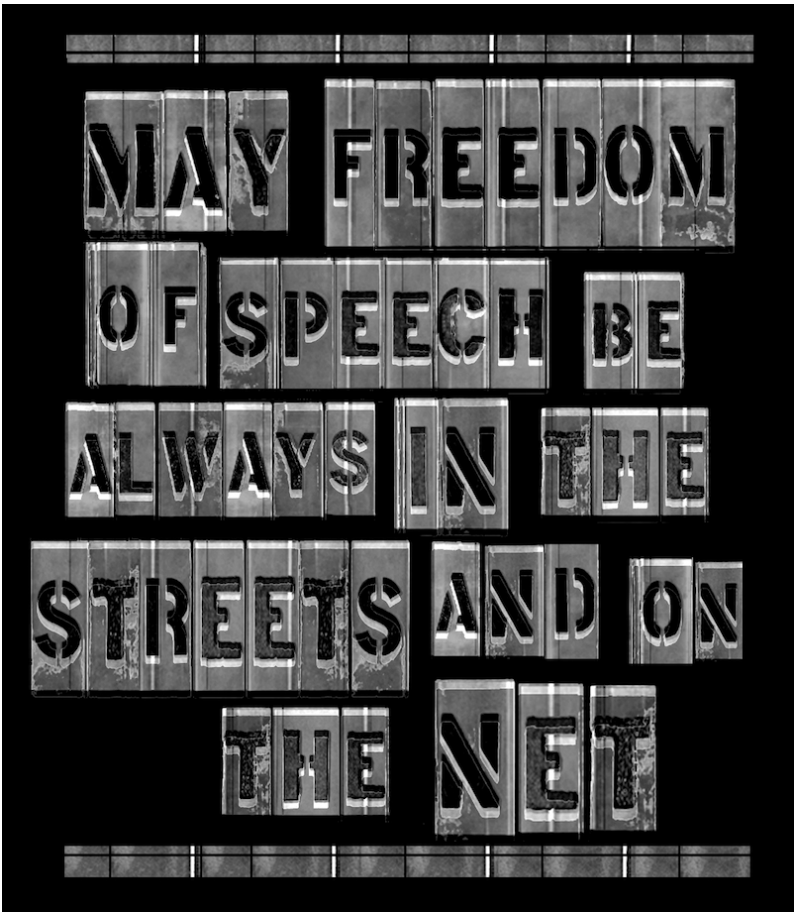
that's more than just art for the art world. Now as he's making GIFs rather than installing wheatpastes and sculptures, General Howe's goal is still the same, but he's reaching out to the online public with fully digital, and easily sharable, artworks.



A piece from General Howe's "Disasters of War" series. Animation by [General Howe](#).

## John Fekner finds a new public space

[John Fekner](#) was making street art in NYC as early as the 1970's, mostly with spraypaint and stencils. He seemed to somewhat disappear from the street art community while he taught at [Long Island University](#), but resurfaced in the last few years as a personality on [Twitter](#), where he and his work was rediscovered by a new generation of fans who had only seen hints of his early street art. Twitter is where he first connected with me, and also with artists like [Remi/Rough](#) and [Stormie Mills](#). The first street artist Fekner connected with through the web was [Josh MacPhee](#), who reached out to Fekner in 2003 for his [Stencil Pirates](#) book. But Fekner hasn't just used the internet for promotion and connecting with fans. He's also found a



*A piece by John Fekner, uploaded to [Tumblr](#) in January 2013. Courtesy of [John Fekner](#).*

home for his work [on Twitter](#) and [on Tumblr](#), where he posts archival images and new work. Much of that new work fits right in with Tumblr's overall aesthetic of [manipulated images](#) and [animated GIFs](#). There's also Fekner's [sawitandsawedit](#) project where he takes images that might be circulating around Tumblr and re-uploads them along with another version that has been slightly digitally altered. Like so many artists in this chapter, Fekner has a history of making street

art, but has transitioned to making organic viral art that exists and is distributed entirely digitally through the public space of the internet.

### Public internet art



*INSA's GIF-iti in Sydney, Australia. Animation by [INSA](#).*

To briefly bring back just one example from chapter 2, [INSA's](#) animated GIFs, his GIF-iti, are fantastic examples of a graffiti writer intentionally making organic viral art for the web. While each one does exist on a wall somewhere and is still (legal) graffiti in the more traditional sense, INSA fully intends for those pieces to be viewed online as animations rather than or in addition to an away-from-keyboard experience. [He's explained](#) that he is trying to make something that will stand out not on a wall against a dozen other pieces of graffiti, but on [Tumblr](#) against thousands of other photos, illustrations and animations of just about anything. GIF-iti is a prime example of organic viral art.

Recall that Rebecca Rosen, the author of an article on GIF-iti for *The Atlantic Cities*, [referred to the GIF-iti](#) as "public Internet art. That's another great phrase for viral art, particularly organic viral art since it's not imposed upon you and so is in that sense more

closely related to public art than to street art or graffiti. Organic viral art is public art (although not usually in the sense of having been commissioned), but it exists on the internet. But if INSA's GIFs are public internet art, then isn't a GIF by General Howe also public internet art? Once both GIFs are up against one another on Tumblr, it hardly matters that INSA painted a wall somewhere to make his GIF-iti and General Howe made his animation entirely in Photoshop any more that it matters if a piece of street art is made by handpainting a poster or spraypainting a stencil. You may prefer over the other, but at their core the GIFs are artworks next to one another on Tumblr just as the works of street art are artworks next to one another on a wall. Once we're at the GIF-iti stage, why continue to differentiate between INSA's GIF-iti and what any other GIF artist does? It's all organic viral art or, to put it another way, public internet art.

It frustrates me when street artists and graffiti writers say that things have to be done a certain way. If the goal of graffiti is fame (and in reality that may be just one goal among many that various writers prioritize differently), any way that a writer gets that fame should be considered legitimate. Once writers start putting in rules, like that graffiti can't be done with wheatpastes, it distracts from the end goal. I use graffiti as an example because it's a bit more obvious where those rules come into play, but the same thing could be said about street art. Too many street artists and graffiti writers get bogged down in rules and tools like needing to write a name or using stencils, losing sight of the end goal of unmediated distribution from artist to public. It's the writers and street artists who use the web like they use walls that aren't getting bogged down in these rules and are keeping focused on achieving their end goal in the most effective way possible.

### **KATSU getting up in digital space**

KATSU is one of the most forward-thinking graffiti writers in the world. He has transitioned from traditional graffiti to making some digital work that treats websites like walls. He has really embraced the idea that his graffiti can be more than paint on a wall and still achieve the same goals. For him, the goal is fame, or as he refers to it FTs (fame tokens). In his own words, "I've decided to explore where my graffiti can live within the matrix."



A KATSU throw-up in [Minecraft](#). Screenshot by [KATSU](#).

Much KATSU's work has already been mentioned, but some of his best work has so far only been described briefly in his interview section. This work deserves more detailed description and analysis. In addition to pieces like his tag on [MOCA](#) that are meant to be seen online but are actually painted on walls somewhere, KATSU has made a handful of works that have only ever existed digitally.

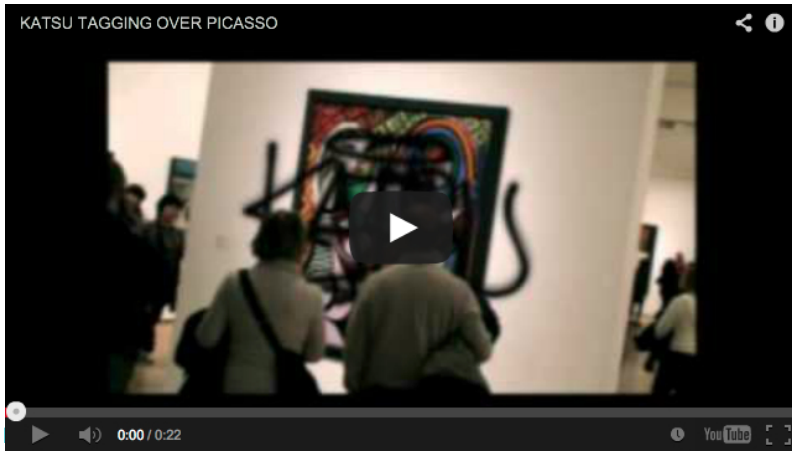
In February 2010, this video appeared on [YouTube](#) of KATSU catching a tag just outside the White House. The 40-second video was quickly picked up and shared by fans of graffiti around the world, eventually getting over 100,000 views. A look at the comments on the video is kind of hilarious. It's not always clear who is being genuine and who is just playing along, but it looks like a lot of people believe the video really shows KATSU catching a tag. To anyone paying close attention, it's clear that the video is a hoax of sorts and that the tag was inserted into the video using video editing software. Hoax doesn't really seem like the right word though, since KATSU was never really trying to convince the world that he had tagged the White House. He calls the video "a graffiti joke." Whatever people believed, they shared it, and KATSU's name was on everyone's lips. Even if you knew the video was fake, it still seemed with sharing just to see who would

be fooled, and because the trick was an impressive one. No, KATSU didn't tag the White House, but he did get up.



*KATSU white house*

Then in April of 2010, KATSU took things a step further. This time, this next video was posted showing KATSU tagging over Picasso's painting *Girl Before a Mirror* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It got even more views, almost 150,000 by November 2013. This video garnered the same response as the first, but perhaps even stronger. I remember when I first saw it and thought: "Oh my God, if this is real, I need to share it ASAP because KATSU is going to be on national television tonight and arrested tomorrow." And the editing on this video was a bit better, so it wasn't as obvious of a fake. Of course, this video was a hoax just like the last one. Still, KATSU got his name out there and associated with MoMA and Picasso without actually committing any crime. Again, people in the comments have debated if the video is real or not, and the graffiti community was quick to share it.



*KATSU TAGGING OVER PICASSO*

These two faked videos each got significantly more views than [The Powers of KATSU](#), even though that video shows KATSU doing actual graffiti. Graffiti is largely about risk, and with these videos KATSU was able to temporarily get the fame and attention of doing something very risky without ever actually putting himself take any risk at all. Like [CDH's Photoshop experiment](#), this was all a bit of a joke for KATSU, but it wouldn't be far-fetched for a graffiti writer or street artist to digitally edit their work onto a wall, post it online and share it as if it were real. Even though the videos are a joke, they were more effective at achieving online fame for KATSU than documentation of traditional graffiti. But in a sense they are graffiti, because the videos treat the web as the same kind of playground and place for sharing as the street. While these videos aren't invasive viral art or illegal, they are two of the most effective pieces of organic viral art I've ever seen from a graffiti writer, and they came out long before pretty much anyone else I know of was thinking about the internet as a place to do graffiti.

KATSU and [Theo Watson](#) even released an iPhone app, [Fat Tag Deluxe — Katsu Edition](#), which could be considered organic viral art as it is yet another way for KATSU's logo and name to seep into our digital lives. The app is basically a doodling app centered around graffiti. There are options to make it look like you're drawing with



a spray can or a drippy marker and the default backgrounds to draw on include a Hello My Name Is sticker and a photo of an NYPD van (much like the pieces in CDH's Photoshop experiment, but years earlier). The app's logo is a KATSU skull, so anyone who downloads the app will always have a reminder of KATSU with them at all times. I'm sure there are other apps out there that do basically the same thing as Fat Tag Deluxe, but I know I'm only putting the KATSU version on my phone. The two added features are that works are stored in [Graffiti Markup Language](#) and that users can automatically upload their work to [000000book.com](#), a repository of GML files ([here are KATSU's uploads](#)). While [Faile](#) and other artists have iPhone apps today, I'm not aware of any other graffiti writers or street artists who had their own iPhone apps when Fat Tag Deluxe – Katsu Edition was first released.

I give KATSU a lot of credit; both for the work he has done and the work he has implied that he is setting out to do. Nobody else that I know of is [saying things](#) like, "The future of graffiti for me will be in the form of black hat tactics." While he hasn't transitioned to invasive viral art yet, it seems to be only a matter of time before that happens. Even looking just at his current resume, KATSU is clearly pushing the boundaries of what graffiti can be and taking advantage of the possibilities of the internet as best he can. If KATSU going in the direction he is headed and successfully transitions into making invasive viral art through "black hat tactics" while making the claim as a respected writer that his digital graffiti is still graffiti, he could go down as one of the most important graffiti writers yet.

### **Conclusion on organic viral art by street artists and graffiti writers**

When you compare organic viral art like the works of [KATSU](#), [INSA](#), [John Fekner](#), [General Howe](#) or [Evan Roth](#) to works by early internet artists like [Heath Bunting](#), [Nathan Castle](#) or [Jody Zellen](#), it quickly becomes clear that not all internet art is public just because it is publicly accessible in theory. The divide between viral art and regular internet art is more than just good art versus bad art. There is brilliant internet art out there that isn't viral art. Early internet art may have been responding to the internet in general, but works essentially lived in isolation on lonely websites. Organic viral art spreads through the



*Animation by [General Howe](#)*

internet and often lives on the social web. It's also more than just a divide between digital art made by street artists or graffiti writers and digital art made by people with no such background, as the next few sections show.

### **Viral art by non-street artists/graffiti writers**

Viral art does not have to be made by street artists or graffiti writers. That overlap is my main interest and focus because I'm coming to viral art as a fan of street art and I would love to see more street artists and graffiti writers treating the internet like a public space. It seems to me like a logical progression for street art and graffiti, and a way to keep it relevant in an increasingly digital world. But most online viral art / art for the Bored at Work Network isn't made by people with a background in street art or graffiti. It's just people doing work in an environment that seems natural to them in the same way that a street artist might see walls as a natural place to display their art. Here are just a few examples of artists doing viral art who have (to my knowledge) no background in graffiti or street art. These artists are only a very small sampling of a new generation of internet art that isn't so inaccessible both in its concept and its distribution.

### **GIF artists**

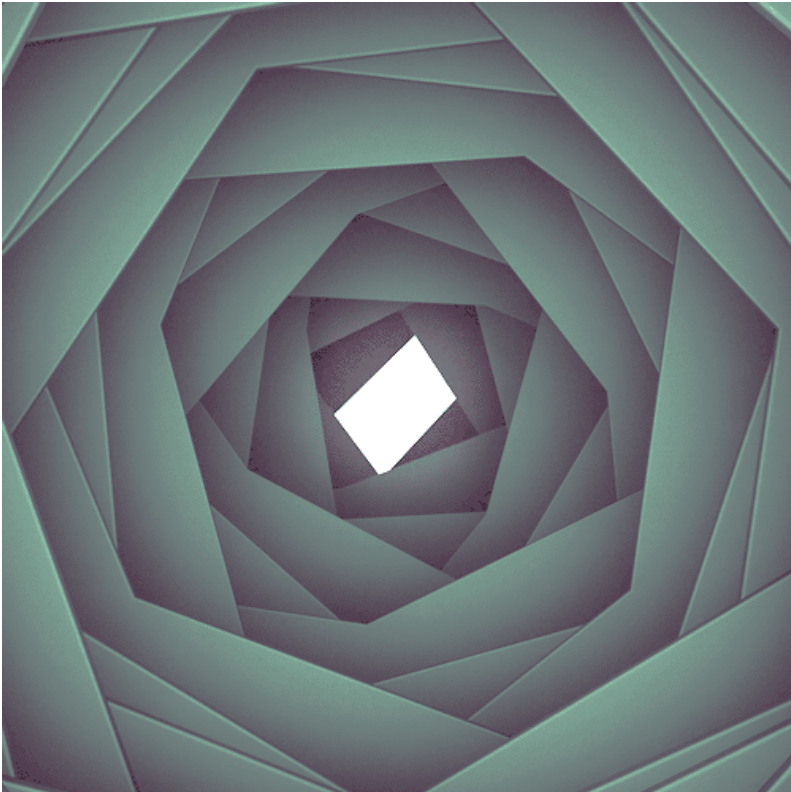
Yuriy MiRonoff, who goes by the name [MiRon](#) online, is an artist based in Ukraine who makes some of my favorite GIFs. MiRon GIFs look a bit like animated technicolor GIF versions of [Keith Haring's subway drawings](#). Like Haring, MiRonoff is putting his work out for the public to see, without any traditional gatekeepers. And, like



Animation by [MiRon](#)

Haring, he's quickly become celebrated in mainstream press for his work. MiRonoff even [cites](#) Haring and [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) as major influences. Like a piece of street art, a MiRon GIF on your [Tumblr](#)

feed is going to stop you in your tracks, at least for a moment. Then, you can move on. You don't need any added context for the work, and it's all available to see for free online. But unlike photos of street art, which one could argue are showing something one-layer removed from what it really is, Tumblr is the natural environment for MiRonoff's work, just like it is for INSA's GIFs. But instead of taking his art to a wall on the streets of Kiev and then taking a photo to post to Tumblr, he's gone direct to the global audience and made work specifically tailored to that environment, the public space of a new generation.



Animation by [Patakk](#)

Paolo Čerić, who goes by the name [Patakk](#), is an artist in his early 20's based in Croatia, but he's already one of the most well-known GIF

artists in the world. His animations can get thousands of “notes” on Tumblr (the number of reblogs + the number of likes = the number of notes for a post). It seems that people just love to share his mesmerizing GIFs. Patakk’s images aren’t really the sort of thing that you could turn into a poster as easily as MiRonoff’s work, but the same ideas about distributing art direct to the public still apply, and it might be said that Čerić’s work fits even more naturally in Tumblr since his GIFs could not be as effectively recreated as a static image.

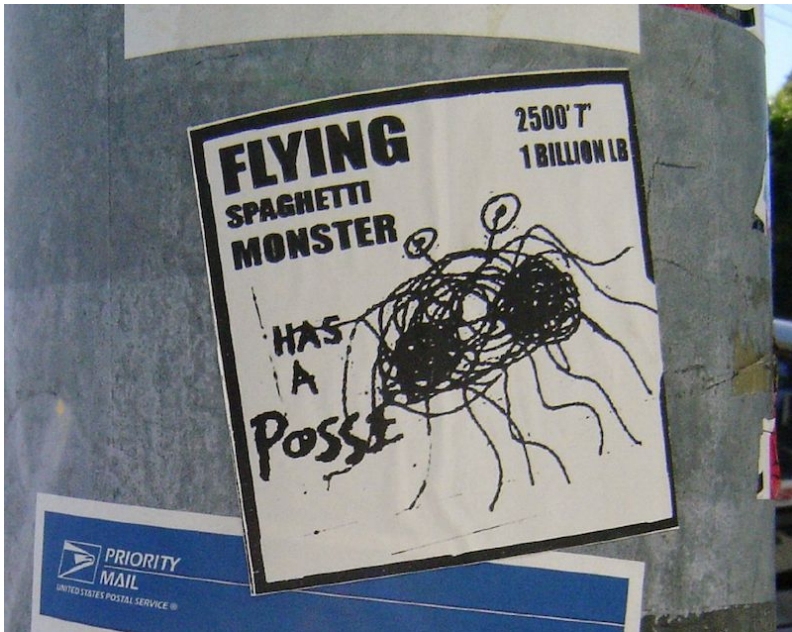
Of course, I’ve specifically picked two out of a large group of artists making GIFs and there are probably plenty of GIF artists living in Brooklyn, but I find it particularly cool that these two GIF artists with global followings aren’t located in New York City. With street art and graffiti (before the internet especially), it was easy to bypass local art gatekeepers, but if you were the biggest thing on the streets of Philadelphia, that might not translate to anything in New York City and vice versa. Now, GIF artists are playing in a global public space and location hardly matters as long as you have a stable internet connection and access to a computer with some GIF-making software (admittedly, a barrier to entry for many people, but it’s still a step in the right direction). The playing field really is wide open. Just as a street artist can pick up her first stencil and can of paint and put work on the street the very same day, GIFs can be created in a few minutes by people with no prior experience and go viral almost instantly.

GIF artists are producing work with the same sort of mainstream appeal as street art. The most popular GIF artists aren’t doing conceptual GIFs that require a thesis to understand. They’re making art that is immediately eye-catching, rife with up-to-the-minute cultural references and often easily appropriated by other GIF artists for use in their own work. In 2013, the logical place for the kid who might have picked up a spray can or designed some stickers seems to be Tumblr and the logical thing to make seems to be animated GIFs.

### **Memes**

Then of course, there are [internet memes](#). With sites like [Meme Generator](#), it’s simple for anyone to quickly make their own (shareable) version of a popular meme. Pretty much everything I’ve argued about GIFs also applies to memes, but I think it’s more up for debate as

to whether or not many manifestations of memes are art. Generally speaking, I'd say that memes are to viral art what doodles on napkins are to paintings, except of course that memes exist alongside animated GIFs and other viral art on the web in a way that napkin doodles and paintings generally do not. And of course, there's no reason that some memes cannot be art. What is [Shepard Fairey's](#) André the Giant / OBEY Giant campaign but an old-school meme? Just like modern internet memes, Fairey's initial André the Giant image was meaningless, but it gained meaning over repeated viewings and people made it their own with homages and parodies. It seems silly to say, "this is only art if it's animated," so of course I don't mean to say that all animated GIFs are art and all static internet memes are not, but it seems like the people making viral art have gravitated more towards animated GIFs or [Vine](#) videos (perhaps including references to memes) rather than straight memes.



*A parody of Shepard Fairey's "André the Giant Has a Posse" image. This parody features the [Flying Spaghetti Monster](#). Cropped version of a photo by [Richard Lemarchand](#).*

Not all animated GIFs or internet memes are going to go viral around the world, and some aren't meant to. Some GIFs and memes reference things that not everyone will or is supposed to get. And that can be great as well. GIFs referencing Star Trek can still be loved within the Star Trek fan community even if the general popular doesn't get it or care. And that Star Trek GIF could still be created by a teenager in a small town with no fellow trekkies around. So there's certainly value in that.

But given the way that early internet art was ostensibly for the general public but in actuality only appealed to an elite group, I worry about something similar happening with art on Tumblr. I have to agree with Evan Roth when he says, "Just because it's online doesn't mean it's geared at the Bored at Work Network. A lot of this new, young, net art scene, this second wave of net art, is happening on Tumblr. I'm inspired by this work too and I love it, but I'm also critical of some of it. I think one thing it's starting to do is isolate itself." While neither of us think that this new work is as isolating as the first generation of internet art, the thought is still there. References and in-jokes are fine, but that often doesn't make for good public art. Imagine if every new sticker was a parody of OBEY. That's great from time to time, but it can't be all that exists because then sticker artists would only be communicating with each other.

The Jogging is an artist collective whose work is distributed on Tumblr. While some of their work has a mainstream appeal and would fit right in with a lot of the art getting shared on Tumblr, they also have a distinctly art-world vibe (think: references to Ai Weiwei or Damien Hirst) and some of the posts are so densely layered with in-jokes that you'd have to be a daily reader of the site to understand what's going on. That's fine, but it's closer to first-generation internet art than what Paolo Čerić, Yuriy MiRonoff and other GIF artists more in line with traditional street art are doing.

### Conclusion on organic viral art

Whether or not the artists making organic viral art online have a background in street art or graffiti, many of them are taking to the internet like street artists have taken to the street, using it as a public space where art can be shared freely and discovered unexpectedly. As

our eyeballs shift from our physical surroundings to digital ones, it makes perfect sense that artists would try to move with their audience. Organic viral artworks are the first artworks described in this book that are truly native to the global track.

The internet is the future of (some) public art, and a place where the goals of open access to art that the street art and graffiti communities have represented are more within our reach than ever before. But organic viral art is only the first step in emulating the street art and graffiti practices online. It's invasive viral art that really takes things all the way in emulating what happens on the street.

### **Invasive Viral Art**

As anyone who has chanced across a piece of street art can attest to, there's a big difference between that experience and being told, "Go down two blocks and turn left because you'll see that [Banksy](#) stencil I showed you a photo of last week." While that, or looking at street art online or coming across a cool piece of organic viral art through your friend on [Facebook](#), can still be a great experience, there's nothing quite like the completely unexpected imposition or discovery of art in your life. That's where invasive viral art comes in.

When you start to think about the internet as a street, or a place with eyeballs, possibilities open up that might not be so obvious if you just think of the internet as storage space or a media outlet. Organic viral art happens when artists think of the internet as a place where they can reach eyeballs, but invasive viral art goes a step further and the artists really treat websites like walls on a street, ready to be taken over. Whereas organic viral art is stumbled upon or searched out or nudged in the direction of a viewer by a friend, invasive viral art is imposed upon the viewer much more like chance discoveries of illegal street art or graffiti (although invasive viral art is not necessarily illegal). There is invasive viral art by street artists and graffiti writers, but artists with no or little history of working outdoors are making invasive viral art too. Invasive viral art is truly street art for the 21st century. It's the unmediated distribution of art and ideas across the internet to unsuspecting people around the world. Invasive viral art defies expectations, much like how an ad takeover puts art or some sort



of unsanctioned message in place of a traditional advertisement. You may be expecting one thing, but you get something else.

I have to acknowledge that invasive viral art may not always meet the definition of “viral” in that it often cannot be shared or is unlikely to be shared except in the form of documentation. But the work is at least viral-y and documentation of invasive viral art is often very potent organic viral art. Because some invasive viral art is sharable in the traditional viral sense, it can so easily morph into organic viral art through documentation and, even in its original state, it is such a close cousin of organic viral art, I’ve chosen to keep the word viral in the name.

So what does invasive viral art look like?

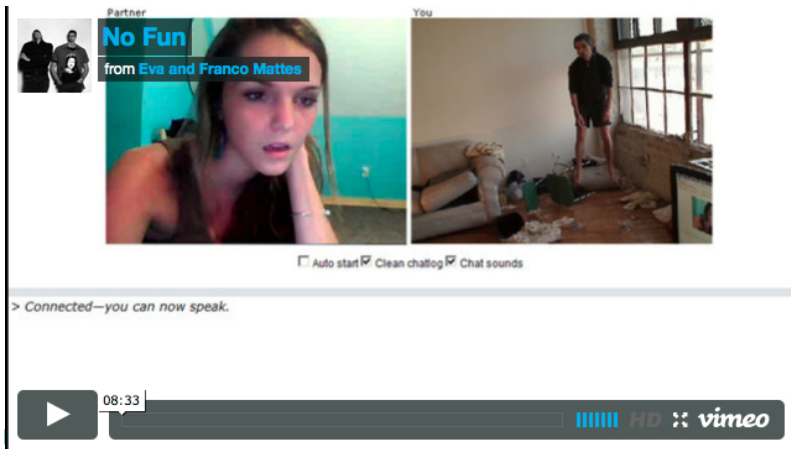
**Evan and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.org**

[Eva and Franco Mattes](#), also known as [0100101110101101.org](#), have done some street art and public art, but they’re probably best known for their internet art. Given their dabbling with street art, it should come as little surprise that their work online also often involves engaging with people outside of the art world. Except that, unlike the typical stencil on a wall, the viewers of the Mattes’ work are often unaware that what they’re witnessing is art.



*Freedom*

*Freedom* is, in certain contexts, a fantastic and thought-provoking work. But the beauty of the video is that it shows performances done in the entirely “wrong” context. In the video, which is made up of video screen captures documenting games of *Counter-Strike*, the artists invade the video game to do a performance. Their avatar asks not to be killed, declaring that he is really an artist doing a performance mid-game. Well, over and over again, it appears that he is in the wrong place at the wrong time, as he gets killed again and again and again without mercy. Watching the video raises a host of questions about our violence-obsessed culture and the way that people act during simulations of violence, but it also shows how art is not valued if it’s in the wrong setting. The live performance, which is hated by those observing it, is a case of invasive viral art, while the video documentation, which has been celebrated in the art world, is an example of organic viral art. Other artists (most notably *Joseph DeLappe*, *Anne-Marie Schleiner*, *Joan Leandre* and *Brody Condon*) have done interventions in *Counter-Strike* and other online games as well, but *Freedom* has to be my personal favorite.



*No Fun*

Another of the Mattes’ greatest online performances culminated in the video *No Fun*. Like *Freedom*, the video *No Fun* is organic viral art, but it shows the documentation of an invasive viral art performance. In

*No Fun*, the Mattes staged a suicide for people on the video-chatting site [Chatroulette](#). On Chatroulette, users are paired up and can video chat with one another until either of the participants decides to leave the chat and move on to another random pairing. A lot of the men go on Chatroulette to masturbate on camera, but that's not particularly relevant to understanding the video except to say that those men didn't love masturbating while looking at a guy who had supposedly hung himself. *No Fun* is a series of excerpts of people on Chatroulette reacting to the supposed suicide in front of them. Some people laugh or say mean things or assume it's a prank. Others get genuinely concerned. Either way, they are unwittingly witnessing a performance.

*Freedom* and *No Fun* have a sort of double-life. One as a live performance and the other as a video documenting that performance in order to show the audience reactions to a new audience that did not witness the performance firsthand. The way the Mattes' force themselves upon the unsuspecting audiences of Counter-Strike and Chatroulette resembles graffiti or street art, and certainly there's value in such work even when the majority of the people who have to look at it don't like it. *No Fun* might more accurately be compared to a subtle ad-disruption because it's a subversion where it isn't clear to the audience on Chatroulette what is real and what is not. And of course, there is also a long history of public performance art, some with permission and some without, that *Freedom* and *No Fun* could be compared to. With both performances, duo succeeded in having an unmediated interaction between themselves and an unsuspecting public through the internet. Maybe the performances were more about tracking the audience response than the actual performances, but both works are still good examples of one form that invasive viral art can take.

### **The World's Most Exclusive Website**

Most of the people reading this won't be able to visit more than the homepage of [The World's Most Exclusive Website](#). The site is a project by [Jeff Greenspan](#), [Doug Loffredo](#), [Mike Lacher](#) and [Chris Baker](#). To get in past the homepage (which features a photo of a door in an alley), you have to sign in with Twitter, authorizing a The Most



*Screenshot of the homepage of The World's Most Exclusive Website. Photo by Marc Sullivan.*

Exclusive Website app to access details about your account. To get past the homepage, the app checks to see that you have a [verified Twitter](#) account, which is the kind of account you get when Twitter approaches you and says, “We want to make sure that you’re who you say you are, because you’re important and people are going to try to fake being you on Twitter.” The next page on the site is just another photo of a door, this time in a room. To get past that page, the app checks that you have a few thousand Twitter followers. The next page is another room with a door. To progress further you need more followers, and so on and so on... There are 9 rooms in total. Nobody has made it to the last room yet, but a lot of people have tried. [According to BuzzFeed](#), the site racked up 25,000 page views in its first eight hours online. Some of that was because the site is the sort of thing you just have to share with friends just like any other URL-specific artwork prone to go viral, but for the first few hours the site had an added tool: auto-tweets.

Greenspan says, “In the very beginning, when we launched The World’s Most Exclusive Website, it would auto-tweet saying, ‘I couldn’t get into The World’s Most Exclusive Website.’ Or, if you did

get in, it would auto-tweet, ‘I got into The World’s Most Exclusive Website.’ When you entered into this app, it alerted you that accepting the terms of the app would allow the app to tweet for you, but very quickly we were paused by Twitter, because they thought we weren’t using it in the spirit of the terms of conditions. That, yes, technically we could tweet on behalf of someone, but people didn’t have the expectation that the app was going to tweet for them, so we removed that from the experience and we got green-lighted to continue working on the Twitter platform. But I think maybe in the beginning that little bump did help.”

So at least when the site was first online, The World’s Most Exclusive Website was almost definitely tweeting out its existence from accounts of people who did not intend to tell their followers about the site. While the site was being promoted along the same streams that any other viral content might go through on Twitter, it got there by inserting itself rather than being shared freely. I don’t think that’s a bad thing, although I can understand why some people might have been upset and why Twitter disabled that functionality of the app. With the auto-tweeting function removed, the site was neutered into simply a popular URL-specific artwork and not organic or invasive viral art.

The World’s Most Exclusive Website is an interesting example of invasive viral art because it still requires a click. As Greenspan points out, you have some idea of what you’re getting and you’re making the conscious choice to see something. Most invasive viral art infiltrates by inserting the work itself directly into an environment, but The World’s Most Exclusive website infiltrated by inserting a link to the work into a stream of shared content.

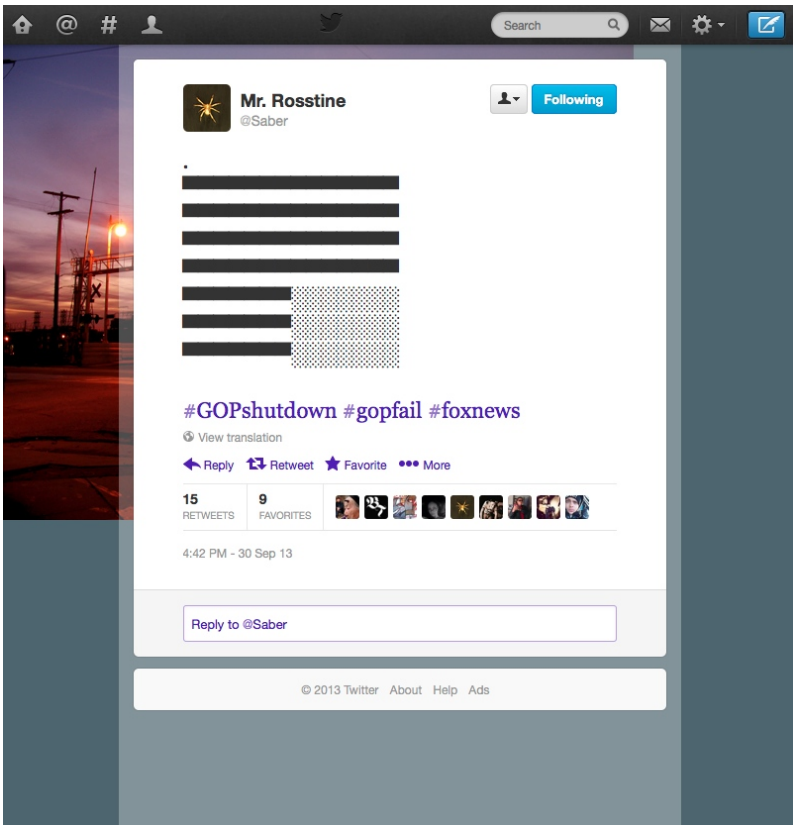
Despite users having some vague inkling of what they were going to get, the site did have an element of surprise. That’s the funny thing about putting street art online, especially on street art blogs. It loses that element of surprise. Greenspan thinks his projects like The World’s Most Exclusive Website and [The Likeable Constitution](#) fall somewhere between the surprise of coming across street art on your commute to work and the lack of surprise of checking a street art blog. He says, “Things like The World’s Most Exclusive Website have a bit more of that element of surprise. When I go to a blog that is showcasing

street art, I expect to see street art. When I go to something like [Boing-Boing](#), I know that it is a set of images and ideas that have been curated for my tastes. Whereas with The World's Most Exclusive Website, somebody may have sent you there, but you don't really know what you're going to get. A project like The World's Most Exclusive Website or The Likeable Constitution actually lets you walk through it like a physical space and then experience the surprise of it. But I don't think it's quite the same because I've chosen to go to [Thelikeableconstitution.com](#). I've chosen to get something. When I walk around the corner from 3rd Street to Avenue A, I don't expect to be confronted with something that's going to challenge my very nature of being in that space." Greenspan makes both organic viral art and invasive viral art, but, whatever form it exists in, I think many of his digital works exist on the internet in a very similar way to how street art exists on the street.

### Saber's Twitter graffiti

When Saber sees something wrong in the world, he tweets about it. He tweets links to relevant news articles and tweets his outrage and does all the things that most of us do. But sometimes he goes one step further. In those instances, he tweets [an upside down American flag](#) made from [ASCII](#) characters. By using odd characters to make a rough representation of a flag rather than tweeting a [JPEG](#) image, the flag is displayed in the tweet itself and you don't have to click anything to see it no matter what platform you are using to read tweets (although in late 2013, [Twitter](#) did modify the site so that even JPEGs are displayed automatically if they are uploaded through Twitter). It's just their in your feed. Simple organic viral art, right?

Saber takes things a step further, into a grey area between organic and invasive viral art. He adds [hashtags](#) to his flag tweets to reference whatever he's alarmed about. If he uses [#GOP](#) in a flag tweet for example, anyone searching the [#GOP](#) hashtag around that time is confronted with Saber's upside down flag. Because Saber has over 18,000 Twitter followers, his flag tweets get retweeted and make their way to the top of the search result pile for any of the hashtags that he uses. He often accompanies the flags and the news or organization-specific hashtags with hashtags like [#lies](#) that make his thoughts on



Screenshot of Twitter.com featuring a tweet by [Saber](#).

the topic more clear to those who might just come across the tweet randomly.

Saber could just tweet the flags along with a comment like “I hate Verizon for cooperating with the NSA to spy on Americans,” but thanks to the hashtags, the flags start appearing in places where they “shouldn’t,” invading conversations and brand identities that would rather not have negative feedback voiced so publicly or so loudly. [#verizon](#) is a kind of digital real estate for [Verizon](#), but Saber can take over those spaces. When the flags are initially tweeted and when they are retweeted, they are organic viral art, but they become invasive viral art when they’re discovered by users who are searching the various

hashtags Saber uses. It's a brilliant way of reaching out to a digital public with art and simultaneously infiltrating the digital real estate of others, a kind of graffiti for Twitter.

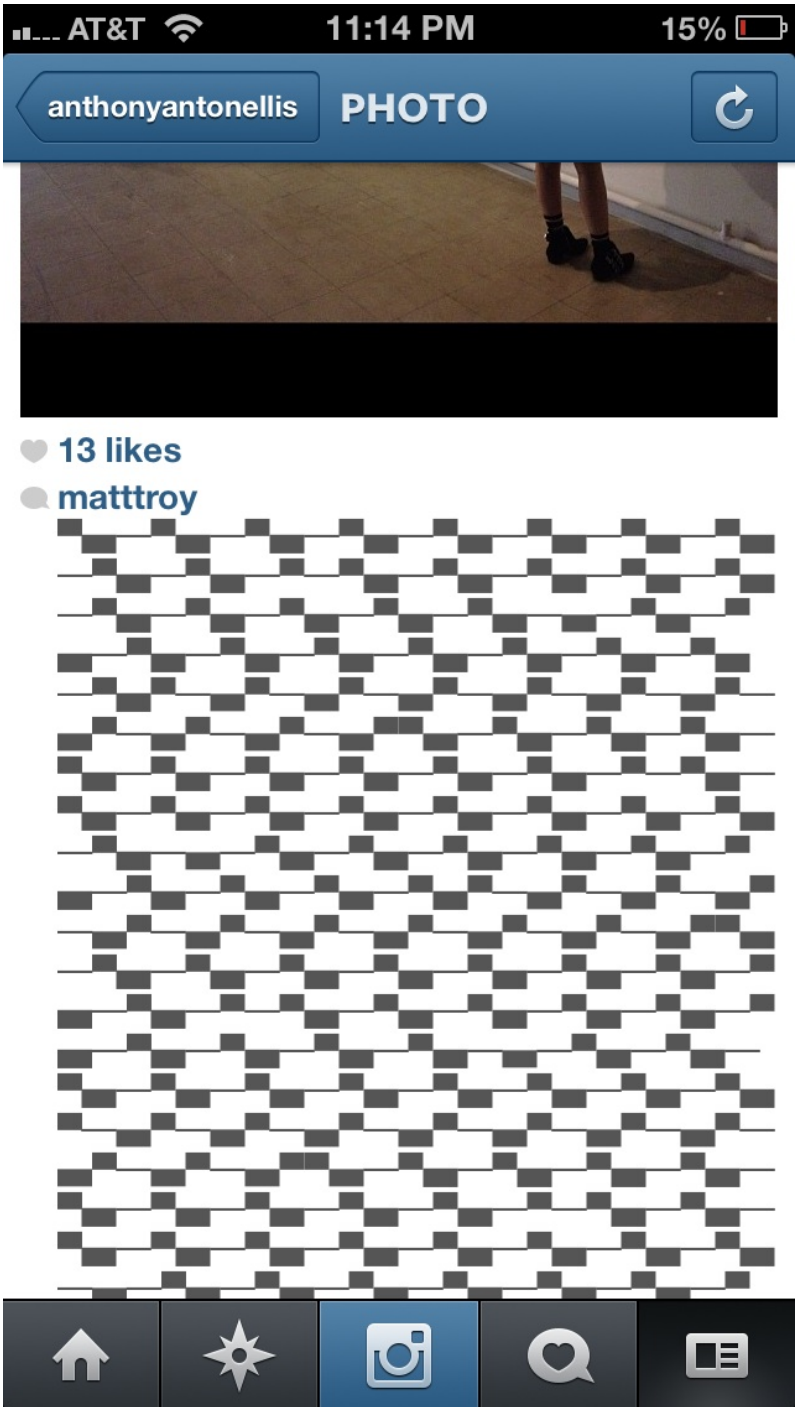
There are a handful of other artists making art on Twitter and I don't mean to say that Saber is entirely unique with what he is doing, but I find Saber particularly interesting for three reasons. First, the hashtags do set him apart somewhat as an artist infiltrating streams rather than just ending up on streams more organically. Second, his work is more accessible than many other artists making work on Twitter. The average Twitter user who isn't particularly interested in the intricacies of the web probably isn't going to have the same understanding of or appreciation for an account like [@glitchr\\_](#) as they will Saber's iconic upside down flags. Without that accessibility, art on Twitter gets trapped in the same pitfalls of first generation internet art. Thirdly, Saber comes from graffiti, so it just seems to make more sense to focus on him in a book about bridging the physical/digital divide rather than artists like [Dion Matta](#), [Matthew Haggett](#) or [Guy Vincent](#).

### **Matt Troy: Spammer and/or artist**

Some people without much imagination, probably the same people who say that graffiti is not art, might be more likely to label [Matt Troy](#) a spammer than an artist, but his spammy art is actually somewhat brilliant. One of Troy's projects is to make ASCII art, much like what some [Twitter](#) artists are doing, in [Instagram](#) and leave the ASCII art as comments on his own photos (which are themselves often screenshots of his ASCII art) and as comments on other people's photos. Typically, Troy's ASCII images are repeating patterns that can go on for so long that they cannot be displayed on the screen of a phone in their entirety without scrolling. The user has to scroll and scroll many screen heights to get past just one of Troy's comments.

The comments Troy leaves on his own photos have essentially the same effect as most Twitter art since it only appears in the streams of his own followers, but, like [@glitchr\\_](#), Troy's comments are disruptive to his followers streams because they go on and on to the point where scrolling past them can cause the Instagram application to slow down and scrolling can become jumpy. Still, it's the choice of Troy's followers to experience that from time to time and it's not sharable,





*Screenshot of a portion of a comment made by Matt Troy on [a photo](#) posted to [Anthony Antonellis](#)' Instagram account.*

so not really viral art. Instagram doesn't have the same sharing functionality that most viral art platforms have, making it a stretch to say that organic viral art can be distributed over Instagram even if there is an unmediated distribution of art between artist and fan (although of course a photo from Instagram can be taken and shared onto other platforms like [Tumblr](#) or [Twitter](#)).

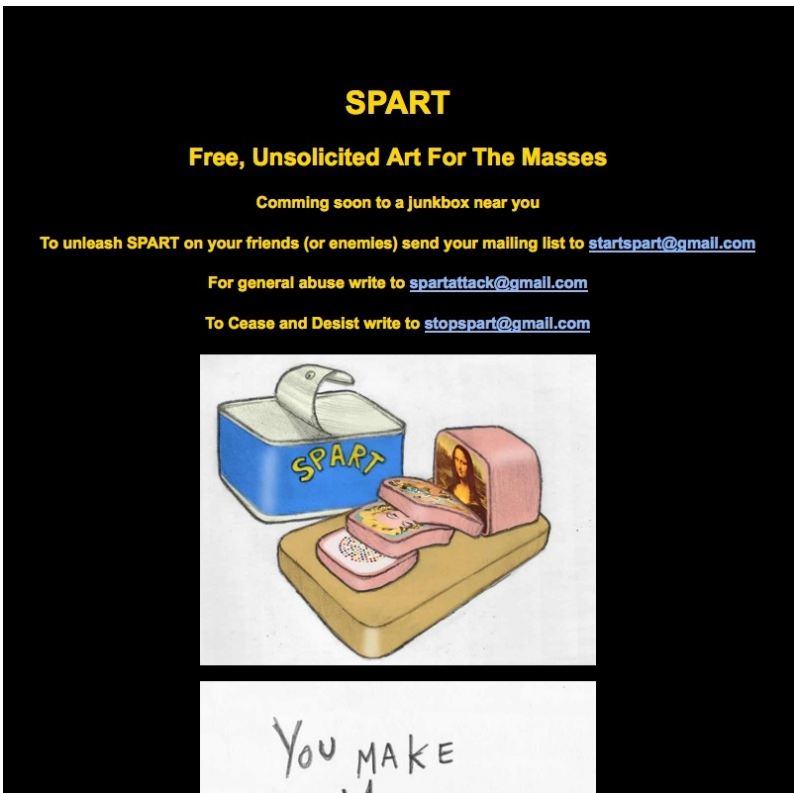
It's Troy's ASCII art comments on other users' photos that are invasive viral art and very reminiscent of graffiti. The comments are not anonymous (although Troy could start a bunch of random anonymous Instagram accounts for the sole purpose of leaving these comments), but it is disruptive when Troy inserts his art next to the art of whomever who would like, exposing the followers of Troy's target to his own art. If Troy leaves a comment on a photo by [Jayson Musson](#), Musson's followers who see that photo will also see Troy's comment (assuming there are not enough comments on the photo for Instagram to limit the number of comments displayed). Actually, Troy did that one time in early 2013 [on this photo](#) along with the comment "#respect #the #internet" (he's also [hit my Instagram](#)). Troy's piece has since been deleted, but here is Musson's response the work:

"@matttroy Ah like graffiti. Like I should let anyone leave whatever comment they'd like on any one of my photos because they have a sovereign Net Art right, right?"

Despite Musson's sarcasm, Troy's comments are a lot like graffiti or street art. I know of hardly any form of invasive viral art that is more like graffiti. And hardly any graffiti writer or street artist would claim a sovereign right to do what they're doing. Just because an artist gets up doesn't mean they don't expect their work to be removed. The comments invade a digital space, and they take up a significant amount of screen real estate. Users have scroll on and on just to get past them. When they appear, they cannot go unnoticed like most comments on Instagram. Troy's ASCII art comments, when left on other people's

photos, are a very invasive form of invasive viral art. They might be removed by Troy's targets, but not instantaneously. It might not spread very far since it can't easily be shared, except through screenshots or by other people commenting and individually tagging people whom they want to share the work with, but it does expose people to unexpected art and to Troy. Every comment almost inevitably reaches large groups of users who would never otherwise come across Troy's artwork. It's graffiti on Instagram. It's invasive viral art.

### Art in your spam folder



[SPART](#) homepage in September 2013.

You know spam emails? If spam is the digital equivalent to an advertisement stuck on the windshield of your car, [SPART](#) was like

anthonyantonellis PHOTO 



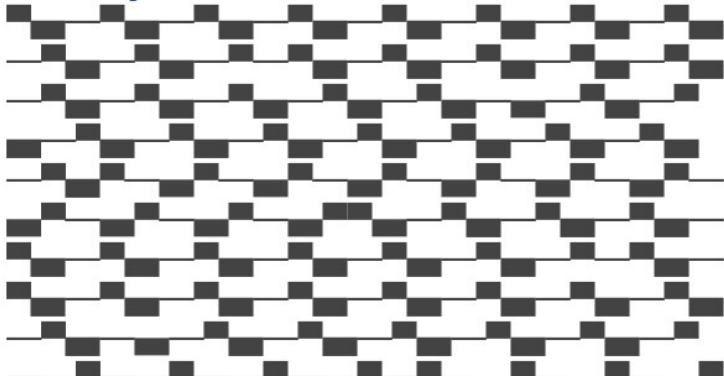
anthonyantonellis

56w



13 likes

mattroy



*The entirety of a comment made by Matt Troy on [a photo](#) posted to Anthony Antonellis' Instagram account. This simulated screenshot gives an idea of how long Troy's comments are and what kind of a screen it would take to display one of them in a single frame. To actually see the entire comment on a phone, the viewer must scroll past it. Note that Antonellis responded in kind with a similar comment of his own.*

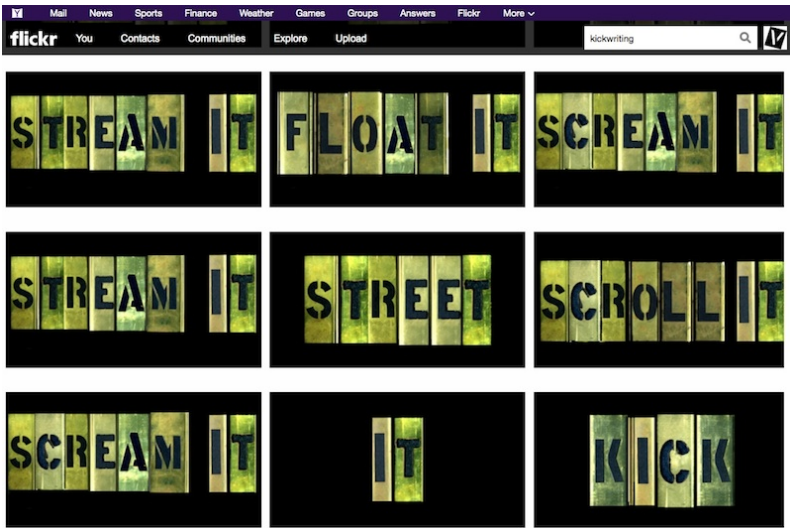
someone leaving photocopies of their drawings on the windshield instead. The anonymous creator of the SPART project made drawings that were sent out in jpeg form to SPART mailing list subscribers, but people were encouraged to sign up their friends to receive the emails. SPART is described on its website as “Free, Unsolicited Art For The Masses.” That could just as easily be a description of traditional street art. SPART didn't infiltrate websites, but it did invade email inboxes.

I remember receiving my first SPART one day out of the blue. It was strange and unexpected, but it made me smile. I was glad I read the message and saw the drawing. It was a lot like coming across a piece of unfamiliar street art, but it came to me without me ever having to leave my desk. And the SPART creator did [put up some of their SPART drawings on the street in wheatpaste form](#).

I began getting receiving SPART regularly and something that was first an invasion of my inbox became a welcome respite from stacks of press release emails and people trying to get me to blog about their artwork. SPART never asked for anything in return. It was just art in my inbox. Sometimes clever, sometimes whatever. Once I became familiar with SPART and began to expect it, waiting for another SPART email became like walking around a city looking out for pieces by my favorite street artists without knowing what I'm going to find.

SPART is still one of my favorite examples of invasive viral art. It didn't require fancy technology. It was just a person sending out emails like a street artist might put up a couple of posters and hope for the best. Dozens of SPART mailings were sent to an unsuspecting audience. Sadly, the project came to an abrupt end on December 26th, 2012 when the e-newsletter service that SPART was using decided that SPART was really just spam and wouldn't let the artist send out any more mass emails.

**John Fekner in the digital ether**



*A screenshot from Flickr of a search for “kickwriting,” the results of which feature John Fekner’s photographs of stencils arranged with little discernible pattern to form a poem.*

In addition to the organic viral art mentioned earlier that [John Fekner](#) posts on [his Tumblr](#), he also uses the internet as his playground and global street, producing invasive viral art on [Flickr](#). Fekner says, “The idea of putting something out online really quickly and getting immediately sparking conversation and interaction appealed to me, even if the work was put out anonymously.”

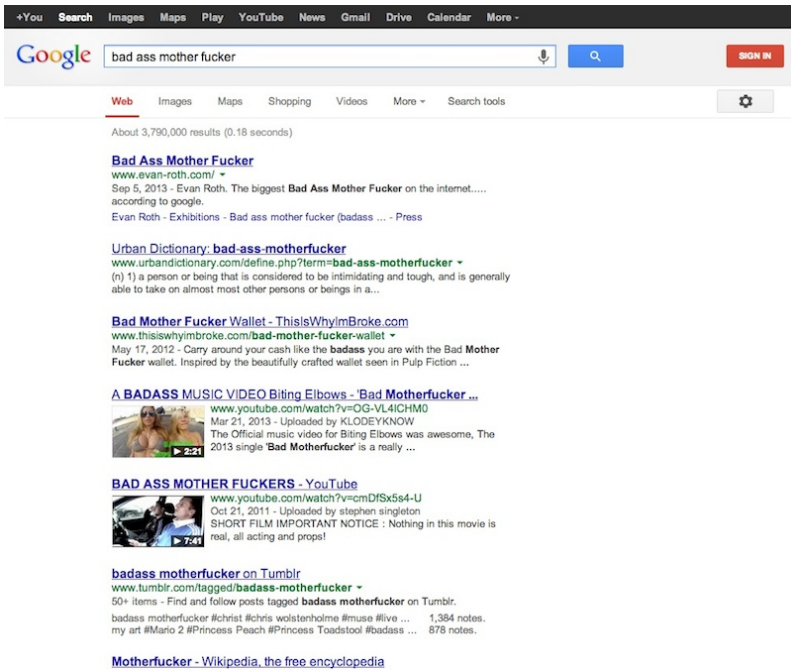
In September 2010, Fekner uploaded [five photos](#) of brass stencil templates that combined to spell out “MY AD IS NO AD,” a phrase from one of Fekner’s most popular street pieces. It was the first in a series of “cloud poetry” pieces that Fekner would upload to Flickr, poems made to live in the ether of the internet. The photos were tagged with words like “kickwriting” (a word coined by [Jack Kerouac](#)) and “vienna” (because the project was initially for the [BLK River Festival](#) in Vienna). The hope was that people search Flickr or Google Images for “[kickwriting](#)” or “[Vienna](#)” could come across Fekner’s work, similar to how [Saber](#) pollutes hashtags on [Twitter](#).

The method has succeeded somewhat, with Fekner’s cloud poems coming up at the top of searches for “kickwriting” [on Flickr](#) and

on Google Images. But the words don't come up in the expected order. You can't read, "MY AD IS NO AD" right out of the search results. Instead, you get something like "IS THE KEY THIS WITHIN SWEAT WORK," where multiple cloud poem phrases have been combined and rearranged by search engine algorithms to form something new, a hybrid of Dada and Concrete Poetry for the digital age. With over 200 words and individual letters uploaded so far, the possibilities for different poems are immense. Which actually relates to another cloud poem that Fekner uploaded, "THE END OF READING IN A STRAIGHT LINE," a phrase that he and his collaborator Don Leicht have been using for years. Unlike a lot of viral art (particularly organic viral art), cloud poetry has a long shelf life and doesn't have to "go viral" in the sense of getting millions of views overnight. The images can exist online indefinitely, with different combinations arising for different viewers over years or possibly even decades. With cloud poetry, Fekner is making a form of invasive viral art that is polluting search results, but he is also exploring the architecture of the web in a way that might fascinate more traditional internet artists.

### Google bombs

While not as easy to do as they once were (although John Fekner and Saber are essentially doing small-scale variations on this on different platforms), Google bombing is one of the most fun forms of invasive viral art. Especially since now they often require some audience participation. A Google bomb is a word or phrase that, when searched on Google, comes up with a result that required some odd search engine optimization to achieve. Some famous Google bombs include "santorum" (for which this site was the #1 result for a very long time rather than politician Rick Santorum's own website) and "miserable failure" (which at one time brought up results relating to President George W. Bush). While of course there are some people who search "santorum" knowing exactly what they're going to see and who spread it along the same avenues as organic viral art, there are plenty of people who search for "santorum" looking for the politician's homepage only to discover the Spreading Santorum page instead.



A screenshot of a [Google search](#) for “bad ass mother fucker” in September 2013.

[Evan Roth](#) took the idea of a Google bomb and applied it to his own website as an artwork. Instead of identifying his site with something like “miserable failure,” he decided to identify his website with the phrase “Bad Ass Mother Fucker.” Using various search engine optimization techniques such as code on his own website and making sure that people who write about him online include the phrase “Bad Ass Mother Fucker” in their articles, Roth is now the #1 hit on Google when you search “[Bad Ass Mother Fucker](#)”. And of course, now people do things like write [Evan Roth is a Bad Ass Mother Fucker](#) and link to Roth’s website, which just further solidifies his position as the top result. It’s a Google bomb, it’s an art project, it’s clever marketing, it’s invasive viral art and it’s kinda badass.

Roth’s [Ideas Worth Spreading](#) piece blurs the line between invasive and organic viral art because sharing is basically part of the piece in a way that it is not with most of his other projects. The artwork consists of

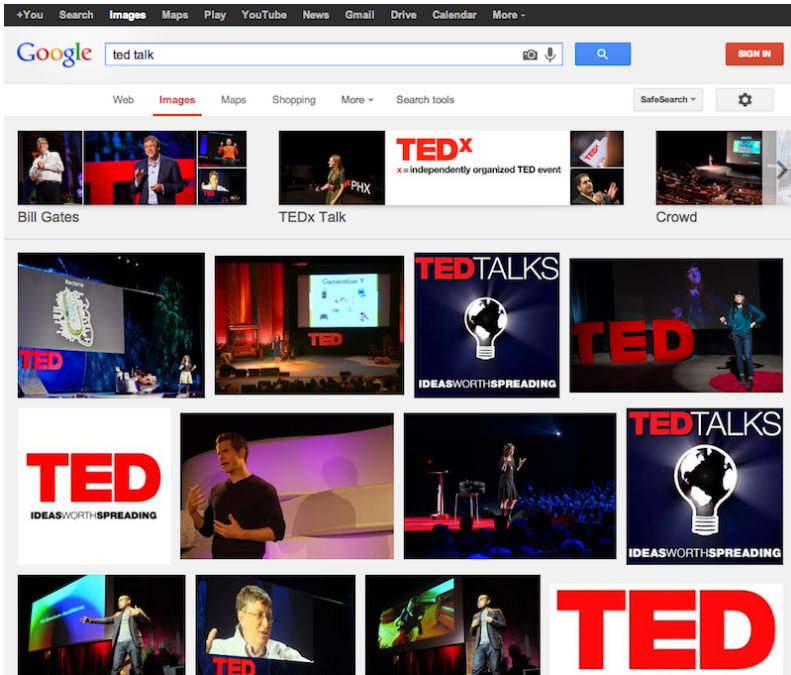




*A person participating in Evan Roth's Ideas Worth Spreading project at Eyebeam in NYC. Photo courtesy of [Evan Roth](#).*

a stage setup indistinguishable from the stage at a [TED Conference](#) and a yellow microphone like the kind that would be used at a TED Conference (a conference with the tagline “Ideas Worth Spreading”). A TED talk is one of the most prestigious lectures a person can be invited to give. Past speakers have included [Al Gore](#) and [JR](#), and the most popular videos of TED talks have gotten millions of views online. At an installation of *Ideas Worth Spreading*, anyone is welcome to get up on “stage” and have their picture taken as if they are giving a TED talk. If you had that kind of a photo, wouldn't you share it? When *Ideas Worth Spreading* was shown at [Eyebeam](#) in 2013, plenty of people did share photos of themselves at the piece with captions that implied they had really just given a TED talk. Most organic viral artworks might be sharable and worth sharing, but they do not require sharing to be complete. *Ideas Worth Spreading* is hardly complete without sharing, even if the sharing is done with the user's permission. At this stage, *Ideas Worth Spreading* is tricky, but it's still organic viral art. The project eventually did result in some invasive viral art (and perhaps that was the point all along) when [Roth found](#) that images from the piece began showing up within the first few results of Google Images searches for “[Ted Talk](#).” At that point, the *Ideas Worth Spreading* images were

intruding into unexpected places, in a sense even tricking Google, and became invasive viral art. The project has moved beyond a prank involving sharing and become a piece that is infiltrating and imposing itself on an audience.



A screenshot of a [Google Image search](#) for "ted talk" in September 2013. Note the woman in the blue/green shirt on the far right of the first row of results. She is not giving a "real" Ted Talk. She was a participant in Ideas Worth Spreading when it was installed at Eyebeam.

The portion of *Ideas Worth Spreading* that deals with the images appearing on Google Images is a visual variation on Google bombing. When I posted about the project on Vandalog, [Roth tweeted me](#) to say, "Thanks @vandalog, make sure to add alt="Ted Talk" to your img src tag!" With that change, search engines looking at my site would identify the photo I posted as related to the phrase "Ted Talk" and it would be more likely to have a higher position in search engine results for the phrase.

Comparing art distributed online to street art and graffiti, Roth said, “You’re hitting people in these spaces, whether you’re talking about viral-y or meme-y type things online or you’re talking about someone who is going to work and commuting and having to see something on the subway system or something on their walk as they go down the street, you’re hitting people in places where they weren’t expecting to experience it.” That’s invasive viral art, and that’s basically what happened with the images that came out of Roth’s *Ideas Worth Spreading* project as well as *Bad Ass Mother Fucker*, although the *Ideas Worth Spreading* images unexpected hit people on such a subtle level that viewers should not actually be aware that they are experiencing anything abnormal.

### Lepos invades on all fronts



A wheatpaste of the Lepos character by Diego Bergia. Photo by [Garrison Gunter](#).

The entirety of [Diego Bergia's](#) [Lepos: The Primary Invasion](#) project has to be applauded as a fantastic combination of traditional street art and graffiti with digital art. Bergia began writing graffiti in 1993. He stopped in 2003, but learned 3d animation around the same time. In 2004 he began wheatpasting his Lepos character, something he had originally began painting in the late 90's to go alongside his graffiti.

With the wheatpastes, Lepos took on a life of its own as a street art project. There were wheatpastes around Toronto and other cities, as well as black and white flyers advertising that Lepos was missing and an email address that people could tear off if they wanted to tell Bergia that they had spotted the creature. Bergia also made a video that combined live action and 3d animation, ostensibly showing a “sighting” of Lepos. Eventually, Bergia moved into making short videos that looked like teasers for game on the Neo-Geo game system of the early 90’s. The game, *Lepos: The Primary Invasion*, shows how Lepos is an alien sent to Earth to warn us of an impending invasion that destroyed his planet. In addition to fighting off the invading hordes on Earth, Lepos tries to raise awareness of the invasion by writing graffiti about it. The videos are portrayed as being segments of a real video game, but they’re really just animations, viral videos giving fans of Lepos the character’s backstory. There is no game in production (yet). The whole thing is a fascinating combination of viral art and street art.

What really completes the project and sets Bergia apart is that he’s put Lepos into real video games in the form of in-game graffiti. Lepos can found in the 2006 game *Tony Hawk’s Project 8* by Activision, as well as the 2009 game *Skate 2* by Electronic Arts. Both skateboarding games (from competing companies) needed some graffiti pieces to decorate their environments. Bergia had friends at each company who asked him if he would like to contribute, so he sent over some graphics and his work wound up in the games.

For Bergia, getting his work in games was an obvious choice once the opportunity presented itself, saying, “With the Tony Hawk games, you started seeing graffiti in video games, and as a graffiti writer, you just want to get up. And if you play video games, obviously you want your graffiti in those video games. It’s just getting up, basically.”

Bergia didn’t have to break the law to get up with this project, and he was still able to get up and get his graffiti seen in a massive way. More people probably regularly saw his graffiti in-game than ever saw it regularly in person. *Skate 2* and *Tony Hawk’s Project 8* sold over 4 million units combined globally. That’s a lot of people spending a lot of hours in environments that are covered in Lepos characters



A screenshot of Bergia's artwork in *Tony Hawk's Project 8*. Game published by Activision and screenshot by [Diego Bergia](#).

and other graffiti by Bergia. By getting his graffiti into these video games, Bergia created an absolutely massive digital viral art component to the Lepos project. What better way to get up on the streets of the digital world by actually getting up on digital walls in a 3d animated environment?

Admittedly, putting your art in a video game with permission of the designers isn't exactly the unmediated distribution that is ideally part of invasive viral art. Perhaps this these games are really a massive-scale example of organic viral art, but once Bergia's work was in the games, players still got that same sense of discovery of his work that can occur outdoors or with a piece of invasive viral art on the internet. Unlike [Tumblr](#), where users visit the site with the expectation of seeing art, or [Marc Eckō's graffiti video game](#), people weren't expecting to see Bergia's graffiti when they played *Tony Hawk's Project 8* or buying the game for that reason, an important distinction I think. With the games taken into account, Lepos has been found on the street as a wheatpaste and a flyer, as a spraypainted character as part of a graffiti piece, in animations for a fake video game where people have at least some idea of what they are getting and throughout two mainstream video games as an unexpected background element. And hopefully one day there will be a real Lepos video game. For me, the

*Lepos: The Primary Invasion* project is a prime example of the amazing potential for contemporary art to be found and distributed as street art, graffiti, invasive viral art and organic viral art across a wide variety of environments.



*A flyer by Diego Bergia. Photo by [striaic](#).*

**SimCopter's easter egg**



*An example of [TMark](#) and Jacques Servin's *SimCopter* easter egg. Screenshot of Maxis' *SimCopter* by [TMark](#).*

Credit for the most hilarious invasive viral art in a video game has to go to [TMark](#) and Jacques Servin (eventually part of [The Yes Men](#)) for their modification to the 1996 video game *SimCopter* by Maxis. Servin was working at Maxis as a programmer on *SimCopter*, and he inserted a particularly spectacular easter egg into the game. Easter eggs (hidden surprise elements added to various forms of media like video games and DVDs) aren't uncommon in video games, but they're usually little jokes between programmers or friendly homages to other projects, all little bonus things that the game's publisher probably wouldn't object to. But Servin inserted a very different kind of easter egg into *SimCopter*. His easter egg was a political statement, a protest of sorts. There was a point in the game at which a bunch of women in bikinis were supposed to appear and start dancing around. Servin modified the game so that if the game was played on certain days, the women would be replaced with bunches of men in speedos and male police officers dancing around and hugging each other. The easter egg was caught within a few days of the game's release, but some copies with the modification did make it into the hands of consumers.

#### **Defacing websites as a form of graffiti**

By now it should almost go without saying, but [website defacements](#) ([here's an example](#)) can be a digital version of graffiti. When a hacker takes over a website and changes the homepage so that it has a message along the lines of “haha you were hacked by Joe,” that’s basically the same as someone tagging “Joe” on a wall. [KATSU](#) brought this up in our interview. He said:

“The second way you can be a vandal online is through actually marking or defacing the digital space. I’ve always dreamt of the day I could tag the Google homepage for .15 of a second. Just think of the number of people worldwide that would see my tag right over the Google logo.”

For KATSU, getting his name in a place is getting his name in a place, regardless of if that place is the wall of a building or the homepage of a website. That makes perfect sense if you see digital space as essentially the same as physical space.

But what if you want to graffiti a website, but you don’t have the hacking skills or a willingness to break the law? [Letterbombing](#) is a very fun and legal way to insert unexpected and difficult to filter out digital graffiti onto [Facebook](#) pages and walls. The technique is simple. You get a bunch of people together and everyone simultaneously posts something random on a person’s Facebook wall or on a Facebook fan page. Then, with all those people’s posts stacked one on top of the next on the wall of the intended target, the letterbombers change their profile pictures to letters of the alphabet such that the group spells out a message through their profile pictures. The result is a message that’s plainly visible to any human looking at the targeted page, but completely invisible to anyone (or any piece of software) monitoring the page for negative comments by only looking at the contents of posts. Letterbombing is a form of invasive viral art that pops up quite blatantly but with no warning of what to expect or that users should be expecting anything at all, giving viewers a surprise similar to seeing an unexpected piece of graffiti on a wall. It’s graffiti for Facebook.



The screenshot shows the Facebook profile of Sarah Palin. The page layout includes a cover photo, a profile picture, and a navigation bar with tabs for Wall, Info, Donate to S..., Notes, YouTube, and Links. The main content area is a list of posts, each starting with a large, bold, single-letter status indicator (K, E, P, F, E, A, R, J, L, I, V, E) followed by the user's name and a short message. The posts are:
 

- K** Luke Carmody you rock!
- E** Danny Adrain go sarah
- E** Andy Tider hey!
- P** Jason Curtis Palin wins 2008!!!! I WISH TIME MACHINES WERE REAL!
- F** Ross Weythman sarah palin 4 lifel wait...
- E** Jereth Catestory you need to legitizie our government!
- A** Indraira Vaidy You know what's cool...Sarah Palin!
- R** Pete Marquis What's up with this Obanacare taking over?
- J** Yes Pepe So much love...
- L** Jesse Snyder All liberal want is you money and gonna kill you're granma
- I** Luke: Koz Sarah, do you like the movie a Mighty Wind?
- V** Ari Voukydis Palin for Prez 2011!!!
- E** Ben Waldman You are like a mom to the country...
- E** Wayne Daisy Job creationism...
- A** Alex Taylor Low taxes. High freedom. That's America...

 The left sidebar contains links to Sarah Palin's website and Twitter, a list of friends who liked the page, and a list of notes. The right sidebar features a 'Create an Ad' section and a 'Facebook Pages' advertisement.

An example of letterbombing on Facebook. Screenshot courtesy of [Jeff Greenspan](#).

The technique was developed by [Jeff Greenspan](#), [Chris Baker](#), and [Daniel Adrain](#) and tested out on the Facebook pages of [Glenn Beck](#) and [Sarah Palin](#) in October 2010, a couple of weeks before [Jon Stewart](#)



### Letterbombing

and Stephen Colbert's Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear. They were able to spell out Colbert's slogan for the rally, "KEEP FEAR ALIVE," on Beck and Palin's Facebook fan pages, exposing the message to each page's visitors. Although both of those pages probably have moderators to look out for anyone posting messages like "KEEP FEAR ALIVE," letterbombing the pages allowed the message to stay up. People visited those pages expecting to see the latest news about their favorite right-wingers, but instead they were confronted with some completed unexpected invasive viral art.

Despite the results essentially being website defacement, letterbombers don't break any rules or laws. They just hack Facebook (I mean hack in the sense of using something for an unintended purpose), using profile pictures in a nontraditional way to get their messages past traditional filters. Maybe letterbombing doesn't have the edge of traditional website defacement relying on black hat hacking or graffiti writers running around in the middle of the night, but the result isn't so different. Due to an updated layout on Facebook, letterbombing doesn't work nearly as well as it did in 2010, but it can still be implemented in the comments of a post.

### Conclusion on invasive viral art

Invasive viral art is the fullest realization yet of how the internet has become a public space and how street art and graffiti can adapt to

infiltrate this new public space with art. Invasive viral art can take many forms. I think artists have only scratched the surface of what it can be, and the possibilities will continue to evolve alongside the internet. Every new online platform or upgrade to an existing platform creates new opportunities for engagement through invasive viral art. Some of the artists I've highlighted already see a clear connection to street art in their digital work, or they may not see the connections but they still involve themselves with both traditional street art or graffiti and invasive viral art. Other artists, it seems, are completely disconnected from street art and graffiti despite their treatment of digital space the same way street artists and writers treat the sides of buildings. For the artist who wants to engage with the most people, who wants to reach the public with the fewest layers of mediation between them and a large audience, who wants to distribute their work without anyone's permission, invasive viral art is the way of the 21st century. On rainy days when we stay indoors, invasive viral art invades our screenspace. On sunny days when we walk around the city but we're looking at our phones instead of the walls around us, invasive viral art still finds us. Ideas of what public space is have changed in the last decade, and so artists' ideas of how to engage honestly and without mediation in public space must change too.

### **In closing**

I hope to have done three things in this book: First, given historical context for how communications technologies have always influenced street art and graffiti; second, shown how street art and graffiti have been shaped by the internet; third, provided the vision of a possible future for publicly accessible and noncommissioned art in the form of viral art. The first two chapters, the first two goals, are really there to set the stage for the amazing potential of viral art for street artists and graffiti writers. Early on, graffiti and street art had to be seen in person and work was only occasionally glimpsed through documentation. Everything was rooted in firsthand experiences. Then, the internet opened the floodgates. Street artists and graffiti writers can now connect with one another and share their work almost instantaneously across previously insurmountable borders. But it isn't

the same thing as seeing the art in person. Finally, viral art functions as street art and graffiti once did, but for a digital society.

Viral art is at least one possible next step for street art. While critics might complain that the internet kills street art and graffiti, I would say that any artist just posting photos of their outdoor work is not using the internet to its full potential. Those artists use the internet as a storage facility and maybe as a place to run their hype machine, which can be useful, but it's still missing out. Those artists represent a rocky transitional stage for street art and graffiti, but we're on the cusp of a breakthrough. Viral art, both invasive and organic, uses the internet in a way more in line with how street art and graffiti use walls. If we like street art but want people to actually see something like it in the age of laptops and smartphones, we must embrace the digital street as the new frontier for art. Viral art uses the internet as more than just a storage facility. Viral art embraces the internet as the public space that it is.

Internet art began as something for, well, nerds who were also artists. So much early internet art seems to have been intentionally made to only appeal to a small audience of fellow conceptual artists with rudimentary programming skills. Art cannot and should not appeal to everyone, but there's certainly something to be said for at least some art appealing to a wide audience, or at least an audience without years of training in art theory and a book on computer programming. Viral art is an evolution of internet art that has the potential for mass appeal. Viral art takes the ideas of internet art and refines them so that they can be used in a way that isn't so exclusionary. Whereas a lot of early internet art existed in the form of websites that people could visit if they chose to, viral art either begs an audience to come and visit, spreads conveniently along social media pathways or actively seeks out an audience. Viral art is what happens when you think of the internet like a street, a place for fame or a place for engaging with directly with an audience, rather than just a new type of gallery space.

I hope that, as street art seems to be morphing into legal walls and contemporary muralism and graffiti writers are sentenced to harsh prison terms for their work, a link can be forged between these artists working in outdoor public spaces and digital artists making invasive viral art. These groups can learn from one another. I know I'm still

learning more about internet art all the time. The graffiti writers and street artists can help internet artists to think about actively engaging with the general public, and internet artists can help graffiti writers and street artists understand the internet as a place for art making. The more that street art and graffiti can come together with internet art and people can think about the internet as a public space worth intervening in, the more artwork we as a society can have appearing in our public spaces.

It seems that I'm having discussions with other street art fans all the time about how there's a lack of the sense of surprise and discovery that we felt when we first discovered street art. We would wander the city, not sure what we were going to see and often not sure what we were seeing. That initial high was so high, but now we're just chasing it. Blogs and social media and following a map will never quite get us there. Even when showing up in a new city and looking for work in an unfamiliar place, it's almost impossible not to say, "Oh, I saw that on [Wooster Collective](#)." Viral art is one way to regain the sense of discovery that we lost when we started looking at commissioned murals online. And for the artists, it's a way to live anywhere with an internet connection and engage honestly with a massive unmediated audience. It's a way to bring surprise to this new public space where we aren't supposed to have surprises. Viral art is a way to bring wonder to the digital frontier, and breath new life into the ideas that make street art and graffiti so appealing.

Graffiti began as writing on walls. It spread around cities. Then it was distributed through documentation in books and in magazines, and eventually on websites. While even documentation of graffiti inspired countless kids to pick up a spraycan and helped the artform evolve, graffiti dulled somewhat as it became a static image on a page and eventually simple organic viral art online. The possibility of invasive viral art brings graffiti back to it's core values while still existing online.

Street art followed a similar evolution, but mostly a few years later. It began on walls, and then found its way online. Street art found an amazing home on the internet, thanks to various websites devoted to the subject and the general desire of Bored at Work Network to see

the kind of art that street art tends to be. Street art had always been for the people who make up the Bored At Work Network, and once that network existed, the genre really took off. But again, sharing physical works online through documentation was just a transitional phase. Street art blogs and photos on [Instagram](#) and even perhaps organic viral art in general are the growing pains of street art as the genre finds its footing online. It too can evolve into invasive viral art, completing a transition from unmediated distribution of art in the physical world to mediated digital distribution to unmediated digital distribution.

As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, we have to follow [Evan Roth](#)'s footsteps and acknowledge the tools of street art and graffiti are hacks, means to an end, and we have to listen to [Ian Strange aka Kid Zoom](#)'s warning that writers and street artists often confuse the means with the ends. We must discard the means and refocus on the end goal of unmediated distribution.

Today, the best place to achieve the unmediated distribution of artwork from artist to audience is often on the internet, not on trains or walls. Today, the best way to do what street artists and graffiti writers have traditionally aimed to do is to make viral art. That must be a path that is at least seriously considered by graffiti writers and street artists if these genres are to continue to evolve and find a home in our increasingly digital world.

## About RJ Rushmore



*Photo by Caroline Caldwell*

RJ Rushmore is a 20-something student living outside of Philadelphia and attending [Haverford College](#), where he works part time at the [Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery](#). Outside of school, RJ is the founder and editor-in-chief of [Vandalog](#). He first became obsessed with street art in 2008 while exploring the streets of East London with his father. *Viral Art* is his second book.





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