

NICHOLAS ALDEN RIGGLE

## Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces

### I. INTRODUCTION

Here is a story you might have heard before: something huge happened around the time that Pop Art entered the artworld. Modernism, through the influence of formalist theory and criticism, had separated art and life by insisting that the significance of art is never relational. Artistic significance was to be found solely in a work's aesthetic, largely visual, formal properties, not its representational, social, metaphorical, or political content. Andy Warhol's acclaimed *Brillo Box*, and similar works, took this idea to task. *Brillo Box* is visually indistinguishable from James Harvey's splendidly designed shipping boxes for the popular *Brillo* cleaning pad. As a result, art could no longer be distinguished from nonart by its visual properties. Artworks, it seemed, could look like, or be, anything. Even the most banal everyday object could be "transfigured" by appropriately placing it in the artworld. Such works effectively collapse the formalist distinction between art and the everyday. A consequence of the fact that anything can be art is a proliferation of styles, media, movements, and influences—a flood of creative freedom. Historians and critics can no longer craft their "master narratives" that attempt to capture the defining influence of a single master or of a manifesto-wielding movement. This is all the better for the "Post-Historical" response to modernism, since these narratives serve to reinforce the artificial distinction between art and the everyday—a distinction that a fully realized, truly pluralistic artworld should abandon.<sup>1</sup>

Less familiar is the fact that there is more than one way to abandon the Modern distinction between art and life. According to our story above, we entered the post-historical artworld, in large

part, by allowing everyday objects and events to enter the museum, gallery, and art-critical conversation. Another possibility, another response to modernism, is to do just the reverse: weave art into everyday life. But how would that work? How could there be an art practice that requires, in a manner of speaking, taking art *out* of the museum, gallery, and private collection—ultimately, out of the artworld—and putting it into the fractured stream of everyday life? How could there be *post-museum* art?

Imagine an intentionally anonymous art practice, most of whose works are destroyed by nature and, often intentionally, by humankind. This anonymity and ephemerality hinders the construction of a master narrative. Imagine a practice whose artworks are largely disconnected from the artworld because their significance hinges on their being *outside* of that world. This disconnection impedes the artworld's involvement in the practice and ensures that the works enter the museum, gallery, and art market only at great, if not total, cost. Imagine an art practice that, instead of delighting merely the refined sensibilities of an elite few, has the power to engage, effortlessly and aesthetically, the masses through its manifest creativity, skill, originality, depth of meaning, and beauty.

What I have asked you to imagine is embodied in the practice of *street art*. It responds to modernism not by hosting the everyday—its works are typically not everyday objects and, like Modernist works, often retain recognizable visual properties of art—but by making art in the streets for all to see. Street art is neither postmodern, nor *post-postmodern*. It is the other response to the Modern separation of art and life.

In what follows, I expand upon these ideas by offering a way of thinking about the nature of

street art. In Section II, I define “street art.” I then defend the definition by addressing its treatment of similar arts. In Section III, I address graffiti, and in Section IV, I discuss the relation between public and street art. Along the way I demonstrate the definition’s art-historical and art-critical advantages.

## II. DEFINING ‘STREET ART’

The question *What is street art?* might seem easy to answer. We have all seen it: graffiti, scribbled names, and murals. It is just art placed on the street, where ‘the street’ is taken in a very broad sense to denote, roughly, any urban public space.<sup>2</sup> However, this commonsensical answer cannot be right. Imagine a gallerist bringing in new works who leans a painting against her car before opening the gallery doors. The painting was placed in the street but clearly is not street art. In art fairs around the world, paintings are placed in the street, but they are not thereby street art. The notion that street art is art placed in the street is also misleading insofar as it suggests that street art is made and subsequently placed in the street. This is true of some works, but as we will see, in many cases, the street is employed in the production of the art. It does not help to add that the art must be in the street for at least a certain length of time. Aside from being ad hoc, it is false. *Street art* spans works that are utterly ephemeral and relatively enduring.

Consider Josh Allen Harris’s inflatable sculptures. Harris creates inflatable creatures out of diaphanous plastic material and tapes them to subway air ducts on the sidewalks of New York City. When the subway passes, air shoots out of the ducts (Remember Marilyn Monroe?) and inflates the animals, casting them into a short and frenzied existence. The inflatable sculptures last about as long as it takes for an average-sized chain of subway cars to zoom by.<sup>3</sup> On the other side of the temporal spectrum are the works of “Stikman” (see Figure 1). One of Stikman’s projects involves placing little thermoplastic stickmen in the middle of the street (normally in crosswalks). Unless they are deliberately destroyed, they will be there as long as the crosswalk is. Invader’s work is equally enduring. With powerful glue, he affixes colorful mosaics depicting digital-style space creatures to various surfaces (see Figure 2). The artist REVS,



FIGURE 1. Stikman (photography by Luna Park).

whom I discuss in more detail below, welds or bolts medium-sized metal sculptures of his name to loading docks, iron beams, sidewalks, and other city surfaces.

Other street artworks have a far less direct connection to the street, which raises the question of whether street art must be physically in the street. The artist Blu created *Muto*, a fascinating piece of animation that uses the street as a drawing board. Blu painted characters in his distinctive style on various street surfaces, took a photograph, shifted the character slightly, took another photograph, and so on. He then stitched the images together and added sound effects. Human-like figures walk along walls, crawl under windows, and kick over logs; they morph into bugs, lose their heads, expand, split in half, and multiply; teeth crawl along the sidewalk and up walls. One really must see it to believe it.<sup>4</sup> Another example: Invader’s mosaics are placed all over various cities, but the finished product is normally a map that details the location of each work. Invader prints the maps and



FIGURE 2. *Invader* (photograph by Luna Park).

distributes them in the “invaded” city. The Paris and Los Angeles invasions are detailed in books sold on *Invader*’s website. These maps and *Muto* are arguably street art even though they are not physically located in the street.<sup>5</sup>

It cannot be a necessary or sufficient condition that street art be art-in-the-street. Still, street art obviously has some strong connection to the street. A different suggestion is that street art is art that employs the street as an artistic resource. Now, there are different kinds of artistic resources. One kind of artistic resource is the physical material artists use to create their works. Just as painters use canvas, paint, frames, galleries, and walls, street artists use elements of the street. The subway and its brief shots of city air are literally part of Harris’s sculptures; the street is the drawing board for Blu’s animation; doorways, windows, sidewalks, signposts, rooftops—all are used to create street art. Another kind of artistic resource is the context in which the work is displayed. Some

artists use the gallery, studio, or museum; street artists use the street. So perhaps an artwork is street art if, and only if, its creator uses the street as an artistic resource in at least one of these ways.

This definition gets something right, but it is too inclusive. Commercial art uses the street as an artistic resource in both senses—mass stenciling by movie production companies, posters, billboards, projected advertisements—but none of it is street art. That an artwork uses the street is not sufficient for its being street art. But given that it covers all our examples thus far, it does seem necessary. Our definition should entail the *material requirement*: an artwork is street art *only if* it uses the street as an artistic resource. (I will often say that artworks that satisfy this requirement make a *material* or *artistic use* of the street.)

For a work to use an artistic resource, it is necessary that the creator of the work intentionally use it in the creation of the work. (It is not necessary that the concept of the material feature in the intention. For example, an artist can “intend to use iron” in a work by intending to use *this stuff*, which is iron.) When this material is the street, a further commitment is at least implicitly (but normally explicitly) incurred. This is a commitment to *ephemerality*. In using the street, artists willingly subject their work to all of its many threats—it might be stolen, defaced, destroyed, moved, altered, or appropriated. This is not to say that all street artists *expect* their work to be short-lived; surely Stikman expects his works to endure. It is to say that, in using the street, they relinquish any *claim* on the work’s integrity, or on the integrity of the part of the work that contributes to its being street art. (So, for example, Blu’s use of the street in creating *Muto* involves the commitment.)

A notable feature of much street art is that its meaning is severely compromised when removed from the street. Josh Harris’s inflatable sculptures would lose something important if they were inflated by an industrial fan in a museum or gallery, presumably because the artist’s use of the street plays an important role in the interpretation of the work. The regular movement of the city brings Harris’s sculptures into existence and introduces them to a brief and animated life. As the subway passes on, so do the sculptures. In Harris’s work, the life of the city just is the life of the sculpture. The artist C. Finley beautifies rugged steel dumpsters by covering them with pretty wallpaper.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the wallpaper is on a dumpster—a veteran

denizen of the street—is what makes it significant. By covering dumpsters with such homely décor, Finley draws attention to the fact that the street is also a kind of living room. Her work reveals that the elements of our commonplaces need not be so uninviting. The dumpster—like the kitchen trash bin or the home toilet—need not reflect its contents. Wallpaper alone is merely pretty. Wallpaper on a dumpster: that is street art.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the meaning of an advertisement does not change if it is removed from the street. Its message is generally *buy this* or *see that* no matter where it is. Of course, that the ad *conveys* this message might depend on its use of the street, and the rhetorical effect of an ad is often severely diminished when removed from a public location; if removed, it might be *ineffective* commercial art, but it would still mean the same thing. If C. Finley's wallpaper is removed from the dumpster, or if the wallpapered dumpster is placed in a warehouse (or a gallery), the meaning of the work will be severely compromised, if not entirely destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

This indicates that, for street art, the artistic use of the street must be *internal* to its significance, that is, it must contribute essentially to its meaning. Features of artworks can be either external or internal to their meaning.<sup>9</sup> Think of the meaning of a work as given by an interpretation. The size of Odilon Redon's *Guardian of the Spirit Waters* is an eliminable feature of any interpretation—one need not discuss it to make sense of the work. However, the size of Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* or of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* must play a role in their interpretation. Duchamp's *Fountain* is pretty because it is made of glossy white porcelain, but its prettiness has little to do with its meaning (contrary to what some formalists have thought). In contrast, the loveliness of C. Finley's wallpaper dumpsters would play an essential role in any reasonable interpretation. This suggests that any reasonable interpretation of a piece of street art must refer to the way in which the artist uses the street to give meaning to the artwork. Call this the *immaterial requirement*: If a work is *street art*, then its use of the street is internal to its meaning.

Notice that the immaterial requirement implies the material requirement. If an artistic use of the street is internal to the meaning of a work, then, obviously, the work uses the street. Perhaps, then, the immaterial requirement is also a sufficient condition. Thus,

An artwork is *street art* if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning.

It is a virtue of this conception of street art that, given certain facts about the street, it implies that street art is at least *likely* to have properties that it in fact often has. The definition implies that street art is likely to be, among other things, illegal, anonymous, ephemeral, highly creative, and attractive.<sup>10</sup>

The street is composed largely of surfaces and objects owned by the city and other people; the artistic use of these surfaces is normally an act of vandalism. This fact forces many street artists to be anonymous or to use pseudonyms. Many street artists are notoriously unidentifiable and difficult to contact. Also due to the illegality, and partially as a result of exposure to the forces of nature, street art is highly ephemeral—some of it exists for only a couple of hours before it is buffed out, scrawled over, or naturally erased. Furthermore, street art does not exist in a designated “artspace”—a place like a museum or gallery specially reserved for art. As a result, it is much more likely that the public will notice these works if they are visually striking—street artists are pressured to make their works pop out of the street and call on passersby and other artists to pay attention. They employ various strategies to achieve this. They make their works visually stunning (Figure 3), examples of extraordinary skill (Figure 4), highly original and imaginative, or all at once (Figure 5). As a result, most pieces need not be placed in a gallery, reviewed by a critic, or blessed by the artworld to be appreciated as art.<sup>11</sup>

This way of thinking about street art also helps make sense of the experience of seeing street art in designated artspaces—it invariably feels dead and inauthentic. When a work is moved into an artspace, the one thing that changes is the very thing that made it street art; at best it looks like street art. One could experience it as street art only by imagining what its use of the street might have been. At best, then, one could imagine how the work seen in the gallery *might have been* street art.

In *Style Wars* (Henry Chalfant and Tony Silver, 1983), the early documentary of the culture that gave birth to contemporary graffiti, art dealers invite young graffiti artists to produce and sell works on canvas. In one scene, which Arthur Danto calls





FIGURE 3. Blu, 2007 (photograph by Luna Park).



FIGURE 4. C215 (photograph by Luna Park).



FIGURE 5. Dan Witz (photograph by Luna Park).

“the most dispiriting sequence” in the film, the viewer is witness to a savage gallery opening where the writers’ distinctive styles are exploited in an attempt to make them viable in the artworld.<sup>12</sup> Danto’s words are chosen carefully. It is the “most dispiriting sequence” because it is the only place in the film where we see graffiti outside of its proper context, cut off from the street, and thereby devoid of its distinctive meaning. It has literally been stripped of its spirit.

Street art is deeply antithetical to the artworld. That is, for each part of the artworld, street art resists to some appreciable extent playing a role in it. Consider a museum. There could be an exhibition of street art only at great cost to the significance of the works exhibited. By pulling them from the streets the curator eliminates their material use of the street, thereby destroying their meaning and status as street art. What is exhibited in the museum is at most a vestige of street art. Imagine, if you can, a gallery that deals solely in street art. Street art is done on owned prop-

erty. What is there to sell? Legally speaking, it is already owned.<sup>13</sup> Of course, it would be possible to create a temporary gallery in the streets full of ephemeral art that cannot be sold. Artist Erik Burke has done just that with his *(Con)temporary Gallery* in Reno, Nevada.<sup>14</sup> But such a “gallery” hardly has the institutional structure required of an artworld gallery.

Even some of the thought-driven realms of the artworld—art criticism and the philosophy and history of art—look different when directed at street art. I think many art critics evaluate street art by relating it to the history and critical background of institutional art. Critics tend to assess street art in terms of how such work would fare in a gallery or museum setting. Unsurprisingly, such assessments are invariably negative, but they do little more than point out the obvious fact that street art makes bad institutional art. This is not to say that criticism of street art is impossible, or that it must ignore its relation to institutional art. Below, I discuss the relevance of

Barnett Newman's paintings to a specific piece of graffiti.

Street art raises problems for justifications of the museum that appeal to the purported uniqueness and power of the works it contains. Street art is largely ephemeral art that is usually cheap to make, free to experience, and owned and overseen by no one (or, rather, everyone). Museums often contain art that is extremely expensive (to make and own), costly to experience, and overseen by an elite few. One reason for visiting a museum, and a reason to maintain the expansive, expensive, and exhausting network of artworld roles that sustain them, is that what is in the museum is supposedly sufficiently different from what is outside it—it is more powerful, full of complex meaning, more beautiful, challenging, and rewarding than the everyday. This is indeed true of art like *Brillo Box*, which carries a significance that Harvey's everyday boxes lack. But when the everyday includes street art, the reason loses bite. Danto, in a discussion of this very issue, asks what art must be like to justify a newcomer's trip to the museum. He says, "[Y]ou want to make sure that they will not, upon entering the museum, find something that strikes them as just like what they saw on Broadway and 145th Street, for then they will ask what the point of going to the museum was.<sup>15</sup> That question—What's the point of going to the museum?—is especially pressing in the face of a flourishing street art practice.

Not only is street art antithetical to the artworld, but it also is at odds with the Modern vision of art and art criticism. Our definition implies that it is *impossible* to employ solely formalist principles in a critique of street art. The very thing whose use contributes essentially to the meaning of street art, the street, itself has meaning. The doorways, windows, alley walls, dumpsters, sidewalks, signs, polls, crosswalks, subway cars, and tunnels—all have their own significance as *public, everyday* objects. These are shared spaces, ignored spaces, practical spaces, conflicted spaces, political spaces. To make sense of street art, the critic is forced to discuss the significance of a work's use of these inflected spaces. This violates the formalist principle, derived from the principle of aesthetic autonomy, that to appreciate a work of art the critic must attend to its aesthetic features alone. According to our definition, making sense

of street art requires attending to a nonaesthetic feature of the work, namely, its material use of the street.<sup>16</sup>

A formalist critique of a street artwork would not be a critique of it as such. This is not to say that street art is formally uninteresting. (I have already provided examples of formally accomplished street art.) It is to say that strictly formalist art criticism cannot handle street art, in spite of its often dazzling aesthetic qualities.

The ubiquity of these qualities indicates how street art respects at least one formalist tenet. Formalists thought that art should *lift us out of the everyday*. They thought it should have the power to disengage us from our practical concerns and lift us to a higher place of disinterested contemplation—contemplation of art itself, apart from the quotidian concerns of everyday life. Clement Greenberg, the preeminent formalist critic and theorist, made sure he would have such experiences. On gallery visits, he would shut his eyes and have artists guide him to their new works. When he was correctly positioned, he would abruptly open his eyes to bring the work into view and inundate himself with aesthetic stimuli.<sup>17</sup> Greenberg's "pure aesthetic experience" often formed the basis for his critical opinion of the work. One can only wonder whether Greenberg would have preferred to have a stranger jump out at him on the street holding the fresh artwork, flashing it violently before his eyes. He would not even have been thinking *I'm about to look at art; I'm about to look at art*. The experience could not be more "pure" or "unmediated" than that.

Yet this is how street art often enters one's stream of consciousness. Walking down the street, on the way to work, a friend's house, dinner, a bar, a lecture, one haphazardly glances in the right direction and BOOM!—an unsolicited aesthetic injection. One is jolted out of whatever hazy cloud of practical thought one was in; one is forced to reconsider one's purely practical and rather indifferent relationship to the street, and a curiosity to explore the work develops. However, the experience is not, contrary to formalism, the primary ground for a critical opinion. Criticism appropriate to street art requires further consideration of the work's meaning, especially the significance of its use of the street. (The critic, too, must return to the cave.) The aesthetic features of street art





FIGURE 6. Swoon (photograph by Luna Park).

are often guides to that significance. The meaning of street art outstrips the power of its manifest aesthetic properties. There is no necessary tension between a work's beauty and its philo-

sophical, critical, religious, or moral force (see Figure 6).<sup>18</sup>

I defined *street art*, showed that it is deeply antithetical to the artworld, and argued that formalist



principles cannot adequately address it. It follows that street art embodies a response to modernism that is interestingly different from the postmodern, or post-historical, response. Modernism separated art and life. It exalted art to extinction. The post-historical artists corrected this by allowing the everyday a place in the gallery. Art and life were conjoined in the world of art. Consequently, we lost the ability to recognize art by its visual properties; to grasp an object's art status, the story goes, one is forced to consider its possible relations to the artworld. This is not the case for an art practice that rebuts modernism by incorporating art into the everyday. Not only *can* such art retain artistically distinguishing visual properties, but it *should*—if it does not call on the viewer to appreciate it as such, it risks blending into the undifferentiated scene, sinking to the bottom of the fractured stream of life.

### III. GRAFFITI

One might worry that this definition implies that graffiti is not street art. Here is an argument to that effect:

- (1) Graffiti is illegal writing, usually a pseudonym, on a public surface.
- (2) The material use of the street is not essential to the meaning of a piece of graffiti.
- (3) Given the definition of *street art*, then, graffiti is not street art.

The first premise seems intuitively true of graffiti. The second premise is supported by the fact that its location makes no difference to the meaning of a piece of graffiti. It means the same in a public bathroom, on an alley wall, or on a bus. I take it as given that any definition of *street art* that implies that *no graffiti is street art* cannot be right. Thus, if this argument works, then the definition is badly mistaken.

Until now, I have hardly mentioned graffiti. I did this in order to show how diverse street art is today. People unacquainted with the richness of street art tend to equate it with graffiti. They think that (a) street art is graffiti and that (b) graffiti is illegal writing on a public surface (same as (1)), and that (c) all such writing is not art; it is mere vandalism or territory marking. All of these assumptions are wrong. In the previous section, I showed that

assumption (a) is wrong—a lot of street art is not mere graffiti. Street art entertains a wide range of artistic practices, from sculpture to painting, video, and performance. Here I show that assumptions (b) and (c) are also wrong. I thereby show that the premises of the above argument are mistaken. Not all graffiti is mere writing on a surface, but even if it were, its use of the street *can* be essential to its meaning. Not only can graffiti be street art, but it can also be *very good* street art. To make this last point more vivid, I show that, in at least one case, a mere tag—an unadorned name on a surface—is street art of the highest caliber. In doing so, I hope to illustrate one way in which street art criticism can proceed.

Examples, which abound, show that assumption (1) is false. Getting a better sense of contemporary graffiti will help us reformulate (1) and recast the initial argument in its strongest form. Contemporary graffiti artists use media as diverse as paint, chalk, light, video projection, and computer programming. The Graffiti Research Lab, a group of so-called Geek Graffiti writers dedicated to inventing and providing open source technology for graffiti artists, makes graffiti with small, magnetized LED lights called “throwies” because they can be thrown onto otherwise unreachable metal surfaces.<sup>19</sup> They also use powerful lights to shine graffiti onto buildings. Some graffiti artists hack digital road signs to display their own messages. I mentioned earlier that REVS welds metal sculptures of his pseudonym to parts of the city. Those works are largely just metal cutouts of his widely recognized tag, and many consider these sculptures to be graffiti. Graffiti is not always as simple as illegally writing a name on a public surface. Light writing is not necessarily illegal, and REVS's sculptures are not writing on a public surface.

It helps to distinguish two basic kinds of graffiti, *mere graffiti* and *artistic graffiti*. Our opening argument fails to make this distinction. Mere graffiti is really what premise (1) has in mind. It is graffiti that says, “so-and-so was here,” or “Jack loves Jill.” Mere graffiti is not art, so the question of its status as *street art* does not arise. The salient question is whether and when *artistic graffiti* is street art. Artistic graffiti is hard to define, and the boundary between artistic and mere graffiti is certainly vague. Suffice to say that the paradigm case of artistic graffiti is done in a distinctive *style* that originated in New York City in the 1970s and

1980s, and it is created with a distinctive attitude or intention.<sup>20</sup>

The argument that artistic graffiti is not street art now goes: artistic graffiti is public writing in a distinctive style, created with a particular attitude. The material use of the street is irrelevant to its meaning because it can be anywhere and still mean the same thing. Therefore, according to the definition of *street art*, no artistic graffiti is street art.

We need to make a distinction here between *general* and *specific* uses of the street. A *general* use of the street is a use of a public surface for its publicity. A *specific* use of the street is a use of the specific features of a public space. Specific uses of the street are either specific uses of a *type* of street space (for example, a doorway or a brick wall) or specific uses of a *token* space (*this particular* brick wall).<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to imagine how any artistic graffiti that makes a specific use of the street is not street art according to our definition. So the argument that graffiti is not street art must be the argument that *artistic graffiti* that makes a *general* use of the street is not, qua artistic graffiti, street art because its use of the street is not internal to its meaning.

It is unclear whether this argument should bother a proponent of the definition developed here. Even though artistic graffiti that makes a general use of the street is not street art *in virtue of its being graffiti*, some such graffiti is street art in virtue of its significant general use of the street. The use of the street might not be internal to a work's significance *as graffiti*, but it might be internal to its wider artistic significance.

Consider MOMO's *Manhattan Tag*. In 2006, the street artist MOMO made what is likely to be the largest tag ever created. It even has a claim to be among the largest artworks; it is larger than Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, and James Turrell's *Roden Crater*. The artist tagged "MOMO" across the width of New York City with a thin line of paint. The piece starts on the far west side of the West Village and ends in East River Park just south of Houston Street. It is over two miles wide and about one mile high. This is clearly artistic graffiti that makes a general use of the street. MOMO simply tagged the street. It just happens to be very large.<sup>22</sup>

The sheer size of this tag is not the only thing that contributes to its significance. Equally impor-

tant, in my view, is the style, in particular the thinness, of the line he painted (see Figure 7). The vastness of the tag is evident to anyone who pays attention to it, yet any attempt to obtain an all-encompassing vision of it is futile. Any aerial position that allowed one to see the relevant section of Manhattan would be too high to see the thin line. The artist himself has never seen the whole thing. Yet a central goal of tagging is to "get up"—graffiti writers want to make their name as visible as possible to as many people as possible, especially to other writers. It is sweetly ironic that the biggest tag in the world is designed to be invisible in its entirety.

But the significance of this piece outstrips, and outshines, its irony. In a way, MOMO has taken an idea of Barnett Newman's one step further. Newman's large paintings are widely considered to be *sublime*. According to Immanuel Kant, the sublime, to put it overly simply, involves a feeling of displeasure followed by a feeling of pleasure. It is the experience of an object or event that overwhelms the imagination or the senses—the infinite, the power of nature, the vastness of the universe—while recognizing that we can rationally grasp the totality of such things. The pleasure we take in the sublime, according to Kant, is the pleasure we feel in realizing that, although our imaginations are stymied (the source of displeasure), our reason understands. Reason's got Imagination's back.<sup>23</sup>

Newman wanted his large paintings to be experienced up close, so that they take up even the farthest reaches of one's peripheral vision. He wanted the viewer to be overwhelmed by the vastness of the painting; viewed at the appropriate distance, our senses are incapable of taking in the whole thing, resulting in a Kantian feeling of displeasure in our inability to take in the whole thing. This feeling can be overcome by the pleasure felt when we use our reason-laced autonomy to take a step back and view the whole painting, thereby completing the two-course meal of sublimity.

MOMO's piece artfully supplies the feeling of displeasure at our inability to see the whole tag. *But there's no stepping back*, no pleasurable reassurance of our reason's power. Any attempt to bring the entire piece into view simultaneously takes it out of view. One is confronted with the fact that one's senses simply cannot take in this work. What we *can* do is draw the piece out on a map; we can use *Google Maps* to visually imagine the piece. The resulting "feeling of pleasure"



FIGURE 7. (Part of) MOMO's *Manhattan Tag* (photograph by Nicholas Riggle).

would be a pleasure in the power of the *imagination* to recreate the piece in a digital medium—the sublime in the twenty-first century.

The definition proffered here counts as street art *some* artistic graffiti that makes a general use of the street. It does not cover it all. This might bother you. But I think it is the correct result: street art and graffiti are *different arts* that sometimes meet in a single work. Some street art is graffiti; some artistic graffiti is not street art. There is no essential connection between the two. This is not to deny that graffiti and street art have a strong *historical* connection. In fact, a case can (and should) be made that graffiti culture was *the* driving force behind the development of street art. But this strong historical connection does not imply a connection in essence. This shows that street art is just one form of postmuseum art—a category

that includes artistic graffiti.<sup>24</sup> If my definition is correct, then art historians should not just look to early graffiti for street art's predecessors; they should also look to artists whose work materially incorporates the street, artists like Gordon Matta-Clark, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Robert Smithson, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Vito Acconci, and Francis Alÿs, to name a few.

#### IV. PUBLIC ART

In a sense, all street art is public art, since all street art is public. But to what extent is public art street art? Some public sculptures, which are clearly not street art, appear to use the street in a way that is internal to their meaning. Does that make them street art? To address this question, let



us focus on Richard Serra's much-discussed *Tilted Arc*—a large steel slab 120 feet long, 12 feet high, and 2.5 inches thick, placed in the center of New York City's Federal Plaza and widely considered to have been a site-specific sculpture. *Tilted Arc* enraged the public it addressed, and in 1989 it was dismantled against the will of the artworld. Any street artist or street art enthusiast would deny that *Tilted Arc* is street art. Yet, given our definition, there is a simple argument that it is:

- (1) *Tilted Arc*'s use of public space is internal to its meaning.
- (2) By using this public space, *Tilted Arc* uses the street.
- (3) So *Tilted Arc*'s use of the street is internal to its meaning.
- (4) Therefore, *Tilted Arc* is street art.

Premise (3) follows from (1) and (2) by simple logic, and premise (4) follows from (3) and the definition of *street art*. Premise (1) is very difficult to deny. Serra conceived and designed the piece specifically for Federal Plaza, and a National Endowment for the Arts Site Review Advisory Panel concluded that *Tilted Arc* was a site-specific piece.<sup>25</sup> There is a straightforward way to defend premise (2): if Invader put one of his mosaics in Federal Plaza, it would be street art in virtue of its use of the Plaza. So, the use of the Plaza is a use of the street. *Tilted Arc*'s material use of the Plaza, then, is a material use of the street.

There is a quick response to this argument that I would like to set aside, but which is important to note. The response is to point out that Serra's use of the public space did not involve any commitment to the work's ephemerality. The artist fought long and hard to prevent its removal. As a result, Serra did not intend to *use the street* in the relevant sense. This is important to note because the same goes for nearly all public sculpture. Almost all public sculpture's use of the street lacks a commitment to ephemerality, and as a result, none of it *uses the street* in the intended sense.

But still, one can imagine a public artwork that uses the street in the relevant sense. Although Serra tried to prevent the removal of *Tilted Arc*, he could have intended the sculpture to corrode over time.<sup>26</sup> I want to formulate two responses to the argument on the assumption that the quick response is unavailable. The second response together with the quick response constitute a power-

ful case against the opening argument and against any formally identical argument purporting to show that a public artwork is street art.

The first response is to bite the bullet and accept that *Tilted Arc* is street art but sweeten the bullet's taste by explaining why it is exceptionally *bad* street art. One could point out that it looks a lot like the stuff one sees in a museum; that it is really big and poorly incorporated into its environment; that, as a result, it is imposing and obstructive, plain and bewildering; that its use of the street is offensive to those who use it even more. Surely very few pieces of street art are this bad. But, says the bullet biter, that does not mean that it is not street art. *Tilted Arc* is street art, *really bad* street art.

Biting the bullet might be a satisfactory response to *some* arguments that a certain public work is street art, but in the case of *Tilted Arc*, there is too much metal to bite. The other response is to deny premise (2), which is supported by the fact that a typical piece of street art that used Federal Plaza would be street art in virtue of that use. The most salient difference between this imagined street artwork and *Tilted Arc* is that the full range of artworld institutions backed the latter. One might argue that the artworld's involvement with *Tilted Arc* made the work transform the public space it used. *Tilted Arc* drastically changed the geography of the plaza. To those who were not privy to the intra-artworld significance of the sculpture, it was merely an obstructive and imposing feature of the space. The effect was to transform Federal Plaza from a somewhat drab and oppressive empty space to one that was even more oppressive. It transformed it into an artspace.

One might think that the artworld's involvement with *Tilted Arc* has nothing to do with its transformative effect, that its sheer size and position is what changes the nature of the space. But if a lone street artist coyly installed an exact replica of *Tilted Arc* in Federal Plaza, it would not transform the public space into an artspace. The public could do whatever they wanted with the sculpture. They could take it down, write on it, or cut doorways in it. The work would not be merely for the public to reflect upon and exalt. It would be *for the public*, period. The crucial difference really is the involvement of the artworld. *Tilted Arc*, along with the artworld, took over Federal Plaza. Its use of the public space is the use of an

artworld-sanctioned artspace. Arthur Danto expresses this thought in his review of the work: “Tilted Arc,” he says, “is the metal grin of the art world having bitten off a piece of the public world.”<sup>27</sup> What they bit off was the street; what they spit out was a museum-in-public.

The final step in the counterargument is to argue that this artworld-sanctioned and protected artspace is not *the street*. This would be so if no *such* artspace is the street, or if, more sweepingly, no artspace is the street. So what does it take for something to be the street? Whether or not a place is the street depends in part on the way people who inhabit or frequent the place treat it. For a place to be the street, people must treat it *as* the street, which means they must maintain a vague constellation of practical attitudes toward it. It is difficult to say what these attitudes are and which are more central than the others. One important attitude seems to be the consideration of a space as social, as playing a role in the organization and functioning of a society. Another important attitude seems to be the belief that the space is *primarily* public, that it is basically for-the-public. Other conditions must hold as well, such as, for example, that the space must be regularly used by a fair number of people and it must be outside, in a sense.

This is clearly an incomplete answer to the question, but it is enough to carry on with the argument. We need only ask to what extent someone can reasonably maintain these attitudes toward an artworld-sanctioned and protected space. In some cases, it seems quite easy. Tom Otterness’s *Time Square* is a good example. In others, it seems nearly impossible. The *Tilted Arc*–inhabited Federal Plaza is a case in point. In using this public space, *Tilted Arc*, along with the artworld, transformed it into an artspace that resists characterization as the street. Serra was correct in predicting that once *Tilted Arc* was installed, “the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture.”<sup>28</sup>

The response to the opening argument, then, is this: *if Tilted Arc* is street art, then it is at best extremely, almost unrecognizably, bad street art. Some, including myself, will be unwilling to accept that *Tilted Arc* is street art. Those who like the definition proffered here will have to contend with either premise (1) or (2). My response is to argue against premise (2). In addition to the quick response, there is a strong case to be made that *Tilted*

*Arc* is *not* street art insofar as (a) it transforms the public space into an artworld-sanctioned artspace, and (b) no such space is the street. What appears to be a use of the street is no more than the use of public museum space. I have focused on *Tilted Arc*, but the treatment generalizes to all public art. There is a tension between a certain kind of public art that uses the street and street art. Intrusive public art that exudes from the artworld threatens to transform its residence into a museum-in-public and thereby devoid its use of public space of any street artistic significance.

## V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that we should think of street art as all and only those artworks whose use of the street is essential to their meaning. The street can be used as a physical part of the work, or it can be the work’s proper context. In using the street, the artist must incur a commitment to the ephemerality of the artwork, which relinquishes any claim on the work’s integrity. A public space is the street only if it is the object of a certain constellation of practical attitudes, including the belief that the space is primarily for the public.

This conception of street art reveals how street art differs from mere graffiti and artistic graffiti. Some artistic graffiti that makes a general use of the street is street art. Furthermore, much public art is not street art in spite of its apparent use of the street. And although street art flourishes at a comfortable distance from much of the artworld, it is not immune to criticism, though such criticism must be careful not to presuppose principles that might be appropriate only for the critical treatment of institutional art. Street art critics must make sense of how a work’s meaning depends, at least in part, on its use of the street. The definition also supports placing street art in an interesting art-historical position.

Street art embodies the other response to modernism. The post-historical response reformed the artworld to allow the everyday a place in its ranks. Post-historical art rejected the distinction between art and the everyday, between “high” and “low” art, by bringing the everyday into the artworld. Ironically, some of those very objects have become the most vivid symbols of the artworld’s extravagant distance from even the closest outsider. As a response intended to collapse the artificial

distinction between art and life, one has to wonder whether it is a success. Street art embodies a different response—one that truly allows art to join the living.<sup>29</sup>

NICHOLAS ALDEN RIGGLE

Department of Philosophy  
New York University  
New York, New York 10003

INTERNET: nar271@nyu.edu

1. For more of the details of this narrative, see Arthur Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981), and especially *After the End of Art* (Princeton University Press, 1997). The term 'post-historical art' is Danto's preferred term for what many people would call 'postmodern art.' See pp. 11–12 of *After the End of Art* for an explanation. The idea is that the term 'post-historical' better captures the stylistic pluralism of post-1950s art. Even though some "postmodern" artworks are (for the most part) distinctive of this era—the ambiguous, unclear, ugly, and intellectually challenging ones—others are more similar to distinctively modern or even premodern artworks. I will mostly use 'post-historical' in this essay.

2. This will be the running definition of 'the street' until we get to Section IV, where we will have to be more careful.

3. To see a video of these works, go here: <http://videos.nymag.com/video/Street-Art-Joshua-Allen-Harris>.

4. The video is here: <http://vimeo.com/993998>.

5. There is room for disagreement here. Any argument against Muto's being street art has to contend with the vast consensus among practitioners and enthusiasts that it *is* street art (some even claim that it is street art of the highest quality). But even if it is not, then without an argument to the contrary, we should allow that it is at least *possible* for there to be street art that is not physically in the street and construct the definition accordingly.

6. Images of the dumpsters are here: <http://www.cfinley.com/wallpaper.html>.

7. The theme of making the city more habitable, inviting, and friendly is common to a lot of street art. Some neat examples: Roadsworth makes traffic markings more playful. Jan Vormann fills the cracks of old stone walls with colorful patterns of Legos. Bruno Taylor installs swings at bus stops.

8. This suggests that the work of one of the most famous street artists, Shepard Fairey, is ambiguous in an interesting, indeed compromising, way. In the 1990s, Fairey littered the streets with stickers and posters of a stylized image of André the Giant that simply said, "OBEY." But in the early 2000s, Fairey started clothing and marketing companies that use the very same insignia and styles so familiar from his street art. Now the OBEY posters are ambiguous between a commercial plea to buy OBEY products and street art with some other meaning.

9. See chapter 4, "Internal and External Beauty," of Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2003). Danto gives a theory of "internal beauty," or beauty that is essential to the meaning of a work.

10. To be clear, I suppose there *could be* a street artwork that is legal, credited, relatively enduring, and bland,

but such an artwork must be careful not to disrupt the street status of the space it uses. I discuss this further in Section IV.

11. One might mistakenly appreciate a street object as art—it might turn out to be a clever advertisement, trash, or a band's logo. Such is the danger of street art. Furthermore, not all street artists want to achieve this "pop-out" effect. One of my favorite works is a project by REVS. He wrote a series of over 225 autobiographical passages on the walls of underground subway tunnels. The passages are practically unreachable and in the dark.

12. Original appeared in *The Nation*, Jan 12, 1985, pp. 24–27. Repr. in *The State of the Art*, pp. 28–32.

13. Of course, it is not impossible to create some kind of market for street art. One ambitious entrepreneur has sold a Banksy piece on the side of a building *still attached*. The cost: \$407,000. (The BBC news report is here: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7188387.stm>.) Also, artists who are famous for their street art have been successful in showing and selling some of their art in galleries. According to my definition, such work is not street art, even though someone who identifies as a street artist made it.

14. More information about this gallery is here: <http://ctgallery.blogspot.com/>. Also, in December 2006, Wooster Collective helped create a show in a multistory abandoned building at 11 Spring Street in New York City. Over a period of two months, forty-five artists put up their work. The show ran for three days, December 15–17, and was visited by over 6,000 people. After the show closed, all the art was destroyed.

15. Arthur Danto, "Museum and Meringue," in *Embodied Meanings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), pp. 349–362.

16. In a recent article, Jason Gaiger writes, "The rejection of aesthetic autonomy carries with it the danger that art will be assimilated into the institution of the artworld and that its critical function will be paraded as just one further element in the spectacularization of art" (p. 57). This is not true of street art, which rejects aesthetic autonomy and is deeply antithetical to the artworld. See "Dismantling the Frame: Site-Specific Art and Aesthetic Autonomy," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 49 (2009): 43–58.

17. He wanted his first experience of the work to be an experience of it straight on, in full view, with good lighting. He did not want to see it first out of the corner of his eye, or in a photograph, or hear about it from a friend because he thought it would dilute his experience of the work.

18. The (wrongheaded) idea that there is such a tension has been a major assumption behind a lot of twentieth-century theory and criticism. Here is Duchamp expressing the supposed tension: "Since Courbet it's been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone's error. The retinal shudder! Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral." See Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Da Capo, 1987), p. 43.

19. Have a look at <http://graffitiresearchlab.com/>. Video of the "throwies" in action can be found here: [http://graffitiresearchlab.com/LED\\_throwies\\_WEB.mov](http://graffitiresearchlab.com/LED_throwies_WEB.mov).

20. I cannot go into the details of the relevant style and attitude here. Note, however, that artistic graffiti and calligraphy have a lot in common (much more than their etymology). Also, I do not mean to imply that all artistic



graffiti is done in, or influenced by, the New York City style. The Brazilian *pixação* style, for example, is native to Brazil.

21. This is an important distinction that is often elided in discussions of “site-specific” art. Some critics are outraged when a particular “site-specific” work is moved to another location. But it is possible that the work’s specificity requires only that it be in the bottom corner of a gallery or hung near a prominent entryway. That is, it could be specific to the *type* of site it uses rather than the *token* site.

22. More information about MOMO’s work can be found here: <http://momoshowpalace.com>.

23. See the second book, in particular §28, of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

24. Earthworks, or Land Art, would also seem to fall into this category.

25. See *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents*, ed. Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk (MIT Press, 1991).

26. Of course, he did not. He made *Tilted Arc* out of COR-TEN steel, an especially corrosion-resistant metal.

27. Danto, “Tilted Arc and Public Art,” in *The State of the Art*, p. 93.

28. “Richard Serra’s Urban Sculpture,” an interview by Douglas Crimp in *Richard Serra: Writings/Interviews* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 127. (The interview was first published in *Arts Magazine*, November 1980).

29. Thanks to Noël Carroll, Susan Feagin, Cressida Gaukroger, Dale Jamieson, Jeff Sebo, and an anonymous referee for especially helpful comments on this article, and thanks to many friends, especially Hrag Vartanian, for helpful discussion about these issues. Special thanks to Luna Park for generously giving permission to use some of her wonderful photographs.

Copyright of Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.