The Universal Canvas: A Comparative Analysis of Street Art in Buenos Aires and New York City

by

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Class of 2013

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Sociology

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2013
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Acknowledgements

This thesis project would not have been possible without the assistance and support of so many incredible people. I see this thesis as the culmination of knowledge and skills acquired throughout my experience as a Sociology major at Wesleyan, so to all the professors of the department, thank you for inspiring me to attempt my own social research. I must especially thank my thesis advisor, Professor Mary Ann Clawson for supporting me from the moment I handed her my research proposal. Your feedback and advice throughout the entire writing process has been invaluable, and your constant encouragement has helped me more than you know.

I could not have completed my research this summer without the assistance of the Davenport Grant and the Davenport Committee.

To my dear friends in Buenos Aires, Fer and Caro, muchísimas gracias por todo—por dejarme vivir con ustedes y por ayudarme hallar mi coraje (gracias Caro por tu presencia durante algunas entrevistas!). To all of the artists, photographer, bloggers, and members of the street art communities that graciously let me into their world—your words, stories, and insights are what have made this thesis special. I must also mention that the street art of both New York City and Buenos Aires has been my most reliable source of inspiration.

Last but not least I need to thank my family, friends, and peers at Wesleyan. Thank you for encouraging me when I was overwhelmed, and thank you—Heran, Mel, Sydney and Anna—for indulging me with spontaneous silly moments and dance parties when I needed stress release. And Sam, I could honestly not have made it through this process without you.
Introduction

When one visits a large city for the first time it may feel like an overwhelming assault of information. An urban metropolis is wired with hundreds of intricate signs and signals that simultaneously usher crowds of people in different directions. So many sounds and images are all grappling for our attention: “Do not cross”; “Sale today!”; “Get fit in one month!”; “Stand clear of the closing doors”…etc. The noise of a city does not really quiet down the longer one lives there; we adapt by learning how to ignore it. The proliferation of new mobile technology assists in this process—people can stay in their own worlds with their headphones on and eyes glued to a screen. Yet sometimes a mysterious image or message manages to catch the eye and interrupt an otherwise mundane moment. An anonymous piece of art, without any commercial agenda, can transform the way we see public space. Indeed, I think our eyes may be hungry for engaging visual interactions outside of a screen’s frame.

When one has the luck of being in an urban environment where a street art scene is thriving, the metal and concrete geometry of a city transforms into a visual playground. A random voice can intervene in some of the most unlikely places—sometimes a subtle modification of a street sign, sometimes a sculpture installed on a wall—injecting the urban canvas with a jolt of humor or eloquence. Street art can also be antagonistic and confrontational; it can make a passerby double-take when unconventional image or text challenges social or political norms. Once one starts paying attention to these mysterious interventions, it’s very hard to stop looking.

Street art has been prescribed many different definitions, classifications, and justifications. Although it certainly contains roots in the tradition of letter-based
graffiti, it is a distinct artistic practice that also has been inspired by the succession of artists and artistic movements (Pop, Happenings, Post Modernism, Performance Art, etc.) that have reacted against the strict elitist tenets of Modernism\(^1\) (Riggle 2010; Irvine 2011; Lewisohn 2008). The artistic movements of the last fifty years have selectively broken specific tenets of Modernism through the experimental use of materials, content that directly engages with everyday life, and the deconstruction of art as a conceptual experience rather than an object. Some observers argue that street art can be envisioned as the grand finale of this series of progressions away from a grandiose “high society” conception of art (Riggle 2010; Irvine 2011). In the ideal world of street art, the “artist” can be any individual with some free time and materials. The “art” is a spontaneous public installation that is not framed by any institutional body or legitimized by any art authority—it is not an object that can generate any type of commercial exchange. Street art has completely infiltrated the everyday experience.

In this thesis I refer to “street art” as any piece of imagery or text, independent from publicity and advertising, which is installed in a public place. Street art can be either legal or illegal, but it needs to use the street in a way that is crucial to its significance (Riggle 2010; 246). The streetscape can be harnessed to provide a specific context for the art (location and juxtaposition), or the piece can use elements of the street as a material or structural source. Therefore street art is not just art that is placed in the street—its public installation is integral to the significance of the

\(^1\) Here I am referring to dominant reign of Abstract Expressionism in the fine art world during the 1940s. Art critics like Clement Greenberg constructed a narrow vision of the “avant-garde” that championed Abstract Expressionism as the only “pure” form of painting.
piece itself. Street art then, is also a type of public good, which is produced by an individual but “given” to a public place (Visconti 2011: 511). This action effectively relinquishes any form of individual ownership or control—anyone is free to scribble on the piece, buff it, tear it down, or even add to it. Unlike a piece of art in a gallery or museum, street art might last for a few years or it may disappear within a few hours.

The content of street art is not necessarily, or even typically, as innovative as its form. To echo the chorus of media scholars that channel Marshall McLuhan’s statement, “The medium is the message”, street art’s “medium” is essentially a type of public intervention that inspires a host of interesting consequences. The form—or action—of direct intervention in public space has naturally coincided with human civilizations dating back to the Roman Empire, Pompeii, and even the early Egyptian societies (Lewisohn 2008; McCormick 2011). Over the last sixty years street art has appeared in isolated moments of history in conjunction with social movements. During the summer of 1968, the student and worker riots in Paris, France notably deployed a creative eruption of graffiti and mass-produced posters, which added a powerful visual narrative to the development of the revolt (Ross 2002). In the late 1970s and 1980s, several militant art collectives in South Africa initiated the practice of postering and graffiti writing to disseminate anti-apartheid messages and make dissent visible in the face of extreme repression (MacPhee 2009). There are indeed more historical examples of street art being employed for the political aid of social movements, yet after all these political crises subsided, the production of street art also diminished. However the global practice of street art that has developed over the
last twenty years is sustained through a distinct creative impulse that is perpetuated through individual artistic exploration, the construction of urban art communities, and the exposure and interconnectivity of social media. The almost ubiquitous emergence of street art in the context of modern urban societies is an especially fascinating phenomenon that warrants further investigation.

The content of street art and the artists that actively work in the streets cannot be uniformly characterized (Irvine 2011). Even within the setting of one city, street art is produced by a diverse array of individuals and transmits a variety of messages and aesthetics. Unlike many of the contemporary artistic movements that challenged the boundaries and definitions of art from the 1950s onward, street art cannot be united under a particular manifesto or ideology. Informal local and international networks of street art culture have developed with the aid of social media and the Internet. Within these communities certain artists have gained social status and recognition (due to their prolific number of installations, political or social commentary, their unique technique or aesthetic, etc.) yet the reason to work in the street—to paint or not to paint—remains in the hands of the individual artist.

In recent years, the do-it-yourself, malleable public form of street art, now combined with its mass digital form of dissemination, has enabled a subjective appropriation of the medium by individuals in almost every major city around the world. Yet any medium that is digitally connected to the Internet has the capacity of gaining viral attention, so why does the phenomenon of street art deserve attention? Despite a new expansive world of digital outlets for self-expression and public dialogue, individuals (from almost every cultural and economic background one can
imagine) still feel the need to express themselves in this local, subversive, and often illegal art form. What does the proliferation of street art and graffiti suggest about globalized consumer culture and modern political and social structures of the democracy in urban environments? Does street art, through its form alone, have the potential to critically engage urban communities (and digital networks) and challenge cultural hierarchies and industries? More aptly stated, can street art democratize the production of visual art? Or is street art another passing cultural trend, like punk music, that is losing its rebellious quality through the attention of mass media and its trendy appropriation for commercial interests? Is its subversive potential lost in today’s saturated sea of content creation? DIY media (for music, visual art, literature, film, etc.) is more available than ever, and this technology is coupled with the universal public sharing platform of the Internet—where does street art stand in this onslaught of content sharing and publicizing? Can it achieve any of its radical potential through mass decentralized practice or does it require the solid social base of a community or movement to reinforce the ideology of its production and practice?

An Analysis From Pole to Pole

These curiosities are what initially inspired the idea of this thesis. Having never lived in a city until my semester abroad in Buenos Aires, I was initially introduced to street art and graffiti via the Internet. For over four years I have been enchanted by the innovative and creative ways in which street artists incorporate city environments into their art. As an avid drawer and visual art enthusiast, I was also excited by the prospect of an alternative to the contemporary art world—a regulated sphere of presentation and esoteric references that rarely engaged me on an emotional
level. Over the last two years I have been able to spend a significant amount of time in both Buenos Aires and New York City—I was finally able to directly interact with street art in its urban context. I instantly became fascinated with how this art form manifested itself through the unique fabric of each city. I also realized that my understanding of street art was very shallow and one dimensional; street art experienced through a photograph flattens all of its interesting contextual layers.

The six months I spent abroad in Buenos Aires involved many thorough explorations of the city streets. Within a week of being there it became clear that the city was full of art. I had never experienced anything like it—graffiti and street art could literally be found everywhere, from the most amateur stencils to meticulously detailed murals. Public space is constantly utilized by Argentines, whether it’s to express visual art or music, or to organize political manifestations and social gatherings. In Buenos Aires, public expression—even in the visual (and durable) form of graffiti and street art—is not historically attached to any stigma or symbol of criminal activity. Thus my interest in the city’s street art was essentially a lens through which I learned about Buenos Aires and it facilitated numerous experiences and conversations in public space. I also had the fortune of seeing many artists at work, and I even witnessed the inauguration of an international street art festival called the Meeting of Styles.

New York City presents a stark contrast. There are sections of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and tiny areas in Manhattan where one can see street art; however public space is strictly regulated and controlled. Yet New York City is the birthplace of hip-hop culture and graffiti—it is a city with a rich history of artistic innovations and
legacies. Even though a strict legal crackdown on “vandalism” has suffocated many of the spontaneous artistic interventions, it is still a city that attracts the most famous street artists around the world. After spending some time in New York City, the idea of comparing the street art of Buenos Aires and New York seemed intuitive—one of the best ways that I could productively explore my curiosity. Thus in the summer of 2012, I was able to split my time between both cities and dig deeper into the respective street art worlds. I primarily conducted qualitative research structured around observational fieldwork and one-on-one interviews with artists, bloggers, photographers, and other important actors in each scene.

I am choosing to compare the cities of Buenos Aires and New York City, yet this just one example of many possible comparisons that highlights street art’s ability to adapt itself to different urban realities. The form of street art is essentially the same in both cities yet the art operates within a unique social and political context tailored to each city’s history. Everything from social reception to legal classification is distinct. New York, as the proclaimed “birth place” of graffiti (built around the tag), is also a highly developed, contemporary Western city that contains a dense concentration of deeply rooted cultural institutions that dominate the production and distribution of art within the city. Indeed, New York City is one of the “cultural capitals” of the world and thus attracts a diverse array of international art scenes. But any intervention made in public space without permission is illegal—with strictly enforced consequences. The emergence of graffiti occurred during a period of urban decline, thus the popular narrative framed graffiti as symbol of crime and chaos (Austin 2001). Buenos Aires, on the other hand, does not have nearly the same level
of institutional development around its cultural production as New York. *Porteño* culture is still a mixture of informal and formal art worlds that can change character across different neighborhoods. Unlike New York, Buenos Aires has had a tumultuous political and economic history, including a brutally repressive military dictatorship and debilitating economic crises. Nonetheless, Buenos Aires has a long cultural and political tradition of congregating, intervening, and acting in public space. Deep-rooted cultural traditions coupled with the relatively recent freedom from extreme repression have engendered a much more positive social acceptance and political reception of street art.

**Methodology**

Street art is technically illegal in both cities, and its vulnerable presence on the street inherently makes it an ephemeral form of art that changes unpredictably on a day-to-day basis. Given these limiting qualities, I decided it would be more practical to take a qualitative approach that employs the use of in depth interviews and ethnographic observational work. It is easy to get to know the specific style and aesthetic of an artist, yet unlike art in a gallery or museum, a piece of street art is not accompanied by useful informative placards with the date, medium, and artist’s description. Thus interviewing individual artists would allow me to actually hear their story in their own words—how and why they started intervening in the street, how do they conceptualize “art”, how do they rationalize their production of street art, etc.—all of the details that are impossible to uncover without personally knowing the artists. I additionally wanted to hear about their experiences putting up work, how

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2 An adjective that refers to Buenos Aires.
they understand legal limitations, how their style evolved, and if they ascribed to any of these ideologies proclaimed by art and culture critics. My immersion into these communities of artists was incredibly revealing—the evolution of street art tells a complex, multi-faceted story in each city.

Before embarking on the plan of formal research, I already had some personal connections to artists and street art enthusiasts in both cities. When I returned to Buenos Aires in the beginning of June, it was simply a matter of diving in. I employed a type of snowball sampling in which my first few connections then introduced me to more artists to interview. However, I also applied purposeful sampling; it was actually quite easy to find contact information via personal websites, email, blogs, social media (Flickr and Facebook) and even their murals (some artists leave URLs for their websites or even their email addresses). I additionally surveyed the scene through my own systematic walks through the city and online investigations. Of course, a street artist Rolodex does not exist—it is impossible to know how many individuals are actually producing work. Snowball sampling will inherently generate sampling bias, and perhaps my sample does not include artists that represent every distinct subgroup of street art, but I tried as best as I could under my time constraints to contact a diverse range of artists. I left Buenos Aires with twenty-four recorded interviews ranging from one to almost three hours long, and dozens of experiences interacting with different groups of street artists (through tours, gallery shows, studio visits, soccer games, goodbye parties, etc.).

New York City proved to be more difficult to break into as an outsider. However some of the Argentine artists helped me get in touch with a few artists.
active in New York, and using the same contact methods I was gradually able to conduct a series of in-depth interviews. The month that I was able to spend in New York this summer was not nearly enough time to understand the full breadth and complexity of street art (and graffiti) that is tied to over forty years of the city’s history. By the time I had left New York I had conducted nine formal interviews, but I continued to return to the city over various weekends to continue interviewing (reaching a total of twelve interviews). Time was a serious limitation in both cities, so I have supplemented my own research with a serious investigation into the academic and popular literature that discusses street art and graffiti. This supplemental material will also help counteract the fact that this not a longitudinal study and I was therefore only capable of interacting with the artists and documenting the art that was present at that moment. Additionally, I made a point of interviewing individuals who were in some way involved with the documentation and promotion of street art in each city. These individuals usually had a passionate connection to the art and could contribute their observations based on their years of involvement.

After conducting the first few interviews I realized how much I did not know—how many intricate processes go on behind the scenes of street art production. It became clear that the interviews were invaluable in understanding the practical and ideological questions surrounding street art. Almost equally important, time needed to be spent walking the streets of different neighborhoods, observing the art in its original context. Each piece of street art, especially one that required a day or more of work, is attached to a small story that reflects the everyday reality of the city. Street art is intimately connected to its urban context—it (ideally) cannot exist
without it\textsuperscript{3}. Therefore this thesis will attempt to engage the words and work of the artists with the contextual facts that characterize the historical, political, and cultural dimensions of their city.

**The World(s) of Street Art**

Sociologists tend to analyze art in a different way than art historians and critics. “Art” is understood as a modern (and Western) conceptual invention that is intertwined with the politics of maintaining certain ideas of culture and status (Ingles 2005; 12). Howard S. Becker expands upon the complex social production of art in his book, *Art Worlds*, and I will be using his theoretical framework of the “art world” to organize the data I have collected from interviews and observations. According to Becker:

All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can all call an art world (Becker 2008; 1).

The production of art thus requires a social system to navigate everything from the acquisition of materials, to its distribution and social feedback of an audience. An individual artist—even when working anonymously—does not exist in a vacuum. All forms of culture are constructed through a social context.

By analyzing the art worlds that generate street art I will attempt to illustrate how this art form interacts with the different political and cultural layers of each city. A sociological dissection of street art production, through the use of historical and

\textsuperscript{3} A chapter of this thesis will be devoted to how this conception of street art is complicated by its digital form—a photograph that is shared and experienced online.
ethnographic information, will hopefully reveal how street art is actually produced and conceptually understood in urban spaces. Theoretically speaking, a lot of radical potential is contained within the public form of street art, yet each city presents distinctions and contradictions between the theoretical ideals of street art and its actual practice. Indeed, the interviews reveal complex stories of individual and collective struggles to find a satisfying form of artistic expression. Thus this thesis will attempt to harness these individual narratives and historical context, in combination with social theory, to tell the story of an art form that evolves in accordance to the social and political needs of a city. Street art can be a form of cultural resistance, giving a voice to people without political power; it can be a way for people to make their urban community feel more personal and interactive; street art can also be just an aesthetic form of expression that artists will willingly adapt to a commercial or gallery setting. The specific temporal climate of a city will play a crucial role in determining the way in which individuals use street art. The different worlds of street art in Buenos Aires and New York City reflect their distinct political and cultural climates. Perhaps they are in different stages of a street art production cycle that ebbs and flows, depending on the cultural and political dynamics that are presently active.

Thus in Chapter 1, I present an overview of the academic literature that either directly discusses street art or engages with relevant social theory on media and cultural production. This chapter will establish a theoretical framework through which street art can be examined. In order to evaluate the claims that street art creates a “street democracy” and subversively undermines the political and economic
order of the contemporary art world, I will first review the literature that discusses the conceptualization of the “public sphere” and how different mediums influence public debate. The chapter will also investigate different theories of cultural production and how culture interacts with society.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the street art world of New York City. In Chapter 2 I examine the city’s history of graffiti and public expression. The graffiti movement surfaced during a period of serious urban decline, and the timing of this decentralized and visually invasive form of expression was immediately perceived as a threat by city authorities. This history has established the current legal rules and barriers that street artists face, which in turn shapes how this art world operates. The years of antagonism between city authorities and graffiti also informs the social relationships between street artists and graffiti, and their respective connections to the institutionalized art world of galleries. Chapter 3 continues telling the story of how street art evolved, using the qualitative information from interviews and observations to explain the current inner dynamics of the street art world. The interviews revealed that street art in New York has had a strong connection to art galleries for years and street artists must navigate their artistic careers through different platforms of exposure (i.e. street art installed—legally or illegally—in public, studio work sold in a gallery, street art photographed and publicized on the Internet).

Then Chapters 4 and 5 dive into an alternative street art scene found in Buenos Aires. As with New York City, the first chapter discusses the historical context that leads up to the emergence of street art. Political graffiti and public interventions have existed in Buenos Aires for over a century; however its abundance
has waxed and waned in accordance to the political authority in power and the social movements that have reacted to political and economic crises. An aesthetic street art culture also established itself before the aesthetic letter-based graffiti (inspired by the graffiti movement in North American and Europe) gained any sort cultural following in Argentina. Thus the current street art scene discussed in Chapter 5 fills an interesting role in between activist art and letter-based graffiti. Additionally, the cultural value of public expression and the consequently lax laws that patrol public space have enabled street artists to work during the day, in almost any space that they choose. Many street artists are therefore known public figures not just within their neighborhoods, but also throughout the entire city.

In Chapter 6, I analyze the fourth dimension of street art—street art captured in a photograph and publicized on the Internet. This is a dimension that affects both Buenos Aires and New York City—in fact, it is largely responsibility for the rise of international street artist communities and networks. Yet as I personally experienced in the process of my research, photographs of street art online are devoid of the original contextual and political meaning. Simply put, a photograph is not a piece of street art, yet the activity of photographic documentation has built the digital realm of blogs and websites (operated by both fans and artists) which almost all street artists use to archive their work and expose it to a massive audience. I examine how the digital world of street art seems to contradict some of the medium’s ideological tenets (i.e. art for art’s sake or art that derives meaning directly from its local context).
Chapter 1: Literature Review

As a recent international phenomenon, street art has yet to be fully incorporated into academic analysis. Furthermore, street art is a difficult medium to study; it is an ephemeral, decentralized art form, thus every day new pieces are created while others are destroyed. The existing literature on street art predominantly revolves around photo-compilations in the form of celebratory catalogues, with succinct descriptions and occasional quotes from well-known artists. There are also a handful of academic articles and studies on the sociological impact of street art in urban areas, yet there is a clear absence of critical analytical dialogue—which is needed to thoroughly examine what social and political forces are driving this artistic phenomenon.

Therefore before my research is discussed, we must first take a step back and evaluate which theoretical lenses would be most useful for an in depth investigation. This thesis will primarily employ a sociological framework that engages fundamental strains of cultural theory and media studies. My own analysis will primarily focus on street art as a medium. The medium is a type of direct visual urban intervention—“street art” and “graffiti” can be considered genres of this medium. Therefore I will inspect how the medium is produced, how it disseminates information and interacts with different socio-political contexts, and how it shapes communities of producers. First, the concept of “art” is dissected and I will traverse the academic debate over art and culture’s relationship with society—can forms of culture engender social change or will they only serve as tools to reinforce already existing socio-economic structures? Furthermore, is radical content or subversive form more effective in
producing change? These questions then lead to a discussion of the “public sphere” in which academics argue over what is the best medium for public debate, and how participants should be selected. The chapter will conclude by presenting the existing literature that explicitly considers graffiti and street art.

1.1: Art and Society

When discussing the conceptualization of “art”, sociologists rarely consider aesthetic theory. Artistic production is generally perceived as a type of social action that derives its cultural significance through socially constructed values of “beauty” or “creativity” (Ingles 2005). Concepts of visual “art” have evolved over time and been defined differently by societies for hundreds of years. Today, a Euro-American standard of “art” dominates the contemporary art world. This conceptualization of art poses the “artist” as a type of “genius” or “hero”—a construction undoubtedly inspired by individualistic culture (Ingles 2005; 16). Indeed, this belief in an artistic “gift” is a type of mechanism that societies use in order to differentiate between artists and nonartists (Becker 2008; 16). Thus the qualifications for what makes an “artist”, and the standards for “good” or “fine” art are not universal. Aesthetic judgments are “characteristic phenomena of collective activity”, reflective of a society’s cultural values and economic and political context (Becker 2008; 39).

Instead of analyzing aesthetics, sociologists dissect the intricate social, political, and economic processes that shape and affect art worlds. One of the most intriguing debates has hinged on discussing the nature of the relationship between culture and society. A spectrum of opinions has developed over time. On one end is a traditional Marxist analysis which describes culture as a reflection of a society’s
economic relations and political structure (a tool to reinforce social relationships), and on the other is a reversal of the Marxist perspective: culture is a potential actor for social change, yet it can either enlighten and refine society or impose a hegemonic order of values and norms (Alexander 2003). Perhaps the relationship between culture and society is best understood as a dynamic exchange in which culture can both reflect and shape society. Howard S. Becker stresses the importance of conceiving art as a social activity rather than an end product (Becker 2008). As an “activity”, artistic creation involves a host of different processes like production, construction of genres and artistic conventions, education or training, rationale, distribution, and reception. All of these processes might involve different sectors of society and therefore fall under different economic or political influences in either “shaping” or “reflecting” relationships. Artistic activity is too much of a nuanced process influenced by both producers and consumers, to be generalized by a unidirectional relationship (Alexander 2003).

1.2: Cultural Capital and Art Classification

Despite the dynamic exchanges between culture and society, some scholars believe that culture ultimately reinforces socio-economic divisions within society. Cultural production is an intricate social process, but the way in which culture is classified and valued is directly derivative of a society’s class structure. Bourdieu’s definitions of “cultural capital” and “social capital” have become popular references for many works of cultural theory. He utilizes these concepts to describe how “taste” (cultural preferences and self-regulation) is a direct physical and mental manifestation of how an individual understands their social class. An individual’s taste articulates
their social class, and thus operates as a set of practices and behaviors that ultimately maintains class hierarchy. Thus the division between “high art” and “low art” is in no way arbitrary. It perpetuates a social division between classes by creating social worlds that require a specific education (cultural capital) and economic status (economic capital) to enter (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu’s analysis of culture is perhaps most exemplified by the world of visual art.

Indeed, Paul DiMaggio produced an important piece of theory on the systems of artistic classification built on Bourdieu’s understanding of culture and distinction. In the article, “Classification in Art”, DiMaggio claims that “we cannot afford to take artistic categories as given or to treat taste as exogenous” (1987; 442). Thus DiMaggio introduces the concept of an “Artistic Classification System” (ACS), which defines and separates genres of art based on the behavior of consumers and the influence of artistic institutions. The concept of the ACS recognizes how both the “taste structure of a population” and the “structure and distribution of cultural goods” inform culture’s relationship with society. Yet the strength of the ACS depends on several important factors: the extent to which art genres are institutionalized; hierarchical rankings of prestige; the universality of classifications across all the subgroups of a population; the extent to which these boundaries are “ritualized” (1987; 442). However, one of DiMaggio’s concluding observations was that the Western world “has entered a period of cultural declassification—the unraveling and weakening of ritual classifications. Artistic classification systems are becoming more differentiated and less hierarchical, classifications weaker and less universal” (1987;
452). He attributes part of this conclusion to the increasing frequency of artists rebelling against the confines of “genres” and the expectations of “high art”.

Over the last fifty years, art history is indeed marked by a series of artistic movements that have consistently redefined the role of “art” and the “artist” in society. The art world has also been impacted by globalization and a new era of connectedness in almost all spheres of life—politics, economics, culture, communication, technology, etc. “Global art” is the present focus of international exhibitions and biennials; the art market now pulsates through a global audience that has a new hunger for “different” art (Belting 2009). In some ways the emergence of global art is another phase in the evolution away from the highly specific and exclusionary concept of Modernism that peaked with Abstract Expressionism. As a result, more voices are being heard and artists outside of the Western world are finally receiving serious attention. Globalization has also disseminated the cheap and accessible mediums of digital media—the new “democratic” platform of expression (Belting 2009; 16). Cultural and technical barriers that once maintained a specific form and aesthetic of art (and artist) are continually being broken. However, skeptical critics like Hans Belting have observed: “The planterization of information may have removed old borderlines but the same media make old and new contrasts even more visible” (Belting 2009; 22). Indeed, the previous issues of Eurocentrism, the often problematic presentation of “other” non-Western cultures, the aesthetic autonomy of individual artists, and the economic backstage that runs the art world (and ultimately decides what achieves visibility) are all problems that can be exacerbated by globalization.
1.3: Cultural Resistance

The extent to which culture is capable of challenging dominant authoritative institutions is doubted by academics like Marx, Bourdieu, and DiMaggio. Yet there are others who claim that culture can be radically progressive and provoke a range of social impacts. “Cultural resistance”, as defined by Stephen Duncombe, can take on various different forms and roles. Depending on the specific context and political intention, cultural resistance can be the production of a type of content or the form of culture itself can be a mode of political expression (2002; 8). Cultural resistance can also be defined as an interpretation of culture or an activity—or the action of producing culture (especially in a politically repressive environment). Duncombe also maintains that the scale of cultural resistance and its subsequent effect on society is best seen as a spectrum of possibilities, ranging from individual subconscious activity that serves as an escape or haven from reality to a full-blown revolution that completely “rewrites” political discourse and “thus political practice” (2002; 8). It is debatable if culture alone can be a force of social change, yet types of cultural production can certainly assist the visibility and impact of social movements. In her analytical study of visual art in social movements, Jacqueline Adams argues that movements can utilize art “to carry out framing work, mobilize resources, communicate information about themselves, and, finally as a symbol of the movement. Art arouses emotions in people, useful in all these functions” (2002; 22). Art and other types of cultural production can also play a critical role in making a marginalized group visible, or by breaking the silence of a society engulfed by repressive authoritarian forces.
Despite the clear potential of cultural resistance to enact social change, more critical observers question its efficacy. After all, the main hegemonic economic and political institutions have barely changed over the last fifty years. Capitalism is still the dominant economic system, overseeing all international political activity. Even in his own enthusiastic exploration of the “zine revolution”, Stephen Duncombe takes a moment to critically evaluate the impact of subversive culture:

“No longer is there a staid bourgeoisie to confront with avant-garde art or a square America to shock with countercultural values; instead there is a sophisticated marketing machine which gobbles up anything novel and recreates it as product for a niche market…The underground is discovered and cannibalized almost before it exists” (1997; 6)

Once popular attention is turned towards a new cultural phenomenon—even if the core values of the new counterculture contradicts consumerism—corporations have an uncanny knack for absorbing the new culture and transforming it into a marketable fad that feeds the constant demands of mass culture. The status quo is not challenged.

1.4: DIY and Subcultures

Walter Benjamin reached the same conclusion as Duncombe in the 1930s. In his analysis of the relationship between the content and form of media, he asserted that the “bourgeois apparatus of production and publication” was incredibly efficient at digesting revolutionary content without threatening its own existence as the dominant class (Benjamin 1934; 74). Therefore the only way for the culture to have a revolutionary effect on society is if the “author as producer” controls the cultural production in his or her own terms. This seizure of control is in itself a subversive political act because it “transcends” the specialization of production in a capitalist system—consumers can also be producers and spectators can also be collaborators.
The “author as producer” disturbs the division of labor and the hierarchy of class control over culture. Benjamin’s argument is clearly rooted in Marx’s theory of social relationships: “Social conditions, as we know, are determined by the condition of production” (1934; 69). Thus perhaps culture could react against the propagation of false consciousness and inspire social change, if its means of production were in the hands of the masses—media created from the ground up. Therefore Benjamin celebrated the arrival of photography and film—mediums of art that undermined the “aura” of the artistic object. The specificity and “authentic” presence of the art object that was intensely ritualized in high art circles is inherently challenged by this new medium that facilitates reproduction (1936). Photographs and film are reproducible, the “original” photograph does not have an “aura”. Free from the ritualization of “unique” art objects, Benjamin saw photography as a means for changing the perception of art and democratizing the production and distribution of art and culture (1936). In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin was perhaps the first promoter for DIY culture.

If “the medium is the message”, as Marshall McLuhan famously stated, then do-it-yourself production certainly conveys a salient political message. DIY production of art directly challenges the professionalization of culture and thus the institutionalized paths of learning (art school) and artistic careers (art galleries and the art market), which ultimately construct culturally “legitimate” artists. In contrast, DIY suggests that any individual can produce content as long as they have the time and materials available. However, DIY cultural production would not pose a significant threat to hierarchical cultural authorities and the hegemony of mass media.
if it solely consisted of random individuals producing their own culture in isolation—content needs an audience and social reinforcement.

Specific forms of DIY culture like zines or punk rock music became their own art worlds by generating an entire subculture to socially reinforce its production and distribution (Duncombe 2001). In his observations of the punk subculture, Stephen Duncombe claims that “The ideal of do-it-yourself arose out of necessity within the punk movement…You did-it-yourself because no one else out there was doing it” (2001; 119-120). Subcultures can indeed become insulated social worlds that present a real alternative to the corporate control of mass media and the elitist worlds of high art. Within these worlds, DIY subcultures can also challenge the norms of consumerism and the conception of culture as a commercial product. Individuals can produce culture without attaching a commercial value to their creation, therefore engendering more intimate and personal producer-to-consumer relationships. In the zine world for instance, zine writers are generally lucky to break even in their zine “sales”—but instead of being limited by the competitive race for profit, they can forge real relationships and exchanges with other zine writers or readers (Duncombe 2001).

DIY subcultures center around the practice of appropriating dominant culture and recreating a new subversive relationship to it (Duncome 2001). It is this action—the underground production of art—that unites individuals within the community. It is indeed as Walter Benjamin wanted: a progressive culture that transcends the bourgeois process of production. The “centrality of the medium” produces new social relationships (Duncombe 2001; 127). Regardless of the content created, it is
the form of production that generates political and social significance. The DIY form that operates independently from any institution, gives individuals the freedom to produce whatever they want. However, as Duncombe observed above, subculture after subculture has been gobbled up and dismantled by outside commercial forces. Obviously, zines and punk rock music did not overthrow the still dominant system of mass cultural production. Subcultures embody the idea of an interactive medium of discourse that is autonomous from political and economic superstructures, yet they cannot exist in complete isolation from the rest of society. DIY subcultures prove that alternatives to hegemonic culture exist and can start from the ground up—but so far they have only proved to be bubbles that eventually burst open into the mainstream.

1.5: The Public Sphere and Mass Culture

Analyses of street art are frequently framed by a discussion of public space; it is a medium that enables an individual to make a visual statement in a space shared by all. Thus street art has been described as a type of social “reflex” against the visual pollution of advertising and the privatization of public spaces, an “intuitive rebellion against the assumption that the rules of property take precedence over the inherent rights of free use and self-expression” (McCormick 2011; 23). Yet why is public space so important—especially in today’s world of Internet “democracy”? If street art reflects a visceral social need to “reclaim” public space, then what is missing from public debate if hundreds of thousands of individuals feel the need to break the law in order to express themselves? How contemporary society is falling short of maintaining a democratic public sphere?
In discussing the ideal manifestation of the public sphere, scholarly literature tends to revolve around two critical questions: who are the participants, and what is the medium of discussion. In one vein of thought, a host of scholars fear the effects of mass culture on public debate, preferring a public sphere built on more intimate, small-scale circles of intellectual discussion. In this view, discussions are ideally conducted through direct exchanges of literature or oral discussions. Mediums like television and the Internet have triggered an overload of content creation, thus flooding productive discourse in a sea of entertainment and distraction. Others contend that the nostalgia for literacy circles or public town debates as the ideal form of a public sphere is inherently elitist and only allows a privileged portion of the population to participate. Public discussion can only be free from the economic and political forces if it is channeled through a medium that is decentralized and controlled from the bottom up (i.e. the Internet).

Jürgen Habermas was one of the most important theorists who articulated an ideal construction of the public sphere. His ideal public sphere was specifically a “bourgeois public sphere”—a community of intellectuals that host a dialogue free from the influence of the State and the economy (1991). Individuals would put aside personal differences and enter this sphere as equals. For Habermas, this type of public sphere is best exemplified by the intellectual gatherings in coffee houses and private salons, or the old tradition of literary circles. However, the emergence of mass media and consumer driven culture began privatizing these forums of debate, invading public discourse with the commercial priorities of capitalism. Thus for the sake of sales and convenience, critical media like literature is converted into a
consumer product that is less intellectually demanding, and the “public debate” now flows in one direction to the mass of passive consumers (Habermas 1991).

Many scholars followed Habermas in professing their fears about the transformative powers of mass media. If the public sphere is to fulfill its duty as the “very balance wheel of democratic power”, then C. Wright Mills proposed that within public discourse there must be a free “ebb and flow of discussion”; a reciprocal ratio of givers and receivers of information; the ability to easily answer back in discussion; the tangible possibility of discussions leading to actions; and—as Habermas stressed—a freedom from institutional authority (1956; 298). Mills also observed the “transformation of public into mass”, which occurs when the previously stated conditions are not met and society therefore becomes structured around an institutionalized public discourse controlled by an elite group (1956; 301). The “mass media” thus destroys the individual’s ability to engage in debate and feel any connection to their political representative; the flow of information and ideas streams in one direction, without competition or challenge. Mills ultimately perceived the mass media as a manipulative tool of control that converts the public into a docile mass, thus preventing the possibility for social change (1956).

Even without the complications introduced by new mediums of communication, contemporary society—especially in the United States—seems far too diverse and split amongst socioeconomic categories like race and class to compose the type of public sphere Habermas and Mills wanted. Nancy Fraser provides one of most comprehensive critiques of this idealized “public sphere”, asserting that it is first and foremost impossible to create a space free from the social
inequalities present in society (1990). The public sphere as defined by Habermas was exclusionary and elitist, and rested on the false assumption that only one concentrated public was ideal for democracy. Fraser argues that diversity actually strengthens democracy, and because culture is inherently stratified, having multiple “publics” might actually be more effective and inclusive.

Even though Mills and Habermas were writing during the 1950s and 1960s, their observations continue to resonate in the minds of more contemporary theorists who cringe at the advents of the television and Internet. Over the last fifty years, critics contend that public discourse has continued to stray away from this ideal “public sphere” of direct, uninhibited, and interactive dialogue between individuals with common concerns (as dictated by Mills and Habermas). In the face of new technologies, speech and the written word have been heralded some analysts like Neil Postman, as the most honest, linear, and rational mediums of communication. In Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, Postman argues that the form of media plays a crucial role in structuring public discourse. Therefore the current trend of mass media—moving from typography to television, and from localized publications to mass broadcasting—was essentially a devolution from critical literary debate to mindless entertainment (1985). Postman contends that television’s form, its technological structure, is predisposed towards a specific use and a certain style of communication. The visual component of television automatically gears the medium towards “emotional gratification” and an automatic departure from communication based on the linear and rational logic of text-based mediums.
Postman wrote this commentary during the 1980s, before the arrival of the Internet. However this digital medium of rapid information sharing and instantaneous communication is perhaps changing public discourse and social relationships more than the advent of television. It is also a medium that evolves at an expeditious pace; every year there are new communication technologies that alter the relationship between producers and spectators. In 2007, Todd Gitlin published *Media Unlimited*, a critical analysis of the new digital forms of media that bombard society with a “supersaturation” of information. Gitlin argues that the explosion of information available in combination with ease and speed of communication does not facilitate a revival of a public sphere or create a space for critical dialogue. Instead we live our daily lives inundated with an “information overload”; our full attention is almost impossible to capture (2007; 67). Today the “commons explodes with private signals”, private amusements are now portable with devices like mp3 players and cell phones, and individuals can literally be in their own worlds throughout their daily navigations throughout public and private space (2007; 59).

The advent of new digital technologies does not necessarily signify the destruction of the “public sphere” and all hope for critical public discourse. The explosion of content creation facilitated by social media and accessible recording technology has caused some academics to celebrate a new digital “public sphere”, while others dread drowning in directionless noise. In the 2000s, the practice of blogging rose to popularity, and it was one of the first online DIY technologies that enabled any user to broadcast their writing to an unlimited audience. Analysts like Yochai Benkler claim that the Internet has given birth to a “networked public sphere”
that has fundamentally restructured public dialogue. The free and accessible publication and production outlets (like blogs and other media sharing platforms) have challenged the unidirectional authority of mass media and has thus permitted dialogue to flow in multiple directions (Benkler 2006; 212). Benkler additionally argues that individuals absorb media less passively if know they have an actual outlet to respond: “We are witnessing a fundamental change in how individuals can interact with their democracy and experience their role as citizens…They are no longer constrained to occupy the role of mere readers, viewers, and listeners. They can be, instead, participants in a conversation” (2006; 272). The Internet provides new tools and possibilities that have not previously been available.

But what if, as Giltin observed, this explosion of amateur content creation has just added to the “clutter” contaminating both public and private life (2001). Jodi Dean is very critical about new digital culture of blogging and social media. In Blog Theory, Dean claims that it is a mistake to see networked media practices as an inherent “hack” or disruption in the status quo; blogs and social media “rather emerge and persist as components of a vast commercial entertainment culture that has found a way to get the users to make the products they enjoy and even pay to do it” (2010; 37). She points to the corporate takeover of blogging practices, and how the market has successfully incorporated networked interactions with consumers as a way to create more specific niche markets: “The dominance of capitalism as a system requires changes in industry; innovation drives capitalism” (2010; 39). Furthermore, in her analysis of content created by network activity, she notes that the interactions between users should not be considered constructive dialogue: users add information
that is “additive rather than supportive”; “elements of thoughts are aggregative rather than analytical” (i.e. memes and other viral media); and “ideas and points are frequently repeated” (2010; 48).

DIY media is now available more than ever, yet it is disputable whether or not the opportunities created by these new media outlets have been organized or channeled in a way that can build a mass “public sphere” powerful enough to challenge political and economic authorities. Yet in the case of cultural production, the broadcasting capabilities provided by digital network has had a catalytic impact on artistic movements like graffiti and street art.

1.6: The Graffiti Subculture and Career

The graffiti movement that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s in New York City was an important type of DIY subculture that laid the groundwork for street art. The academic literature on graffiti tends to focus on the social organization and construction of rules and conventions within this insular “outsider” community (Snyder 2009; MacDonald 2001). Ethnographic evidence makes it difficult to generalize about the characteristics of graffiti writers (from the 1980s and onward)—they come from various ethnic and economic backgrounds and lack a unified ideology or rationale behind the action of graffiti writing Snyder 2009; MacDonald 2001). Nancy MacDonald stresses the importance of this fact, contenting that the motivation to write graffiti with such dedication (despite extreme legal risks) can only be explained by in individual passion—some personal drive—not a blanket ideology of “rebellion” (2001). Thus the graffiti subculture is primarily bound by a shared passion for writing: “…these young people’s identities are largely constructed from
their achieved status as writers rather than from an ascribed status imposed upon them by the larger society” (Snyder 2009; 2).

Consequently, graffiti communities are structured by a meritocracy in which one’s social reputation acts as a type of currency, earned through hard work (Chalfant and Cooper 1986; Snyder 2009; Mason 2008; MacDonald 2001). Through the competitive dynamics of this meritocracy and the social support of the community, graffiti writers motivated one another (and pushed back against the escalating legal crackdown) to get their name up everywhere and innovate new styles of tags. These social forces led to the development of a graffiti “career” which has enabled many artistically “untrained” writers to have professional careers as studio artists, graphic designers, tattoo artists, web designers, etc. (Lewisohn 2008; Mason 2008; Snyder 2009; MacDonald 2001). The graffiti “career” is thus a series of personal and artistic progressions in which writers usually start as teenagers, primarily focused on “bombing” and “tagging” (making their name famous), then gradually “maturing” into writers more focused on style and quality—thereby moving away from the initial illegal practice into the legal world of hired work and commissions (Chalfant and Cooper 1986; Snyder 2009; Mason 2008; MacDonald 2001). As writers get older they feel more weight from their legal and economic responsibilities, and illegal graffiti becomes a less feasible activity. The graffiti “career” proved that urban youth who broke the law and had zero formal artistic training, could catch the eyes of galleries and businesses. Gregory J. Snyder even claims that graffiti is a “democratic art form”: “With desire, dedication, humility, courage, toughness, and most of all
hard work, anyone can potentially become a successful graffiti writer, and maybe even make a living as a result” (2009; 5).

Thus graffiti writers were the first group to demonstrate that street interventions could be the beginning of an artistic career. However once they stepped into the gallery or made commercial work, they left the subculture, painting for a new audience (Macdonald 2000; 90). Yet as a form of public intervention, graffiti was already exposing itself to an audience beyond its own subculture; graffiti is visible to everyone whether they like it or not. Graffiti writers essentially advertised their talent and demonstrated the power of publicly establishing a name. Before the advent of the Internet and social media, graffiti writers were subverting advertising techniques, making their own brands (the “tag”) that invaded both public and private spaces (Mason 2008; 106). Graffiti writers explicitly want attention from everyone: “Fame, respect, and status are not naturally evolving by-products of this subculture, they are its reason for being and a writer’s sole reason for being here” (Macdonald 2000; 68).

Today’s street art communities mirror some of the social dynamics and strategies of graffiti. Graffiti—especially in New York City—was (and still is) a powerful voice that has established a crucial precedent for working in the street.

1.7: The Rise of Street Art

Although most critics and academics agree that graffiti was the “natural” predecessor of street art, the emergence of street art was a simultaneously local and international phenomenon (Lewisohn 2008; McCormick 2010). The concept of aesthetic urban interventions (illegal and legal) was already popularized internationally in the 1980s through mainstream globalization of hip-hop culture.
The origin of “street art” is difficult to pinpoint; its evolution is hard to track because it is much more inclusive than graffiti. Street art can be made from literally any material (not just aerosol), and can range in format—from posters, to murals, to sculpture installations. In general, street art also lacks a cohesive subculture, even in most local contexts. Furthermore, street art has not been attached to a specific identity, style, music, dance, or any other dimension of cultural representation. It is clear however, that street art really began to explode internationally during the early 2000s (Lewisohn 2008; Irvine 2011). Most literature on street art narrowly focuses on its international impact and the ideologies that its form seems to embody. This body of literature also tends to highlight internationally renowned street artists like Banksy and subsequently feature little discussion on the specific artists and dynamics of local scenes.

Perhaps street art exploded so rapidly and has received positive press because it is a genre more focused on aesthetic pictorial interventions, rather than the repetition of a name and the aggressive tagging of space. The skill, detail, and creativity of street art can sometimes rival the quality of art found galleries or museums, and it undermines the normative expectation that high quality art must be designated to and protected by “art spaces” (Riggle 2010). In an argument based primarily on aesthetics, Nicholas Riggle contends that unlike graffiti’s repetitive action of tagging without regard for place, street art differentiates itself from graffiti in its artistic use of the street in a way that is “internal to its meaning” (2010; 246). In other words, the specific context of place shapes the art itself. Additionally, most authors agree that because street artists include both formally trained and untrained
individuals, street art draws inspiration from the DIY, confrontational nature of graffiti along with the genres of contemporary art (McCormick 2010; Irvine 2011; Riggle 2010).

In further investigations of street art’s form, most analyses involve a discussion of public space. From one idealistic perspective, street art has been theorized to foster a type of “street democracy”. In one of the only ethnographic studies of street art, Luca M. Visconti (et al.) interviewed both the dwellers and street artists of multiple cities in an attempt to understand how street art is consumed as a type of public good (2010). They concluded that there are multiple aesthetic and political dimensions of street art that city “dwellers” consider. They suggest that the precise location of the piece, its physical form, and its ideological intention were the most influential factors. Ideally, street art can be a creative type of “civic participation” that encourages individuals in an urban community to instigate public dialogue outside of the traditional, institutionalized political framework (Visconti 2010: 512). A “street democracy” is thus a public arena that “refuses both the excesses of the appropriation of public space by single individuals and the lack of conscious consumption…relates to the set of rights and duties that citizens have in democratic political settings” (Visconti 2010: 520). Yet their results demonstrated that public opinion on street art was far from unanimous. Street art can certainly be an eyesore. If anyone can produce street art, then there certainly will be pieces that are less pleasing to look at. This is of course, a debate of the “public sphere”—will the public actually benefit from the surge of content if everyone is allowed and encouraged to contribute?
While some analyses conceptualize street art as a potential solution to the void of a “public sphere” in many urban environments, others celebrate street art as a type of cultural liberation from the commercial and elitist world of contemporary art institutions (Lewisohn 2008; Irvine 2011; Ganz 2004). Given the autonomous nature of street art, artists are free to utilize any content or material they choose. Content-wise, street artists tend to remix different forms of pop culture with the spice of their own imagination (Irvine 2011). Consequently, street art often contains content that is accessible to a larger audience than the more esoteric work of contemporary art in a museum or gallery (Riggle 2010). Indeed, Will Ellsworth-Jones argues that Banksy’s rise to fame was partially due to the fact that his art is conceptually straight-forward and representational (2012). The art world maintains its boundaries between “high” and “low” art through the intricate application of theory—art that conceptually relies on an understanding of art history (Ellsworth-Jones 2012; 293). Yet one does not need the cultural capital of an art history degree to understand most pieces of street art. To be sure, street art does not aim to perpetuate any social or cultural boundaries by exclusion—it is a form that attempts to directly interact with whoever happens to pass by (Irvine 2011).

Despite the exciting implications of street art, there is a lack of specific evidence and research to support these claims. In addition to the lack of attention paid to local street art worlds (to investigate how street art operates in its specific context), there is also little written about street art as a digital form of art, and how its presence on the Internet affects local and global street art communities. Unlike graffiti and perhaps any other artistic medium, street art co-evolved with the Internet
and social media. In his discussion of street art’s evolution, Matt Mason explains that photography and digital documentation has dramatically amplified the audience of street art, even if the piece only lasts a few hours: “The new way to achieve status is virally, via the information superhighway, so street art can afford to be more temporary than ever” (2008: 121). The role of the Internet is generally acknowledged by street art literature since it has created a “global web museum” (Irvine 2011; 10), yet it is rarely analyzed critically or compared to its physical form. Matt Irvine claims that street art’s presence in the digital world reflects the current “read-write” culture: “street art presupposes the global remix and reappropriation of imagery and ideas transferred or created in digital form distributable on the Internet” (2011; 19). However, what does this imply about its local, physical form? The “viral” road to fame that various street artists have achieved seems to contradict the ideology surrounding the artist’s motives for place-based intervention. It is quite possible that an artist could attain international fandom through viral media without establishing any meaningful connection to their local urban context. Viewing a photo of street art is not the same experience as the surprise stumble-upon-moment on a city street. Nevertheless, instead of only a handful of people seeing a piece, a photo on the internet can by seen by thousands around the world. It also exposes this genre of art to people who do not live in urban environments—this is precisely how I first started to observe street art.

1.8: My Objectives

First and foremost, this thesis will hopefully fill in part of the absence of
analytical work on street art. The ethnographic information obtained from in depth interviews and observations will provide an insight into the actual lives and perspectives of street artists. As I discovered in both Buenos Aires and New York City, street artists represent a diverse social body of individuals with distinct lives and opinions. The two contrasting urban environments will also allow me to explore how street art’s social reception and political role changes through its interaction with different cultures and political histories. Secondly, the academic debates discussed above (the relationship between society and culture, the most “democratic” medium and for public discourse, and the efficacy of cultural resistance) reflect the contradictions between theory and practice in street art, so I bring these theories into dialogue with my research. In conclusion, I additionally discuss how presence of street art on the Internet affects the street art communities of New York and Buenos Aires. The street art phenomenon can be used as a lens to examine a host of cultural and political issues that affect urban environments and the production of visual art. This thesis does not have the capacity to explore every dimension of street art; what follows is primarily an investigation into street art as an artistic medium.
Chapter 2: New York City and the Battle Public Space

It is impossible to neatly summarize all that is pulled into the gravity of New York City. It is a densely populated city of nearly nine million people, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world, and it is a place that has accumulated a long tradition of cultural folklore of both romantic and cynical character. New York City is a global city, the center of Wall Street and consequently some of the most powerful international corporations in the world. It is also home to some of the world’s most influential cultural institutions like Broadway and its world famous art museums and galleries. New York is also simply a physical site that has witnessed some of the most important political and cultural events in United States history—the attacks of September 11th, Occupy Wall Street protests, the Harlem Renaissance, etc. The city has come to embody a type of stage with an international broadcast. It is within the belly of this urban giant that graffiti as a movement started.

In order to understand how street art interacts with specific urban communities, one must first comprehend the societal relationship of graffiti—which almost always exists before the development of street art. Graffiti, like street art, is a visual form of public intervention, however because it predominantly features letters or words in the form of a “tag”, it is not as commonly perceived as “art” (Lewisohn 2008). Graffiti had an international resonance as early as the late 1970s, but it was the location of New York City, as well as the timing of its appearance, that made graffiti so significant to modern urban societies around the world (Austin 2001). In

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4 Graffiti as a cohesive movement started in New York City, but “Cornbread” from Philadelphia is frequently cited as one the first graffiti writers that initiated the practice of tagging (Gastman and Neelon 2010; 48).
the city that perhaps best symbolizes the triumph of capitalism, private property, and the commercialization of culture, a subversive medium emerged from the neglected ghettos and suddenly exploded onto every visual surface of the city.

In Joe Austin’s historical analysis of graffiti, he asserts that graffiti was nurtured into its role as a powerful medium of defiance—it was not inherently imbued with this cultural significance (2001). Graffiti appeared at a time of intense urban decline in which many of the structural and economic issues of New York became vulnerably transparent. This context certainly fueled the aggressive writing of graffiti, but graffiti was also reciprocally transformed into a symbol of chaos and failure by the city authorities and mass media. The antagonistic relationship between graffiti and authority was a crucial factor in the evolution of graffiti as an aesthetic movement, and the development of society’s relationship with graffiti (Austin 2001). Years later, when street art asserts itself as a new artistic medium, its development as an art world is informed and conditioned by the social relationships already established by graffiti and its pre-existing subculture.

2.1: The Birthplace of Graffiti

The act of marking public walls has been a feature of human civilizations for centuries. Yet the practice of “tagging” or “bombing” one’s name (usually an invented pseudonym) in obsessive repetition is what defined “graffiti” as a contemporary movement. These tags started popping up in New York City during the late 1960s, even before spray paint was available (Cooper 2008). At first these tags were concentrated in a few neighborhoods like Washington Heights, yet after Taki 183—a Greek teenage bike messenger—became the first “all-city” writer, the
practice of writing graffiti exploded and invaded all areas of New York City. Every piece of literature on graffiti, and every graffiti writer that I interviewed, mentions the article published in the New York Times in 1971—“Taki 183” Spawns Pen Pals. This was the first time graffiti was formally recognized by the mass media (Gastman and Neelon 2010; 57). As Fernando Romero (“Ski”) expressed in our interview:

“Graffiti got recognition the day when the article about Taki 183 dropped—that one article catapulted graffiti...When that article was published, kids all over New York City thought to themselves: ‘Wait a minute—if do this, graffiti, I could be in the papers?’” (Interview on August 18, 2012). In 1971 however, graffiti was still not perceived as a “major crime”: as it began to spread onto the subway cars the Transit Authority could not take any serious legal action because graffiti was only classified as a “violation” (Gastman and Neelon 2010). In an era before the Internet and the mass dissemination of communication technologies, attracting media attention was a difficult feat. The Taki 183 article was especially significant because it featured a teenager from Washington Heights—a voice that was almost always ignored. As a result of the New York Times article, Taki 183 proved that graffiti had the potential to be a powerful voice that not only attracted the attention of city authorities, but the mass media as well.

During the 1960s and 1970s, New York City—the famed “Big Apple” and utopian “Capital of the Twentieth Century”—was facing a period of division and decline (Austin 2001). Joe Austin’s analysis of graffiti in New York emphasizes the importance of the historical frameworks that were already in place when graffiti emerged. In recognizing the social complexity of such a diverse city, Austin argues
that there are two competing “mass-mediated public framing stories” through which
New York is understood (2001; 10). There is the utopian vision of New York as the
“Cultural Capital of the World”, and then there is the “Naked City”—the harsh and
cruel dystopia of urban decline: “The Naked City marks the city limits of the New
Rome. The Naked City makes the New Rome possible. The New Rome is built on
across the Naked City’s back” (2001; 13). One of the quintessential symbols of the
Naked City was the image of criminal youth, and the first graffiti writers were young
teenagers from poor neighborhoods (2001; 33). Perhaps predictably, graffiti was
almost instantly framed as a tool of criminal activity and destruction.

As hyperbolic as the vision of the “Naked City” appears to be, it was based on
very real structural problems that New York City was facing in the 1960s-1970s.
Cities all across the United States were in a dramatic period of transition after the
industrial boom of the World War II era. According to Tricia Rose, this “transition”
was devastating the urban working-class:

In the 1970s, cities across the country were gradually losing federal
funding for social services, information service corporations were
beginning to replace industrial factories, and corporate developers
were buying up real estate to be converted into luxury housing, leaving
working-class residents with limited affordable housing, a shrinking
job market and diminishing social services (1994; 27).

Urban renewal problems were enacted in an attempt to “rebuild” the city—to “fix”
the growing slum areas, and prevent the flight of middle to upper class families to the
suburbs (Austin 2001). However in 1970, fifteen percent of all New York City
residents under the age eighteen were living below the poverty (more than forty
percent were African American and thirty percent were Hispanic Children) (Austin
2001; 35). The urban renewal projects were not aimed towards alleviating this
epidemic of poor urban youth; instead there was a growing public fear of young criminals prowling the streets. Thus when graffiti began to appear, the association was immediate (Austin 2001). This fearful association was assisted by the fact that graffiti aggressively invaded all corners of the city in a way that could not be ignored (especially on the subway trains). Joe Austin convincingly argues that one of the ways in which the public of New York made sense of graffiti was through the pre-existing framework of urban decay; graffiti was a visual manifestation of chaos, a sign that the city’s authorities has lost control.

This public conception of graffiti would indeed explain the harsh legal measures taken by both the Transit Authority and the city government to “control” the graffiti problem. In 1972 the first anti-graffiti law was established by the mayor John Lindsay, and thus began the so called “war on graffiti” which the city of New York has been waging ever since (Cooper 2008; 9). Graffiti also became an economic problem when the cost of “clean up” on the subway trains alone reached ten to twenty million dollars a year in the 1970s (Mailer 1973; Cooper 2008). While the Transit Authority had their own economic reasons to wage war on graffiti, the city government was also cornered into its own aggressive stance as graffiti became publicly understood as the symbol of the city’s decline (Mailer 1973; Rose 1994).

Despite the aggressive effort channeled towards fighting graffiti, there was very little public dialogue with the actual writers about what graffiti, as a voice, meant to the ghetto. Even so, not all journalists and cultural critics viewed graffiti as “vandalism”. For example, in a New York Magazine article in 1973, Richard Goldstein observed: “There’s been a lot of speculation about why these kids feel the
need to write their names all over the place, but very little analysis of the public hysteria which this phenomenon has provoked” (Cooper 2008; 93). Norman Mailer even celebrated the creative energy of graffiti as a relief from the monotonous confines of “modern architecture” and its controlled regulation of the city environment: “Plastic above, dynamite below” (1973; 25). Regardless of whether outside media framed graffiti in a positive or negative light, graffiti continued grow beyond the limits of certain neighborhoods, beyond confines of a subculture, and beyond New York City itself.

2.2: The Evolution of Writing

From the 1960s onward, graffiti has been identified as “vandalism”, “art”, “personal advertising”, and everything in between. The ethnographic work, published decades after its initial explosion, reveals that graffiti—like any medium of expression—can be performed with a range of intentions and received by an audience through a variety of frameworks (Snyder 2009; MacDonald 2001). The graffiti writers of the 1970s did create a type of community organized around the action of writing, however its internal dynamics and organization did not remain stagnant (Gastman and Neelon 2010). Part of graffiti’s international explosion in the 1980s was due to its alignment with the rise of hip-hop culture. Even though graffiti became known the visual dimension of hip-hop, graffiti existed before the music and break-dancing (Snyder 2009). Graffiti in New York City has had its own evolution—an evolution of adaptations.

From the 1970s to the mid 1980s, when New York writers actively explored the potential of graffiti as a creative medium, a type of insular subculture formed
around the production of graffiti (Austin 2001). The act of “tagging” or “bombing” one’s name was the origin of graffiti (and is still the core activity), yet when writers incorporated the use of spray paint and obsessively spent more and more time practicing the execution of their tags, graffiti also developed into an expression of aesthetic style (Rose 1994). In the mid-

![Figure 2.1: A Graffiti Piece (Artist Unknown) in Brooklyn, New York City (August 2012)](image)

1970s dedicated graffiti writers implemented the use “blackbooks” (essentially a sketchbook) in order to practice and experiment drawing their tag (Gastman and Neelon 2010; 99). The more developed tags, in which the name is painted with layers of color and visual effects, were called “pieces” (short for “masterpiece”) or “burners” (Chalfant and Cooper 1986). Graffiti that is executed with “style” is
consequently much more time consuming than a simple tag. Before the MTA cracked down on the security of the train yards, writers had the time to transform entire train cars into a type of graffiti mural. As early as the 1970s, graffiti already embodied two very different types of activity: the repetitive tagging or bombing (often intentionally destructive without much regard for aesthetic sophistication), and the more selective execution of stylistic pieces that were intended to showcase a writer’s creativity and originality (Austin 2001; Snyder 2009; MacDonald 2001).

The relationship between these two intentions of graffiti is too complex to generalize; it is a dynamic that hinges on the social structure of the graffiti community and its evolving public relationship. In Nancy MacDonald’s ethnographic investigation of the New York City graffiti subculture, she emphasizes the need to look beyond the traditional Marxist view of a subculture defined by class antagonisms (2001). In the 1970s, the initial was pioneers of graffiti were predominately Black and Latino youth—which is why graffiti is frequently referred to as the “voice of the ghetto”—but after graffiti was spotlighted in the 1980s and the train era took off, youth from every imaginable background joined the ranks of graffiti writers: “To many New York kids, graffiti was just the sexiest, most fascinating thing imaginable” (Gastman and Neelon 2010; 25). Furthermore, the underground medium of graffiti facilitates the possibility of anonymity; the tag lives an independent life from the actual writer. One’s physical identity is not nearly as

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5 The photographs that Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant took of the graffiti “burners” on subway trains have become the internationally iconic images of graffiti.

6 Largely owing to the publication of Subway Art by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant (1984) and the release of graffiti movies Style Wars and Wild Style (Gastman and Neelon 2010; 25).
important as the work they put in either tagging their name everywhere or developing an original style. Thus graffiti has been described as a type of “meritocracy” in which individual writers compete for recognition and respect (within the community) (MacDonald 2001; Snyder 2009).

The legal and physical risks (in addition to time and energy) ensure that graffiti writing is not a type of casual hobby. As MacDonald observed in her fieldwork, writers have a “passion” for graffiti (2001). The passion is individually understood; it is not social commitment to a type of ideology or cause. Graffiti can be an addictive passion because of the adrenaline rush of risk-taking, the competition, the art of designing pieces, the act of rebellion, the ability to artistically express oneself, or the fame and recognition. MacDonald thus argues that a generalized “reason” for why a diverse range of individuals commit these risks and sacrifice belittles the freedom that graffiti embodies.

Despite this nuanced reality of intentions and practices, a graffiti community formed around the shared passion and respect for the medium, and it still exists today. Regardless of how independent a single graffiti writer might be, individuals who devote so much energy to creation typically seek some sort of positive social feedback. Indeed, “art worlds” (artistic communities) are particularly necessary to support art forms that lack institutional endorsement (Becker 2008). Ever since the 1970s, there has been a specific audience for graffiti—writers and appreciators within the culture. Graffiti writers have branched out of this community in various ways, yet certain esoteric dimensions of graffiti culture like the act of tagging, the terminology, the ability to decipher lettering and appreciate the different styles and techniques—
require a trained audience (Snyder 2009). Outside forces—the harsh legal crackdown and the fearful public image of graffiti—also kept this community small and intimate (MacDonald 2001). Because graffiti was vehemently labeled as criminals by the city authorities, most New Yorkers would never consider trying to read it or see it as anything other than vandalism. Therefore the writers created their own world of rules and criteria. It was a world of activity, a type of lifestyle and obsession that only another writer could appreciate. Beyond a specific image or identity of graffiti, it was this shared struggle, practice, and sacrifice that united graffiti writers (Snyder 2009; MacDonald 2001).

The fact that graffiti writing continued to flourish despite the hostile environment of New York City has crucial implications for the later development of street art. In Richard Lachmann’s analysis of graffiti careers, he labels graffiti as both a “deviant” and “artistic” subculture which is sustained through two types of social interactions: “First, novices must learn the motivations and conventions for engaging in these activities. Second, deviants’ and artists’ careers are furthered or thwarted by the ways in which audiences label and react to them and their endeavors” (1988; 230). Not only did the graffiti community keep the practice alive by providing social reinforcement and stimulation, it also internally motivated writers to develop their writing skills. For example, Cern’s development as a graffiti writer (and even later as a muralist) was guided by social relationships within the community. He did not get serious about graffiti until he met Quizm, an older writer (Cern was 12) who acted as

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7 Some of the informal rules (like not writing over another writer’s tag) that regulated conduct within the community are still respected and have even carried over into street art communities.
a type of mentor and taught him about “style”: “It’s not about fighting people over spots, you know, and writing over people’s shit. It’s about style, it’s about blowing people’s minds. It’s about taking shit to another level” (Interview on September 15, 2012). Then in 1994, Cern and his friends formed the YMI crew: “We all felt like graffiti, as a form, had a real

Figure 2.2: A Collaborative Mural Painted by Cern and the YMI Crew in Brooklyn, New York City (August 2012).

power...we all felt progressive with that and hip-hop and everything, rapping and doing graffiti. So we collectively really pushed each other—it was super idealistic”. Cern accredits his technical development as an artist to the peer education he experienced as a member of YMI.
The “war” waged against graffiti in New York pushed the community of writers in two directions, and each direction received a different public “label” (Lachmann 1988). On one hand, many graffiti writers embraced the idea of destruction—rebellion against the legal choke collar imposed on public space. Writers who focus on bombing (“bombing” intentionally implies violence) enjoy graffiti’s legal status as a crime. As explained by Ski: “We paint, we vandalize. Mike got arrested for graffiti, sometimes people look at him and go ‘Oh my God! How could you get arrested for doing art?’ I’m like, ‘No! Idiot! It’s graffiti!’…No he didn’t get caught for doing art, he got caught for fucking shit up” (Interview on August 18, 2012). This vein of graffiti revels in the mantra of breaking rules, and the more authorities try to squash this voice, the more these writers want to “bomb” (Gastman and Neelon 2010).

However, the graffiti writers who focused on style did not share the thrill of engaging in “deviant activity” (Lachmann 1988). “Piecing” takes time, thus it is nearly impossible to execute illegally. Through years of practice and commitment these writers had developed a high level of technical skill; as graffiti “professionals” of style, they sought places to exhibit their talent (Snyder 2009; MacDonald 2001). Thus the style-driven vein of graffiti started to appeal to public sensibilities, these writers wanted to be respected for their work; graffiti could be a “legitimate” form of expression that was not solely based on vandalism (Lachmann 1988). As early as 1972, a group of writers formed the UGA (United Graffiti Artists) and actively promoted graffiti as an art form that was worthy of gallery space. Graffiti writers like Lady Pink, Lee Quinones, and TATs Cru also pursued relationships of
“professionalism and respectability” with New York communities by using their talents to paint murals that addressed community issues (Braun-Reinitz and Weissman 2009; 158). These writers wanted to shed the criminal association with graffiti and prove that it could be a positive voice of artistic expression.

The impulse of style and aesthetic expression propelled part of the graffiti community to establish a new interactive relationship with the greater society of New York. Thus the “subculture” of graffiti writers was not entirely isolated from the rest of society, and it did not completely oppose mainstream culture. As graffiti started to gain momentum through its connection to hip-hop and its own evolution of

Figure 2.3: TATs Cru Mural (Close-Up) in the Bronx, New York City (August 2012)
style and skill, the audience of graffiti “appreciators” grew expansively (Gastman and Neelon 2010). The more stylistic pieces of graffiti started receiving the label of “art”, and cultural critics began to question the notion of graffiti as visual destruction. Thus a practice of documentation and sharing developed through a proliferation of magazines, videos, and photo collections in accordance to the growing public interest (Austin 2001). Finally, this accumulation of growth within and around the practice of graffiti eventually established links between graffiti and the contemporary art world (and the commercial art world). Graffiti became a medium that can potentially lead to a commercial or fine arts career (Lachmann 1988; Snyder 2009; Austin 2001).

2.3: Graffiti and Contemporary Art in New York City

Before discussing how graffiti made its way into the contemporary art world of galleries and exhibitions, it is important to understand the state of “fine art” during the 1970s and 1980s in New York. When Europe was struggling to rebuild from the decimation of World War II, New York City became the new focal point of the fine arts world (Yve-Alain et al 2005). From the late 1940s and onwards, artists from all over the world have flocked to New York City, and it has subsequently become a site that has witnessed the birth of various artistic movements and even the development of important art institutions (the Museum of Modern Art, The Guggenheim, Cooper Union University, Pratt University, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, etc.). New York is also the city in which the gallery became a prominent feature of the art world—and art market (Yve-Alain et al 2005). When New York City rose to prominence in the art world, Abstract Expressionism was its championed form of avant-garde Modernism. Yet this form of Modernism, as expressed by the famous art
critic Clement Greenberg, had an acutely specific aesthetic formula that sought to completely disengage art from social and political life (Yve-Alain et al 2005). The elitist hierarchy established by Modernism and Abstract Expressionism inspired decades of artistic challenges and redefinitions of “art” and the “artist” in society (Stallabrass 2004). Therefore when graffiti first started to emerge during the 1960s, there were visual artists in New York City who were also seeking new art spaces and practices. One such artist, Claes Oldenburg, famously stated his support for graffiti: “You’re standing there in the station, everything is gray and gloomy and all of a sudden one of those graffiti trains slides in and brightens the place like a bouquet from Latin America” (Mailer 1973; 23).

Neo-Dada, Pop Art, Fluxus, Performance Art, and Conceptual Art were just some of the artistic movements that had a presence in New York City. Within the institutionalized art world, there were artists actively challenging not only what content fine art could express, but also what type of medium could be considered “art” and how it should interact with the viewer (Stallabrass 2004). All of these artistic movements followed a general trend away from painting (as the “pure” artistic medium) and away from art as a (commodified) object. However, these movements and challenges were still contained within the institutionalized world of art. The essential cultural and social boundaries perpetuated by galleries, museums, and the art market were maintained and thus these critical reflections and experiments in art rarely reached an audience beyond the walled in art world (Lewisohn 2008). In contrast, it is inherent to the public form of graffiti that it exists (literally) outside and indiscriminately displayed in front of everyone’s eyes. As noted earlier, writers who
focus on “bombing” their name everywhere view graffiti as aesthetic anarchy—a form of destruction, not a form of “art”.

It’s difficult to gauge the extent to which graffiti writers were influenced by the changes in contemporary art—if they were at all—yet contemporary artists did pay attention to graffiti. The growing presence of graffiti in almost every imaginable place proved to some observers that perhaps these rules regulating public and private space should be broken. Art could exist outside an art space (Lewisohn 2008). During a period of contemporary art in which boundaries and definitions were in constant flux, it is perhaps unsurprising that the 1970s also witnessed the first forms of unsolicited public interventions based on pictorial or conceptual intents (Yve-Alain et al. 2005). John Fekner is one such artist who started working in the street, and stenciled different messages like “LAST HOPE” or “DECAY” on decrepit buildings and walls in Queens and the Bronx (Lewisohn 2008; 91). An increasing number of artists started taking their work outside of the studio as they realized what the context of daily public life could add to the meaning of their work (Lewisohn 2008). As Norman Mailer observed during his investigation of graffiti in 1973: “Art has been saying with more and more intensity: the nature of the painting has become less interesting than the nature of the relation of painting to society” (1973; 28).

Jenny Holzer was also actively working outside during the late 1970s. She imitated the practice of “fly-posting” (usually for punk rock concerts) by installing her own posters of writing. When she initially started these interventions she didn’t consider herself an “artist” and was in fact more concerned with instigating public debates and reflections (Lewisohn 2008; 90). Dan Witz, an artist who still remains
active in the street, started creating his street art based on the idea of the tag—except his “tag” was an intricately painted hummingbird (worked on for four to five hours at home, then installed outside). Dan Witz was disappointed by the commercial undertones of the art world he discovered in New York, and he ended up finding more inspiration in graffiti (Lewisohn 2008; 77). Witz was just one of many artists at the time who were influenced by the energy and confrontation embodied by the uninhibited energy of graffiti.

The exploration of art embedded in a public context was fully embraced by Kenny Sharf, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat in the 1980s. In an article from Village Voice published in 1982, Richard Goldstein dubbed the emergence of this new street medium as “new wave graffiti” or “visual punk” (Cooper 2008; 103).

In his description of this art that started to appear in Soho and Tribeca, he detected some clear divergences from graffiti:

“Cryptic texts have replaced the underground creativity; the mode of execution is less free-hand and more precise; materials include not just spray paint but elaborate stencils; and the placement of these modest ‘masterpieces’ is often camouflaged, sacrificing confrontation for surprise—the salient mode of conceptual art” (103).

All three artists would indeed refer to their art as “street art” and made a point of differentiating what they did from the practice of graffiti—they were all actively pursuing gallery careers (Lewisohn 2008; 94). A path was set by the successful careers of these artists; the worlds of contemporary art and graffiti continued to blend.

Graffiti writers also entered the gallery for the first time in 1978 (Snyder 2009; 25). The “masters of style” like LEE, FUTURA 2000, and SEEN are just a few examples of writers who were invited to exhibit their work in galleries. The entrance
of graffiti artists into the gallery raised many questions within the graffiti community—it also disrupted the conventional cadence of the contemporary art (MacDonald 2001). Suddenly, the raw, illegal, and criminalized medium of graffiti was embraced as “art”, and young untrained writers from the ghetto neighborhoods of the Bronx and Queens were labeled “artists”. This collusion of worlds was of not welcomed by everyone, yet as the famous graffiti photographer Martha Cooper stated in her book, *Tag Town*: “The street art scene, still growing today, owes its existence to this fusion. Graffiti writers led the way in appropriating public space for art” (2008; 79). The writers who produced visually stunning “pieces” or “burners” had to work hard in order to legitimize their “art” in the public eye (Lachmann 1988). Yet in doing so these graffiti writers were able to carve out artistic careers in which their skills in graffiti translated to sellable art, commissioned murals, clothing designs, graphic designs, tattoos, etc (Lachmann 1988; MacDonald 2001).

By the end of the 1980s, the streets of New York City were full of different types of visual interaction, legal and illegal. The illegal tagging of graffiti writers was still everywhere and treated as a serious threat to “public health” (Cooper 2008). Yet graffiti also had established itself as a skilled artistic medium that could generate a commercial value. Indeed, New Yorkers were much more likely to appreciate illegal street interventions if they demonstrated technical skill and employed color and imagery (Mason 2008). Separate from the aerosol pieces of graffiti writers, “street art” also became a feature of public space. Street art was undeniably influenced by graffiti, nonetheless it slowly grew into its own artistic movement through the grey area created by the collision of the graffiti and contemporary art worlds.
“It also can be a really scary city—really lonely—so when you feel like you’re decorating it like your house, then every block you walk by on your way to work—maybe that’s your block now…it becomes more familiar”—Elle

Elle is actually her second street pseudonym. When she first started “getting up” in New York in 2008, she worked under the name “Oopsy Daisy”—“As in, Oopsy daisy! I just wrote graffiti”. Elle is a California native from an upper-middle class family—one of three children, and the only child involved in the arts. After graduating from UC Davis, Elle enrolled in a graduate program at Brandeis University to pursue painting. Yet she left the program early, frustrated and disillusioned with the world of fine art:

“The program was horrible and the teachers were super sexist. So after one year I left and was like—well I don’t know what to do now. But I ended up coming to New York because I was like—Oh! Obviously that’s where all the artists go. You know at that point I was like I’m not going to paint anymore, I hate painting, I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I still love art and I don’t know what else I’m going to do with my life” (Interview on August 17, 2012).

Once she reached New York City, she had a brief art hiatus. Although she wasn’t actively producing anything, she still visited the galleries in Chelsea—yet was never enthused with any of the work exhibited. One night when she was leaving a gallery show, she stumbled upon some illegal wheatpastes made by Gaia and Swoon. Elle’s story spirals out from this moment of discovery and inspiration; she eagerly sunk her teeth in, thrilled by a new motivation to create art. Her entrance into both the graffiti and street art worlds was facilitated by personal connections with both artists and writers. She gradually learned tricks and tips from her new friends in each community; working illegally in New York requires learned skills and knowledge—and often partners in crime (usually to help as look outs).
Figure 3.1: Elle’s Wheatpaste in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (August 2012)
Elle has now been actively producing street art and graffiti for over three years. While I interviewed Elle in her apartment in Brooklyn (which doubles as her studio), she was silk-screening black and white paper posters featuring her name and design that she later pasted up illegally all over Manhattan and Brooklyn. In addition to posters, Elle tags her name with spray paint and stickers and additionally creates wheatpastes—elaborate drawings of women or animals. Elle has had a variety of day jobs in order to support herself and buy art supplies (including a gig as a hair model). In a sigh of exasperation she admitted to me: “I spend all of my income on art now, it’s getting ridiculous”. Despite the constant hustle she must maintain to stay afloat financially, she continues to be inspired by both the street art and graffiti communities, still preferring the public nature of street work to a private gallery setting:

“[referring to her canvas paintings] everything is just going to rot in storage, no one is ever going to see it, it’s all going to die and it’s so depressing. And just to be able to make work and never have to worry about it again and also know that they are going to continue to live their own life—thrive outdoors and people will see them and enjoy them was like a huge draw for me” (Interview August 17, 2012).

Elle is one of the few individuals active in New York right now who can be considered both a graffiti writer and street artist. All of her street work is illegal, yet like most artists she has also had work sold in galleries, in addition to accepting various commercial gigs for illustration and design. I found that, like Elle, most street artists in New York are in their late to mid 20s; have had some formal artistic training; come from a middle to upper class background; and have felt either disillusioned or uninterested in the institutionalized art world. Rather than entering
the street art scene with a passionate ideology against the art market or with the burning desire to democratize art and public space\(^8\), most of these young artist initially start creating street work because it is an enticing new opportunity in which they can produce art with complete creative freedom and have their work directly interact with a public audience, regardless of their achieved art world status.

### 3.1: Constructing the Street Art World

Even though it acts as a decentralized medium, street art in New York City is not produced through isolated individual acts. The production of street art, like graffiti, requires the coordination of an “art world”. This chapter will utilize Howard S. Becker’s theory of art worlds to analyze how the street art scene operates: how much of the world is influenced by historical context; how is the world conceptually defined and articulated; and to what extent does the medium itself affect the construction of this world and its interaction with society. Understanding these dynamics from the artist’s perspective is invaluable:

Art worlds typically devote considerable attention to trying to decide what is and isn’t art, what is and isn’t their kind of art, and who is and isn’t an artist; by observing how an art world makes those distinctions rather than trying to make them ourselves we can understand much of what does on in that world” (Becker 2008; 36).

One of the significant themes that emerged during my research is the convergence of the street art, graffiti, and contemporary art scenes and how “art” is classified and valued in accordance to these worlds. The fact is, street artists can not support themselves financially if they only create free public art; their community does not have the economic infrastructure to support their independence from the

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\(^8\) This type of ideology is usually developed later on after the artist has made a commitment to street art.
traditional buying, selling, and exhibiting of art. Perhaps in reaction to a monetary system of value invading the street art world, the New York street art scene developed a conception of “authenticity” that informally guides respect and social ranking within the community. Street artists who demonstrate a commitment to the free public form of intervention (either through years of experience, producing a prolific amount of daring work, or explicitly rejecting commercial offers) are held in high esteem—as opposed to individuals who produce street art and leave the medium entirely once they get a gallery’s attention.

Constructing “authenticity” leads to another salient theme, which is the division between legal and illegal street work. The “war” fought between city authorities and graffiti writers over the visual control of public space has produced decades of tension and imbued the act of public intervention with political significance. The practical obstacles and extreme risks prevent many street artists from working illegally, but illegal art is still more celebrated than legal work because it has stronger ideological import—and the acquires “authenticity”. Legal work is less free and spontaneous; the artist loses control over where, when and how the work is produced. This legal division of street interventions is what first divided the graffiti community of New York (i.e. “bombing” versus “piecing”). The recent intrusion of street art has added another interesting dynamic of tension that has forced both artists and writers to revaluate and identify the rationale behind their work.

Analyzing these dimensions of street art requires revisiting the question of culture’s relationship to society. The impetus of the city authorities to maintain visual control over public space and the dominant presence of commercial advertising
certainly shapes the political significance of street art and graffiti. In this sense, the form of direct public intervention (especially when its illegally executed) can be considered “cultural resistance”. Yet has street art engendered a “street democracy” in New York City? Has it actually affected the dominant institutions that regulate public and artistic expression? My research, based on interviews and observations, produces a complex picture of contradictions.

![A Mural by NDA and Robots Will Kill in Bushwick, Brooklyn (August 2012)](image)

**Figure 3.2: A Mural by NDA and Robots Will Kill in Bushwick, Brooklyn (August 2012)**

### 3.2: Defining “Street Artist” and “Street Art”

Decades of graffiti and street art in New York City have massed into a dense history of urban interventions that already features several “waves” or “generations” of artists. It is the weight of this history and the intensely politicized boundaries...
between legal and illegal work that makes classification a puzzle. Each individual I talked to aligned themselves with either “street art”, “graffiti”, “murals”, or just “art” in accordance to how they perceived their artistic career and position within the graffiti or street art communities. Needless to say, I was corrected for using the wrong label or classification numerous times. Labels are taken seriously because they allude to different ideologies and identities that have historical weight—this is especially true in the world of graffiti. In New York I found that most of my interviewees did not want to be labeled “street artists”. Artists seem to be wary of adopting the label because it means embodying a type of radical ideology—the “anti-institution”, “anti-consumerism” image that public critics have assigned to the medium. Not every artist who produces street art wants to be compared to the politically outspoken icon that is Banksy.

Part of this reluctance in adopting the “street art” label might be explained by the fact that most street artists in New York have had some type of formal artistic training. Indeed, street artists are frequently referred to as “art school kids”. Elle, LNY, and Sonni all had an art school education, but Cern, Ski, Jilly Ballistic, and Gilf! also carry college degrees (majors ranging from Business and Management to English). Lenny, known as LNY, described how he conceptualized street art:

I think the term “street art” is jumping the gun. I just think it’s so young, I mean we have to call it something…but that’s like calling hip-hop “rap” in the 80s. We are just getting to know what is going on. It’s also like an easy way of categorizing something, and once you categorize something it’s easy to just put it in a box and not see the perspectives to it. So I don’t like terming myself a street artist at all. I’d rather be an “artist” or just like a person that makes things (Interview on September 15, 2012).
Artists that produce street art also typically create work privately (in sketch books, on canvases, or employing other materials), especially if they have an art school background. Whenever I had the chance of visiting an artist’s apartment or studio for an interview, we would sit, talking in a space that was surrounded by their creations. Because it is particularly difficult to publicly intervene in New York, artists balance this time of public inactivity with private work—which they sometimes sell. If artists embrace the “street art” label, then they are violating the expectations of the medium if they exhibit in a gallery or accept commercial propositions. As LNY expressed in his interview, he didn’t want to commit himself to a specific label or role and potentially limit other artistic opportunities.

Despite the often outright rejection of the term “street artist”, the artists that didn’t consider themselves graffiti writers did call their street work “street art”. Whether or not the artists consider themselves “street artists”, they form a cohesive community around the production of street art. Like graffiti, street art is a medium that thrives with the social support of a community; it plays an essential role in encouraging and nourishing the production of this medium. As Becker insisted, art—even in the form of street art—is a social activity, and thus a product that is valued through constructed art world conventions (2008). The street art world has indeed established its own conventions, rules, and notions of authenticity; it provides an audience that can directly supply feedback (especially through the use of social media); it also composes a network of artists and fans that assist one another in the acquisition of walls and materials, in addition to sharing knowledge of installation techniques or methods of evading the police. These provisions of the community are
especially important since street art is not directly connected to an art institution that could provide some of these services. Nonetheless, the street art world does not have the dynamic of a subculture in the sense that street art is not tied to a specific lifestyle or identity, and it lacks a connection to other cultural elements like music or style. It is a world that mostly focuses on encouraging and celebrating a medium of expression.

One of the crucial things that the street art world cannot usually provide is an income that recuperates the financial losses of producing (free) street art. Street art—in whatever material form—is generally more costly than the practice of writing graffiti tags (which requires only a can of spray paint or paint marker). The time one can take in producing a piece of street art can also be more exhaustive than basic graffiti tags. Unsurprisingly, every artist that I talked to had at least one day-job. Individuals who are dedicated to creating art generally try to fund their street work with jobs that also involve creative production or art sales. As a result of this artistic passion, every street artist that I talked to has inevitably had work exhibited and sold in a gallery. But, only after achieving a very high level of prestige and success can a street artist live by public commissions and travel to different cities when they are invited to paint in festivals or events.

3.3: Converging Art Worlds

In the context of New York City, the street art world must navigate between the pre-existing graffiti culture and the dominant presence of some of the art world’s most prestigious institutions and galleries. All three worlds constantly interact with one another, but despite the profoundly developed art worlds maintained by both
graffiti writers and street artists—the most well respected artists from both communities have had solo gallery exhibitions; their names have established economic value in the art market.

Figure 2.3: The Mighty Tanaka Gallery in Downtown Brooklyn (August 2012)

Galleries play an undeniable role in the street art scene—they have ever since graffiti first entered the gallery space (Lewisohn 2008; Irvine 2011). There are of course some individuals who have never shown work in a gallery and have no intention of developing a studio art career. Yet the majority of street artists have been a part of at least a group show. Every month there is diverse range of gallery events or art fairs that present the work of street artists, with at least fifteen different galleries in Brooklyn and Manhattan that primarily exhibit the work of street artists (indeed
they are called “street art galleries”). Even though galleries are frequently seen as the antithesis to street art, they assert a lot of influence and are responsible for organizing important events and opportunities for artists that bring the community together (Strausbaugh 2010). Some of these galleries, like the Jonathan LeVine Gallery in Chelsea, hold elite esteem and presents their gallery as an alternative but professional institution that promotes and sells prints or original works of the best street artists in the world: “We moved to Chelsea in 2005, with an eye towards honoring and connecting with the history and context of Post War art. We contribute to the dialogue by challenging the conventions of the canon—exploring the terrain of the high/low and everything in between”9. Indeed, the Jonathan LeVine Gallery is one of the galleries partially responsible for constant influx of visiting foreign street artists. However there are also galleries that are artist-run like Low Brow Artique, operated by Bishop203 in Bushwick. Low Brow hosts small monthly group shows featuring local graffiti and street artists (the murals on the outside walls also change monthly), but primarily sells high quality spray paint and art supplies. When I attended one of opening receptions in September 2012, I observed that it was a very informal event with a small but well-acquainted crowd of friends and artists. The opening reception seemed to serve as an excuse to hang out and drink together.

The presence of galleries in the street art scene has inevitably implanted certain hierarchies of “success” and “fame” in the social world of street artists. The formal galleries that are embedded in the art market, like the Jonathan LeVine Gallery, create a clear bridge between street art and the money and art world fame of

9 Excerpt from the “About the Gallery” description: http://jonathanlevinegallery.com/?method=home.About
a successful studio artist (Strausbaugh 2010). For street artists who are artistically trained and developed, this is often an irresistible opportunity to showcase more personal and detailed work that physically or ideologically does not translate to a public street piece (Irvine 2011). It is probably no coincidence that most of the rare illegal street art in Manhattan is concentrated around the gallery districts of Chelsea and Soho. Whether or not it was their original intention, since the 1980s street artists (Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring) have been jumping into galleries after attracting attention with street work (Lewisohn 2008). There are now numerous art collectors in New York, and around the world, that buy work from street artists (Strausbaugh 2010). However, the ladder from the street to art world success was first established by the New York graffiti writers in the 1970s—their careers proved that one could garner attention from this institutional world of money and cultural power by establishing an image or presence on the street.

The relationship between graffiti and street art is difficult to grasp, yet dissecting this relationship of tension and cohesion is crucial to understanding how street art operates within the context of New York City. According to all my interviewees, the graffiti and street art communities tend to operate as separate circles. However there is a lot of social crossover, especially when graffiti and street art reach a legal or institutional level (i.e. gallery success). There is also the added confusion when street artists work with text and spray paint or graffiti writers paint abstract designs and characters more than letters. Furthermore, individuals like Elle actively create in both mediums. Despite this social and aesthetic cross-pollination of
genres (in the medium of urban intervention), certain historical and ideological conflicts prevent a smooth cohesion.

Graffiti came first. This is perhaps the most important fact driving the division. Graffiti was the first cultural street phenomenon in New York, and it was the graffiti writers who first challenged ideas of public space and expression, and who or what can be defined as “art”. Furthermore, many of the graffiti “heroes” of the 1970s and 80s, still live and work in New York. As Cern observed, many of the original writers are still painting: “This shit never left and I think it’s really, really exciting…and I think that’s what forms community on a level beyond any kind of external credit from a museum or art world” (Interview on September 15, 2012).

Both graffiti writers and street artists respect the “old school” writers, and every street artist will acknowledge—if not admire—the power of graffiti and the impact it has had in New York. LNY is a huge fan of graffiti and explained to me how the gold and metallic aesthetic that he incorporates into his murals is directly influenced by graffiti.

However, this respect is not always reciprocal. The whirlwind of positive public and commercial attention surrounding the emergence of street art has inspired skepticism and annoyance within the graffiti community. The rules of the meritocracy established by decades of graffiti are shattered by the “instant fame” of some street artists. Graffiti writers are also traditionally from the lower class neighborhoods of the city—they were the local urban youth. Street artists are generally middle class college graduates who have moved to New York early in their adult life. Given these dynamics, it is easy to understand why street artists might be
perceived as a type of “invasion” that is transforming the culture around public intervention. But these are very generalized portrayals of each community, and both social worlds have already undergone many transformations and “waves” of different artists. For instance, graffiti is now very popular among white men in their twenties who “like typography and fine art”; Elle says that most of the writers she knows are designers or artists who have full-time jobs but “write on the side” (Interview on August 17, 2012).

Thus when I asked my interviewees how they defined “street art” and “graffiti”, the explanations rooted in ideological or cultural distinctions made the most sense. According to Becker, the artistic “rationale” is a construction that places personal and social value in the continued production of a medium:

Rationales typically take the form, however naïve, of a kind of aesthetic argument, a philosophical justification which identifies what is being made as art, as good art, and explains how art does something that needs to be done for people and society…necessary for those moments when others not engaged in it ask what good is it anyway (2008; 4).

Dasic explained to me that even though he stopped painting letters years ago and now only paints figures and murals (with aerosol), he is still painting graffiti because he is a part of graffiti culture. Dasic didn’t try to argue that the aesthetics of graffiti and street art are different; to him all art is a single medium of expression. What truly separates these two genres of public intervention are their distinct cultures which inform different rationales behind creation and value. Yet as previously discussed, graffiti culture is diverse—especially today. On one hand, the impulse to write graffiti as a form of destruction and rebellion still exists. Ski sees this as an essential difference between the two genres:
“I just get upset at the term ‘street art’ because it’s not what we do. We paint, we vandalize. Mike got arrested for graffiti. Sometimes people look at him and go ‘Oh my God! How could you get arrested for doing art?’ I’m like ‘No! Idiot! It’s graffiti!’…No he didn’t get caught for doing art, he got caught for fucking shit up” (Interview on August 18, 2012).

Furthermore, Ski claims that graffiti “doesn’t have a message”, but street art has a recognizable visual form that tries to communicate with the viewer (Interview on August 18, 2012). Street art is also not based on the repetition of a name.  

![Image of a mural by Faith47](Figure 2.4: A Mural by Faith47)  

10 However some street artists repeat a certain recognizable aesthetic, or consistently create the same character over and over again. Thus these artists are also attempting to develop a unique aesthetic that represents their art—a visual quality that is easily recognizable.  
11 Faith47 is a female South African street artist who painted this mural during a brief visit to New York.
Because street art usually comes in the form of an image (that isn’t cryptic and unidentifiable like graffiti), street artists often say that they are trying to create an interaction with the random passerby. Most of Gilf!’s work has clear political content, and she began producing street art because she felt like important current events were publicly going unnoticed:

“I learn about all these things that were happening in our world and I felt like so many people didn’t know. Whenever I would actually try to speak about it…people would shut off...So for whatever reason I felt like being able to create something visually and allowing people respond to it however they choose, gives that conversation an opportunity” (Interview in August 2012).

However most street art currently present in New York is not as directly political as Gilf!’s art. Artists like Elle and LNY take to the street because they are disillusioned with the art world and want a way to express themselves that actually reaches an audience without the filters and politics of art world culture.

Artists (in both graffiti and street art) are also attracted to the idea of their art creating a meaningful connection with local communities—something that art isolated in a gallery or museum cannot accomplish. For instance, both Dasic and LNY prefer working in more poor, working class neighborhoods rather than in the high profile areas of Manhattan or Brooklyn. Dasic enjoys the experience of working outside for hours, directly interacting with local community members as he paints: “I like to paint in neighborhoods like ghettos and stuff because they really appreciate what you’re doing…they see that you care about them, you’re not treating them like they’re nothing” (Interview on August 20, 2012). LNY further explains how public interventions like street art allow the artist to act as a potential catalyst for change.
He believes that transforming a physical environment can inspire individuals and even communities to attempt social or political change (Interview on September 15, 2012). “Change” does not imply full-scale revolution or the toppling of authoritative institutions, but there are other artists like LNY (active in New York and internationally) who try make street art with social or political meaning—usually by addressing a local cause or issue.

3.4: Constructing Authenticity: Legal and Illegal Art

The conception of “authenticity” helps an art world define itself and set a standard of values and norms to follow. Due to the fact that street art is “in style” and has attracted the attention of outside authorities (the elite art world and corporations), “authenticity” helps the community identify which artists are worthy of respect. Becker explains that, “because the artist’s position as artist depends on the production of art works which embody and express his special talents and gifts, participants in art worlds worry about the authenticity of art works” (2008; 22). Thus the link between the street and art world success has unsettled the artists that I interviewed. While none of them explicitly opposed to the idea of a street artist creating gallery work, they have all observed that its mainstream popularity has inspired a surge of “shitty”, “bad”, and “terrible” street art. According to Elle, the success of the first wave of street artists in New York reverberated throughout the entire art world:

I think that a lot of people saw that, and they wanted to get into the galleries. So a lot of artists that don’t really care about street art started making street art, and do it now just for the gallery aspect… I mean I’ve had gallery shows too so I’m not one to talk, but I’m not like, do it only for the art, but I feel like people are happy to get off the street quickly—whereas I spend most of my money doing this shit” (Interview on August 17, 2012).
Therefore newcomers today are greeted with skepticism. If an artist jumps into the gallery at the first opportunity and completely abandons their street work, they will lose the credibility and respect of other street artists. It is an action that inherently casts doubt on the anti-commercial and anti-institutional rhetoric that is often used to justify street art. It also reinforces the dominance of the galleries and art market as the ultimate arbiters, belittling the autonomy of the street art world.

The “authenticity” of an artist in the street art world is proved by demonstrating their commitment to the medium. Artists earn the trust of community members through experience and years of activity, through taking risks (working illegally, getting up in hard to reach places, creating a piece with a massive scale, etc.), creating quality street work that clearly demonstrates time and thought, developing friendships and relationships with other members of the art world, and by showing that street art is their priority even if they have received outside attention.

Illegal street art is the type of work that most artists and fans of the medium celebrate because it embodies more “authentic” qualities of street art than legal work. When I interviewed Luna Park, a street art and graffiti photographer who has been scrupulously documenting the New York scene since 2005, she expressed frustration and disappointment with the work currently up in the city. While she recognizes the severe risks that illegal work incurs—“Here things have been criminalized to an extreme—the punishment doesn’t match the crime at all”—she thinks that legal work loses the power of spontaneity, and artists become much more “safe” and non-confrontational in the work that they chose to create: “You’ve got like a certain pack
of people that are getting walls and painting walls—it’s the same people and it’s the same characters, and no one is really taking any risks” (Interview in August 2012).

But illegal work also has its limitations. Given the extreme consequences for “vandalism” in New York, all of the illegal work is tailored for a quick installation. Artists cannot take their time, the installation is rushed, and the places where artists can safely risk illegal work are few and far between. Thus most illegal pieces consist of wheatpastes, stencils, posters, stickers, or sculpture installations. All of these materials can be installed in a matter of minutes and therefore most of time-consuming artistic execution takes place at home rather than in the street. On one hand, this method of street art production does not force the artist to sacrifice their elaborate vision or meticulous technique; wheatpastes and stencils can contain a dense amount of detail. On the other hand, the artist is working at home instead of out in public, so they lose the opportunity to socialize and interact with the neighborhood while they work. For artists like Dasic, LNY, and Cern who have had the opportunity to work outside, they all mention that this is one of the most enjoyable and meaningful aspects of street art.

When an artist works illegally, any surface of the city is a potential canvas, whereas legal work must be either approved by the property owner or be commissioned by a business or organization. There are rows of walls in the industrial areas of Williamsburg and Bushwick (Brooklyn) or Hunts Point in the Bronx, in which graffiti writers and street artists can legally paint. Cern and Rhiannon

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12 The textured surfaces of walls, fences, trash receptacles, etc., can often limit the amount of detail an artist can express—especially if they paint directly on the wall. Working outside also exposes an artist to all the elements of weather and the environment which can further impact the outcome of their work.
informed me that these walls are informally curated by different street artists and graffiti crews, and every month or so the walls will be painted over with new art. While these spaces enable individuals to take their time and paint elaborate pieces, they are mostly concentrated in geographically isolated parts of the city. In this type of situation, street art cannot be intertwined in the local context—it is physically set apart (some of these areas are even referred to as street art or graffiti “galleries”). Yet interestingly enough, Sonni, an artist from Buenos Aires that moved to New York in 2011, claims he is able to paint legally just like he does in Argentina—he rings the doorbell, shows sketches of his work, and asks for permission. Sonni admits that it is more difficult in New York, and this would be practically impossible in upper class neighborhoods of Manhattan or Brooklyn, but this method still works on occasion. None of the other artists that I interviewed used this direct method of asking permission; occasionally they get access to a wall through friends or personal connections.

An unprecedented amount of institutionalized space has opened up for graffiti and street artists (predominantly through galleries or commercial commissions). There are also legal designated city spaces with walls that rotate to feature different artists like the Bowery Mural curated by Tony Goldman and Jeffrey Dietch, the Graffiti Wall of Fame in Harlem, or 5pointz in Long Island City. Illegal graffiti still runs rampant in many parts of the city (excluding upper class neighborhoods in Manhattan), yet the elaborate pieces of graffiti or street art that require more time to execute almost always appear in very predictable places. Only in less commercial neighborhoods like Bushwick in Brooklyn, or Hunts Point in the Bronx do these
labored pieces intertwine more organically with the urban community. In my exploration of New York City in the summer of 2012, I had to know exactly where to look in order to find street art.

Commissioned work could be considered another type of legal street art, and commissions almost always come in the form of murals. A commission presents the rare opportunity for an artist to make money with public work. Of course, when money is introduced into the equation, artists will sometimes have to sacrifice the freedom of their creative process. Especially if the commission is for a type of commercial business, the artist’s work is essentially converted into a public image for the company. They will not be allowed to take any controversial risks, and furthermore, the location of the piece will already be decided. Street art in this sense, plays the role of an advertisement. Luna Park illustrated this phenomenon with an example of D*Face’s (a famous British street artist) appearance in New York:

“His gallery arranged for a wall here on Lafayette, another one in Williamsburg, I mean like big giant walls—everyone is like “wow! There’s street art!” But, they’re like ad walls, so after a month—painted over—ad. So is that street art anymore? No, not really. It’s just an ad for his show...he’s not going out looking for spots on the side” (Interview in August 2012).

Most of the huge walls of street art in Manhattan are walls set up by galleries. So New York has walls painted by some of the most talented street artists in the world—yet they are almost all pre-meditated commercial propositions.

Not all commissioned work is restrained by these characteristics. Dasic Fernandez, a graffiti artist from Chile, is an artist who chiefly earns his living through commissioned murals. Even though he is part of a New York based graffiti crew called the “4Burners”, he spends most of his time painting commissioned murals in
and around the city. In these commissioned works he claims to have aesthetic freedom and, as an established muralist, he has the ability to choose which commissions he accepts. Sometimes the political messages he wants to express align with activist, community-based organizations that he paints for. For example, he painted a few stunning murals for Make the Road (Hacer el Camino) in Brooklyn and the Bronx which features colorful illustrations of community members filming police activities. This series of murals is called “Know Your Rights” and alongside the murals are lists (in English and Spanish) of an individual’s legal rights. Dasic is not the only muralist working in New York; other artists like Cern have also developed a type of “portfolio” from their mural work. Therefore commissions have the potential to result in meaningful work for both the artist and community involved, and the mural can last more than the shelf life of an advertisement.

3.5: Evaluating the “Street Democracy”

In just considering the medium of street art, its presence in New York City has had a certain “democratizing” effect. Through direct visual public intervention, both graffiti and street art has enabled thousands of individuals to express themselves. In fact, in New York it is one of the only public platforms available for any individual to use. Furthermore, it is the only medium available to artists that want to create whatever content they chose, and publicly exhibit their work without gaining the institutional art world’s approval. However, public space is so policed in New York that both legal and illegal street art is limited to certain areas of the city, areas geographically isolated from the busiest locales. Thus more voices are present in public space, yet the efficacy of communicating a message through this medium is
severely limited by legal restrictions and the criminalized public image that graffiti, or any form of illegal intervention, has maintained through decades of “war” with the city authorities.

Moreover, after being immersed in the street art scene of New York I realized that most artists in this world did not have radical, institution toppling intentions with their street art. Some artists like Gilf! are politically motivated and this manifests itself through the content that they chose to express. However most street art does not engage a political rhetoric; as discussed above, many artists simply use the medium to convey personal imagery that is often esoteric or fantastical. Artists in New York rarely use this public platform to make social or political commentary. Yet while the content is often apolitical, there are artists who do enjoy working in public and interacting directly with local communities. Street artists like feeling that their art is appreciated and plays a tangible role in “beautifying” urban spaces and potentially inspiring others (especially residents who don’t frequent art galleries or museums, usually due to class barriers).

An additional complication to the concept of “street democracy” is the presence of the institutionalized art world. When galleries chose to feature specific street artists they are asserting their authority in determining which street artists qualify as professional artists. Thus even though the medium of street art allows anyone, even completely untrained individuals, to create and publicly share art—the art world still has the ultimate say in determining “good” or “bad” street art. In addition to determining which street artists get visibility within gallery walls, galleries also have the money to pay for the public walls that function as ad space in the
busiest areas of Manhattan and Brooklyn. These walls end up featuring the most high profile street artists in the world. So not only does street art fail in effectively challenging the art market and its world of galleries, it falls prey to its influence and measures of “success”. Despite constructing its own standard of authenticity to counteract commercial influences, the street art world still contains an internal social hierarchy in which some artists have more access to walls (and thus visibility) than others.
“Here there is a strong cultural use of public space, people that write graffiti are not revolutionary…here the space is already won” – Grupo de Arte Callejero (el GAC)

The GAC (Street Art Collective) is one of the oldest, best-known activist art collectives in Buenos Aires. It is composed of an all female group of five friends who began their activism together in 1997. When GAC first took to the streets, they did not know what to expect; they were all art students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, and none of them had any previous experience with street art or any type of public intervention. During our interview, these now veteran activists in their late thirties laughed about their paranoia at the time. In the beginning they would only install work late at night, trying to stay hidden and out of sight. For their first action they painted the traditional white uniforms of teachers to support the union’s fight against a new national law of education that would cut teacher’s salaries. Lorena Bossi stated that during the 1990s they had no awareness of the other activist groups: “We were all working in a clandestine manner as if it was the 1970s. We were working under our imagination of the dictatorship and of the censorship that prohibited everything” (Interview on June 14, 2012).

Yet with each action and experience they ascertained what their real limitations were. When I asked them about their interactions with the police, they shrugged and stated that they’ve never had a problem: “Whenever there was a conflict we could negotiate without a problem…sometimes a police officer approaches and inquires, but it's not an attack and it doesn't cause problems”
(Interview on June 14, 2012). They quickly learned that it’s better to work during the day so as to appear less suspicious (they were also self-conscious of the fact that as white, middle class women they did not attract much criminal suspicion). Their techniques, aesthetics, and actions evolved over their fifteen years of activism, yet when I asked them about the visual role of imagery in their activism, they made it clear that their interventions always had a purely political intention: “We are a group that produces political—not aesthetic—art… we always work with the purpose of communication” (Interview on June 14, 2012). Thus the visual component of their street art is solely a medium of communication—to illustrate events in a way that can be easily understood. Indeed, the GAC is known for street signs made in the same style and colors of traffic signs but altered for different causes, like “Justice and Punishment” for the perpetrators of torture and assassination during the dictatorship.

The women of the GAC all consider themselves “street artists”, yet they represent a vein of street art that produces only political content. Activist art has an explicit goal: political militancy. Thus their public visual interventions are almost always associated with a type of political mobilization (i.e. marches, protests, or demonstrations). Unlike New York City, in Buenos Aires there is a clear visual and social division in the street art world between “activists” and “artists”. Part of this division can be explained by historical context: public expression (for political and cultural purposes) is an ingrained practice in Argentina’s culture as is outright repression; as a result, decades of political and economic turmoil has transformed public space into a type of battleground between authorities and the populace. Therefore activist groups like the GAC think it is frivolous to intervene in public
without a political statement or cause. They view the more aesthetically driven street artists as vain “decorators” of their own neighborhoods—at least they could paint in the villas (slums) and actually serve a practical purpose. However, the political character of public debate that saturates most of the art and activity in the street is in fact what stimulated a new wave of artists to produce apolitical content. Street artists like Dobleg Gonzalo of Buenos Aires Stencil believe that there should also be comic relief, imagination, and visual “poetry” in public space (Interview on July 14, 2012).

In Buenos Aires, visual public intervention is not an inherently political medium—it has been normalized through over a century of cultural practices. Unlike New York City, in Buenos Aires public space is “already won”. Indeed, the GAC realized that they could work during the day without harassment from the police, and this seems to be true for any public installation regardless of whether its intention is explicitly political or purely “creative”\(^\text{13}\). The GAC and other activist collectives have even experienced a degree of institutionalization—they still maintain their own autonomy, yet they have accepted various commissions by the city government and other political institutions. Figure 4.1 is an example of an installation commissioned by the city government for the “Parque de la Memoria” (Park of Memory), a public park dedicated to the victims of state terrorism during the Dirty War. The GAC appropriates the imagery of road signs to tell the story of Argentina’s fall into economic and political repression during the 1970s. The cooperation of the GAC with authoritative political institutions suggests that activist art has political legitimacy in Buenos Aires.

\(^\text{13}\) There are however certain buildings and areas that are deemed “off limits” because of their cultural or political value (i.e. churches, schools, monuments, etc.).
There is enough physical space and social-political tolerance in Buenos Aires for Argentineans to utilize public space for a variety of causes. Furthermore, if there is a public action that instigates controversy, Argentineans will often directly confront the individuals who are responsible rather than divert their complaints to the police. The activists and street artists that I interviewed have all commented on their interactions with strangers on the street—Argentineans are generally not shy in approaching and will readily praise or reprimand the public activity or art. To this effect, public space in Buenos Aires also possesses a strong ethos of social policing through direct dialogue and interaction. Indeed, Buenos Aires embodies some of the ideal characteristics of a “street democracy”—an interactive and accessible public sphere.
However, visual public intervention has evolved into the medium that it is today as a result of a long history ensnared in political and economic instability.

4.1: Street Art and Buenos Aires

As a city of three million inhabitants in a nation of 41 million\(^{14}\), Buenos Aires is the gravitational center of politics, economics, and cultural production in Argentina. The city is divided into 48 different barrios (neighborhoods) that have different aesthetic, cultural, and economic characters. First and foremost a port city, its strategic location on the mouth of the Río Plata can explain the mix of cultural influences and immigration patterns (European and Latin American) that have gradually constructed its foundation and identity (Gorelik 2009). Walking through the streets of Buenos Aires today, one immediately notices the chaotic energy that charges the atmosphere with an air of unpredictability. Indeed, the streets of Buenos Aires have absorbed political revolutions, military coups, state terrorism and guerrilla violence, a diverse range of social movements, and countless expressions of collective cultural and political expression.

Although street art arrived a little “late” in Buenos Aires (10-20 years behind other cities in Europe, North America, and even Latin America), it has quickly established a prolifically productive street art world with some unique characteristics (Fox-Tucker 2010). While it is technically illegal to damage public or private property\(^{15}\), this law is rarely enforced because street art and even graffiti is not immediately understood as “damage” (Interview with Melissa on June 27, 2012).

\(^{14}\) The total population of the Buenos Aires province, including the city and its neighboring districts, is 13 million (according to Wikipedia statistics).

\(^{15}\) It was difficult to uncover the facts on street art’s legal status, everyone I talked to seemed to have a different understanding of the legal boundaries.
Instead street art is supported by a popular attitude that encourages public expression rather than fears it. Additionally, Buenos Aires is geographically massive for the size of its population; the concrete sprawl provides ample wall space for artists. Therefore street artists are often able to work during daylight hours, sometimes for days at a time, without the pressure of time or legal risk. This public exposure to the entire process of their work has generated a tradition of social interaction between artists and passerbys. In fact, most of the artists that I interviewed informed me that these interactions were what they liked best about working in the street. Artists like Mart and Ice have even been able to build relationships with their neighborhoods because they usually paint close to their apartments or workshops for practical reasons. The street artist known as “Ice” said he has a fan group of older women in his neighborhood that visit him whenever he’s outside painting. Argentine street artists are also known for their collaborative work, with groups of artists that have been painting together for over ten years. Collaboration, either between artists or between the artist and the viewer, seems to be an essential characteristic of street art in Buenos Aires—an ethos that is nearly impossible to generate in a society like New York City that strictly regulates public space and criminalizes these types of interventions.

Utilizing public space for political expression and discourse has been ingrained in the historical fabric of Argentine society for over a century. The use of public space for purely creative visual manifestations is a relatively new phenomenon (Lau 2008; Chaffee 1993), yet while street art in Buenos Aires might not directly channel a political cause, any visual assertion in public space is a “political act”: “art is political not because of its subject matter but because it secretes the sort of
dissensus-engendering—or consensus-corroding—sensibility that brings previously invisible or scarcely visible bodies into focus” (Wright 2008; 3-4). According to Stephen Wright, street artists intrinsically engage in the “politics of visibility” by visually asserting what they think should belong in public space. Thus creative, expressive street art seeks to broaden the range of possibilities within the medium of public expression precisely because it does not add to the volume of political content. Street artists (in both Buenos Aires and New York) are also making a statement about the visibility of art: contrary to the contemporary conceptualization of fine art, art should be visible and interactively available in spaces outside of the walls of art institutions.

4.2: Political Graffiti and Mobilization of Public Space

The last century of Argentina’s history has been characterized by tumultuous cycles of democratic and authoritarian governments. Political and ideological struggles polarize and enflame public discourse; within this context, Argentines have used graffiti, wallpainting, and poster as a decentralized form of political expression (Chaffee 1993). The practices of physically occupying public space and directly using the city walls as a form of mass media are deeply embedded in Argentina’s history and in the history of Buenos Aires. In his book, Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries, Lyman G. Chaffee meticulously researched the history of political graffiti and street art in Buenos Aires, locating the first organized occurrence of this medium in the political campaigns of the Socialist party during the 1896 elections. In addition to the more traditional

16 Argentina’s fine art world reproduces the Euro-American structures of the art market and art galleries (Cullen 2008).
practice of handing out flyers and pamphlets, the Socialist party plastered
approximately 8,000 posters that outlined their party platform all around the city.
Chaffee concludes that this event inspired a “tradition” that was swiftly adopted by
almost all Argentinean political parties and organizations (1993; 103).

Even today, after the advent of television and other forms of electronic media,
political parties still systematically produce an immense amount of political graffiti\(^{17}\),
especially around election time. This type of political propaganda has a recognizable
form: large bold letters made with paint rollers, often in the national colors of blue
and white, painted across building like factories and warehouses that have high

\(^{17}\) Chaffee refers to the type of political campaigning as “graffiti” because of its
physical medium—decentralized wall painting and postering in public spaces.

Figure 4.2: Political Graffiti Accompanying a Pro-Abortion
Demonstration (November 2011)
visibility along major roads or railways. I was living in Buenos Aires during the 2011 presidential election and noticed this graffiti everywhere expelling campaign slogans like “Yes for Kristina” and “Kristina is with the people”. Today however, one can gage a sense of annoyance or resentment for this political graffiti, possibly because it has become a blatant form of propaganda that visually invades public spaces (sometimes even plastering over murals and pre-existing street art)\(^\text{18}\). In fact, street artists like Jaz and Ever have been commissioned to paint factory and warehouse walls because the owners are sick of this political graffiti.

Graffiti has had a grassroots appeal for many societies facing repression or political conflict because it is a tool that can be used by literally anyone. Graffiti can be voice for those without the economic or political access to institutional forms of media (television, newspapers, radio, etc.). In Argentina, graffiti, postering, and wallpainting have been used to voice dissent, to spread information, to memorialize victims of violence or oppression, and to communicate events (Chaffee 1993). The medium of visual public intervention has an instilled cultural value because it has been utilized an important tool of resistance during so many eras of Argentine history.

The temporal political and economic climate will typically determine the conditions of how public space is used and conceptualized. Political graffiti exploded in the 1940s during the rise of Juan Domingo Perón and the populist Peronista movement. Chaffee argues that:

Essentially, political graffiti in Argentina had its origins in class politics and was directly linked to the political evolution of the workers and the dynamics of their popular culture during the transition

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\(^{18}\) Both of the street art tours (Buenos Aires Street Art and Graffitimundo) that I went on stressed public sentiment.
to Peronism. Graffiti were symbolic of class politics, an expression of political will evolving out of the opposition and protests of the working class against the dominant political elite and their culture (1993; 104).

When Perón was ousted in 1955 by a military coup, Argentina’s political stability became even more precarious; over the next thirty years of turbulence, graffiti and street art became a spring of unfiltered popular reactions. Under Perón’s rule, this type of underground, do-it-yourself form of mass media had become a legitimate form of popular expression (Chaffee 1993). Therefore the military governments that seized control of Argentina in 1955, 1966, and 1976 unsurprisingly feared the public agency and influence of this decentralized medium.

One of Chaffee’s most salient observations is that graffiti and street art have the power to break an imposed, repressive silence: “As an underground medium, street graphics advertised to the public and the military that an active opposition existed” (1993; 107). For example, when Perón was exiled from Argentina in 1955, the streets of Buenos Aires rang out with dissent and the followers of Peronismo scribbled “Perón vive!” (Perón lives!) or “Perón vuelve!” (Perón returns!) on any available surface (Chaffee 1993; 107). However, the brutal state terrorism imposed on Argentine society during the “Dirty War” and the subsequent military dictatorship from 1976-1983 did successfully quell most forms of free expression—including graffiti—until the beginning of the 1980s (Chaffee 1993).

The repression and violence that defined this dark period of Argentine history interrupted an otherwise long tradition of political debate and expression in public space. During these years, Argentina suffered from state-run terrorism that systematically tortured and “disappeared” more than 30,000 Argentines that were
allegedly associated with leftist groups like the Montoneros (Villalón 2007).

Violence and fear stifled dissent and the leftists and radical intellectuals who were not seized by the state were exiled or fled to other countries. The dictatorship also effectively shut down Congress and banned all political parties and unions (Lau 2008). Unsurprisingly, this period put a halt to any free or democratic cultural production—Argentines were not even allowed to meet in public spaces. Many of the country’s visual artists either fled the country or in extreme cases, committed suicide (Cullen 12). When democracy was finally reinstated in 1983, Argentina had to process the heavy weight of collective trauma before it could start rebuilding its free artistic voice again.

One of the events that broke the silence was the march of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. These women are now contemporary icons of Argentine identity, who first started to congregate illegally in the central plaza of Buenos Aires (Plaza de Mayo) during the finals years of the dictatorship. As the mothers of the desaparecidos (the “disappeared”: victims of state terrorism that were kidnapped and killed) 19, they donned symbolic white kerchiefs in their march around the plaza, demanding to know what happened to their children (Lau 2008). The Madres demonstrated peacefully, occupying the most important piece of public space in the entire city of Buenos Aires. Without taking any outright militant actions against the state, the Madres successfully constructed a profound visual presence that the city could not ignore. Part of their visual protest included the appropriated use of a series of artistic symbols to represent their cause (photographs of their children,

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19 The term “desaparecido” alludes to how the military regime hid the evidence of their systematic violence.
black silhouettes of people, and the white kerchief), which to this day hold ubiquitous meaning in any part of Argentina (Lau 2008). In fact, a series of white kerchiefs are now painted on ground of the Plaza de Mayo, marking the route of their procession. These were some of the new cultural symbols that a stunned and wounded Argentina used to start rebuilding itself. The Madres were the first group that strategically and illegally occupied public space—a politically transgressive act that made the repression and violent crimes of the dictatorship visible after years of forced silence.
Along with the actions of the Madres, graffiti in general started to slowly reemerge in the beginning of the 1980s (Chaffee 1993). However, public space was truly reclaimed the day that democracy returned to Argentina in December 1983, when thousands of posters featuring life-size silhouettes (used to symbolize a desaparecido) were plastered all over the city overnight (Lau 2008). Argentines could then add the name and age of family member or friends that they had lost. Thus the return to democracy was marked with one of the most powerful demonstrations of street art in Argentina’s history, engaging the participation of thousands of individuals.

4.3: The Rise of Activist Art

The return of democracy in 1983 and the economic collapse of December 2001 were two critical events that solidified the value of free expression and the democratic use of public space in Argentine culture. When the military authority finally stepped down, the public spaces of Buenos Aires were cathartically filled with different forms of graffiti and street art (Chaffee 1993). The transition into democracy was not going to happen seamlessly, especially after a generation of activists, academics, and artists had been systematically purged from society. Argentines struggled to balance two contradictory impulses: to move forward, and to recover what was forcibly erased—or “disappeared”—from the past (Lau 2008). Several social movements also formed during this time, spurred on by issues of human rights, political accountability, and rebuilding collective memory (the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo were in the epicenter of these movements). After years of suffering from violent repression, many Argentines collectively felt the need to
protect their democratic rights and through political and cultural campaigning, to ensure that this type of tyranny and repression never happens again.

Activist street art collectives like the Grupo de Arte Callejero and Grupo Etcétera emerged during the late 1990s as part of this social impulse to protect democratic rights. These collectives represented a new breed of activism that focused on visual interventions like signs, posters, wallpaintings, and stencils, which principally communicated through images rather than text (Lau 2008). Although these groups aligned themselves with certain causes like human rights, they did not affiliate themselves with any formal political party, union, or organization; they formed a new wave of public expression in which individuals and small collectives experimented with methods of public communication in a decentralized manner. To be sure, many national and local issues were debated through street art and graffiti, but these new commentaries were more likely to be made by individuals operating independently from any politician or formal political organization. In a society now passionately embracing free expression, Argentines started to use public space to address moral, economic, and ideological issues like divorce, national debt, Marxism vs. neoliberalism, etc. (Chaffee 1993). The possibilities of what could be expressed in the streets kept expanding, and more pictorial interventions also started to appear. While the GAC and Grupo Etcétera chose to strictly focus on political imperatives, the return of democracy also inspired a trend of individual artistic exploration.

4.4: The Beginning of Aesthetic Graffiti and Street Art

The 1990s were marked by the emergence of a new generation of activists, artists, and youth subcultures (Chaffee 1993). While there was certainly a large
portion of youth that participated in movements for human rights like GAC and
Grupo Etcétera, there were also many youth cultures that wanted to break away from
the past and produce music and art that wasn’t strictly political (Lau 2008). As a
result, graffiti began to appear that was not related to politics at all—at least not
through content. Some of the best-known street artists (Jaz, Mart, and Poeta) started
writing graffiti at this time.

Inspiration for this new type graffiti initially came from the graffiti culture of
New York City: graffiti focused on letters, color, style, and activity of “tagging” the
city with one’s name (Lau 2008). During the 1990s this type of stylized graffiti had
already been adopted by cities around the world; young Argentines were finally
exposed to it through magazines and movies that became internationally popular.
Many of the young graffiti writers of this time period were also influenced by the
thriving Brazilian graffiti culture. In 1994, the now world famous Os Gemêos along
with other Brazilian artists such as Tinho and Binho visited Buenos Aires and painted
various walls around the city (Lau 2008). Jaz said that he was first exposed to this
type of colorful and stylistic graffiti through the work left behind by these Brazilians
(Interview on July 6, 2012). Argentina at this time had more of a punk and skater
culture than a hip-hop one; indeed many graffiti and street artists were connected to
one of these subcultures. Although Argentines were certainly influenced by New
York and Brazilian style graffiti, they adapted it to the context of Argentine culture.
Therefore a lot of this non-political graffiti focused on Argentinian band names,
soccer teams, and popular figures like Diego Maradona or Carlos Gardel (Lau 2008).
Some of the first artistically expressive street art interventions also took place during the 1990s. When the Brazilian artists came to Buenos Aires in 1994, they were hosted by Alfredo Segatori (known as Pelado: “the bald one”), and within that same year he became the first active muralist in the city. Pelado adopted the free-hand technique of aerosol from graffiti, but started to paint “espejos urbanos” (“urban mirrors”) that reflected different aspects of the city (Interview on July 21, 2012).

Pelado has a background in scenography and theater, yet through a lot of practice and experimentation, he taught himself how to maneuver aerosol. Pelado stated that he was never interested in “tagging” or the cryptic lettering of graffiti, yet he has always been attracted to the idea of art in public space—visual art, theater, music, and dance. For the first four to five years (1994-1998), he claims to have been the only artist painting publicly. Now as a man of over forty years of age, he is a well-known public figure with over 100 murals in Buenos Aires.
The first street art collective, DOMA, was also formed in 1998 by a group of four graphic design students of the University of Buenos Aires. In an interview with Charlotte Lau, “Chu” reflected that their interventions were initially inspired by the boredom they felt with school and graphic design; there were interesting opportunities provided by the scale, format, and freedom of street art (2008; 21). During their first experiments with stencils and wheatpastes they felt the need to make some sort of political statement or social reflection of the city. This appears to be a common instinct felt by many street artists when they first start out painting in Buenos Aires—especially in the 1990s and early 2000s. Public space was open for interventions and expression, yet there was an expectation for political content due to its history of political significance. Pelado, DOMA, and FASE (another collective of graphic design students that formed in 2000) were some of the first artists that started to break the expectation of political discourse in public space. Their work also proved that aesthetic “art” could exist in the street: although political expression in public space had been legitimized by a century of practice and tradition, artistic expression at that time still had not been freed from the artistic institutions of higher education, galleries, and museums (Lau 2008). Therefore these artists, in combination with an emerging movement of stylistic graffiti, initiated a new trend in public expression that diverted from the dominant political discourse.

4.5: December 2001: An Explosion of Public Expression and Cultural Resistance

Even though expressions of street art and graffiti had begun to expand and diversify in the 1990s, the economic catastrophe of 2001 acted as a further spark plug
for public expression (Lau 2008; Villalón 2007). In December of 2001, the economy collapsed—many Argentines lost their jobs and savings, inflation spiraled out of control, and Argentina had five different presidents within a period of twelve days (Villalón 2007). The crisis was the culmination of political and economic instability—of corruption and disastrous economic plans. The neoliberal reforms enacted by the President, Carlos Menem, dramatically transformed the economic structure of the country, ultimately producing a large heterogeneous mass of the population that faced unemployment, impoverishment, and overall financial instability (Villalón 2007). There were also growing signs of corruption within the political sphere and Argentines grew frustrated and lost confidence in traditional institutions like political parties and labor unions. Argentina was no longer facing the direct, brutal repression of a dictatorship, yet “informal” economic repression was still a reality—as the income gap widened, Argentine society became dramatically more unequal (Villalón 2007). The economic collapse of December 2001 essentially lit the fuse to a growing powder keg of popular unrest, and this moment proved to be critical in the development of Buenos Aires’ street art.

December of 2001 is infamous for the protests and rage that erupted through almost every level of Argentine society. It was a crisis that afflicted the entire country, a collective experience that stimulated an enormous movement of organization from the ground up. In addition to new types of public demonstrations like piquetes (disruptive road blocks), cacerolazos (city-wide gatherings that involved pot banging) and new forms of political and economic organizations like neighborhood assemblies and informal barter clubs—street art and graffiti became the
visual medium that assisted in mobilizing the masses and reclaimed public space as a political and cultural tool (Villalón 2007). The economic crisis of 2001 launched a new wave of street art that literally illustrated the chaos and public outrage. More politically inspired street art collectives (similar to GAC) emerged at this time, and many of them worked together to fill the streets with dialogue (Lau 2008). Some of the collectives like Iconoclasistas used the Internet to disseminate stencil-making instructions and encouraged their compatriots to create their own statements or use the designs they freely provided (Lua 2008).

From 2001 and onwards there was also an explosion of artistically expressive street art. Thus within the same form of art (visual public intervention), there were two distinct reactions to same political and economic chaos. On one side there were the activist collectives that produced purely political content with the intent of public mobilization towards explicit causes. On the other were individual artists (and a few collectives), formally trained and completely self-taught, who created elaborate stencils or painted large murals that did not engage in any type of formal activism. These were more aesthetically stylized interventions that injected color and surreal or fantastical imagery into the urban environment. The latter group of artists composed a new wave of street artists, many of them just joining in the chaos of the moment, not fully considering their interventions as “art”.

Gonzalo of Buenos Aires Stencil started making stencils at this time with his friend “El Negro” (Interview on July 14, 2012). They were both artistically untrained but began intervening in public space to add their personal humor and imagery to moment of public mayhem. At first their stencil designs were fairly simple, usually
involving one color and one layer of detail. Stencils were the most prevalent form of street art at this moment primarily because they can be easily made and used repeatedly. At the moment, the two friends were just having fun; they did not plan on turning stencil making into a type of prolonged artistic career. But the crisis also attracted the attention of international media, and suddenly their stencils started appearing on news channels across the globe. They installed their stencils at night in the downtown banking district,

Then during the day the plaza and surround area would completely fill up with people and three million people would see our work. There were also reporters and film crews so our work would also appear on TV...we were lucky to paint in places—withou trealizing—how much attention they'd draw at that moment...if you paint in that zone now, no one would see it (Interview on July 14, 2012).

With the world keenly watching events unfold, Argentines became more aware and reflective of their street art and public culture. Thus Gonzalo began making stencils at a critical moment in which Argentine society realized and embraced the power of mass public occupation and intervention (in a variety of forms). Despite the devastating events, some Argentines began to feel a certain amount of pride towards the participation and creative action of citizens in the street (Lau 2008). The 2001 crisis in combination with the return of democracy, made a lasting imprint on Argentine society; these events demonstrated the democratic importance of a free public voice, and the power that this voice commands when it is made visible.

4.6: The Street Art Paradise

What followed after the explosion of activism and art in 2001 was a steady rise in creative and spontaneous artistic interventions in Buenos Aires. The long-standing tradition of political graffiti and occupation of public space planted the seeds
for tolerance, and after December 2001, the political and cultural tolerance for legal and illegal public expression was at an all time high. There was a tangible, culturally understood freedom—all individuals have the right to express themselves in public space. This is clearly a situation that stands in stark contrast to the hostile context of graffiti’s emergence in New York City. In Buenos Aires, graffiti and street art were first culturally understood as valuable tools of public expression—instead of destructive, criminal practices perpetrated by urban delinquents. Pelado claims that Buenos Aires is a “paradise” for street art because it is a medium that has consistently garnered public support (Interview on July 21, 2012). Indeed, he points out that all forms of urban visual interventions in Buenos Aires have received good press and positive social reception since democracy returned—they have never been negatively framed by the mass media. In point of fact, Buenos Aires has never had any anti-graffiti laws.
The lack of stigma attached to visual public interventions in Buenos Aires fostered an encouraging environment in which artists could experiment and explore the possibilities of street art. Gonzalo said that he initially made stencils with political messages, but like many of the other new stencil artists (RunDontWalk, Stencil Land, and Malatesta), his work transitioned into more aesthetic, or “poetic” art (Interview on July 14, 2012). These artists believed that popular art and public discourse was already too saturated in politics, so instead of inundating the streets with more political dialogue they instead chose to create humorous or whimsical content that could potentially inspire other emotional reactions: laughter, curiosity, awe, pleasure, etc. (Lau 2008). Their artistic progression after the crisis thus
deepened the division between activist art and street art. Street artists formed their own movement of public expression driven by creative manifestations of individual imagination and playful interactions with physical space. Their actions asserted that public space could also be used as an alternative medium of artistic expression, which frees individuals from the limitations of institutionalized art (art school, galleries, and museums) and allows the artist to form more interactive relationships with their viewers.

The street artists that emerged after the 2001 crisis established the foundation of the current street art world. Gonzalo remembers how he steadily became aware of other active stencil artists, and through communication and messages left on the street, they gradually established contact (Interview on July 14, 2012). When he reflected on the last decade of producing street art, Gonzalo concludes: “If I started painting and there was no one else painting, and I didn't meet anyone else, I don't know if I would have continued to paint for ten years alone” (Interview on July 14, 2012). Most of the initial friendships between artists from that moment are still active today; they continue to collaborate and work together. Although these artists did not rally around an explicit ideology or cause, the activity of producing street art initiated a social cohesion early on. In a similar manner to the development of graffiti and street art cultures of New York City, the social bond of shared creative activity facilitated the growth of a new art world. Over the last twenty years, walls all over the sprawled out city have started emanating a colorful vibrancy. Today street art in all sizes, styles, materials, and content seem to spontaneously burst from every corner.
Word of this “street art paradise” has even traveled outside of Argentina’s borders. Within the last decade, this art began attracting international attention; artists from around the world have traveled to Buenos Aires to paint because of its legal and social tolerance towards street art, in addition to the ample wall space that is readily available (Fox-Tucker 2010). There are even several organizations established within the city that now administer street art “tours” and manage up to date websites that document new street art and events. The following chapter will investigate the inner dynamics of this paradise.
Chapter 5: The Street Art World of Buenos Aires

“We take advantage of the chaos that is Buenos Aires. We are part of the chaos.”

Jaz was one of the first artists to begin painting on city walls in the 1990s. At the age of fifteen he started writing graffiti as a fun pastime with friends, but this gradually evolved into a more serious artistic activity in confluence with his artistic training and development as a fine artist. Jaz comes from a middle class family that has encouraged his artistic endeavors since he was five years old, thus he has formally studied a diverse range of artistic mediums, from painting to scenography, at a university level. However, ever since he wrote his first tag he has never abandoned the street art world. Through years of activity painting on the street and in the studio, Jaz has developed a successful artistic career in both street art and fine art. Instead of working in opposition, these two art worlds have converged in a favorable balance that has enabled Jaz to take advantage of the unique opportunities in each medium.

Jaz paints street art because he profoundly enjoys it: “Today I don’t paint for any particular cause, I paint because I need to. It’s not a hobby—my life is directly influenced by it” (Interview on July 26, 2012). The open environment of Buenos Aires permitted Jaz to experiment and development his unique style of street art. Many of his friends are also street artists whom he has met and developed relationships with through over ten years of painting in the street. Thus for Jaz, street art has never had a political or ideological imperative:

Really it’s so much fun, more fun than anything else. It’s boring and lonely to work inside and alone…On the street you can’t control anything, it’s this mixture of adrenaline and action that I love. And I
hope that as long as I can physically endure it, I will continue to paint in the street (Interview on July 26, 2012).

Indeed, street art is the foundation of his social world (both locally and internationally) and has directed his professional artistic career.

Figure 5.1: A Mural by Jaz in Almagro (June 2012)

In fact, Jaz is one of the few Argentine street artists who has received international attention and has subsequently been invited to paint in countries around the globe. Street art has enabled Jaz to travel to the United States (multiple times), Brazil, Peru, Mexico, Italy, France, South Africa, Chile, England, Norway, Germany, and Spain for both street art festivals and solo gallery exhibitions. Jaz’s international success and recognition as a talented and innovative street artist has undoubtedly facilitated his entrance into galleries. However, the world of fine art has always been
a part of his life—Jaz has an art school education. For Jaz, working privately on canvas is just another way he expresses himself, and it diversifies his experience as an artist.

Despite having a relaxed and encouraging environment for street art, Buenos Aires does not provide many institutionalized opportunities (in galleries and exhibitions) for street artists: “We are forced to work abroad. On one hand this is great because you get familiar with a more expansive market…yet this means that there are not many things to do in your own city, there are few opportunities in galleries…it is a very closed off world” (Interview on July 26, 2012). However, Jaz has profoundly enjoyed his experiences abroad. He explained to me that street art is a medium that facilitates cultural exchanges; it permits artists to directly interact with the cultures of different urban environments: “More than a fulfilling artistic experience, [street art] fills you with experiences—with perspectives of cities, countries, and people that you otherwise would not have access to”.

When I asked Jaz if he had ever considered relocating to another country, to a city that has more fine arts opportunities, he shook his head. In all of his experience traveling abroad, he has never felt as comfortable painting in the street as he does in Buenos Aires. Indeed he has observed a contradictory dynamic between the art market and street art: “Real markets for street art already exist. There are galleries that actually want to feature your work, yet they are located in the most difficult cities to paint in” (Interview on July 26, 2012). He cites New York City, Paris, and London as examples of this contradiction.
5.1: Street Art in a Different Context

Street art is a medium that inherently requires adaptation. In New York City, street artists and graffiti writers must adapt to the strict legal regulation of public space. In confronting these legal limitations, artists have had to adjust their production practices (materials, installation techniques, and physical locations), which have in turn shaped the structure of the art world. Street artists in Buenos Aires face a different set of limitations. In contrast to New York City, the difference between “legal” and “illegal” street art is insignificant. The “chaos” that Jaz refers to consists of the unpredictable quality of the day-to-day life in Buenos Aires, especially given the turbulence of the past and the public’s subsequent reclamation of public space. Issues surrounding urban poverty, crime, or the incessant protests and manifestations that block traffic and disrupt order are more likely to gain the police’s attention than the actions of graffiti writers and street artists. In contrast to New York City, the city authorities of Buenos Aires are not attempting to uphold the same image of visual control (graffiti is also not perceived as a threat to their power). Therefore legal risks are negligible, and finding wall space is also not an issue. Instead, street artists in Buenos Aires commonly face financial barriers (spray paint for instance is imported into Argentina and is therefore very costly) and an institutionalized art world that is less expansive and therefore more “closed off” than in New York.

Buenos Aires is a unique urban environment with an unusually high tolerance for public forms of expression (protests, graffiti, music, demonstrations, street art, etc.). As discussed in the previous chapter, the collective experience of ruthless repression and political and economic instability has substantiated the cultural
importance of public space and expression. The fact that heterogeneous masses have participated in public demonstrations and protests (particularly during the 2001 crisis) may have prevented the medium of public intervention from being characterized by a specific social identity—which is what occurred in New York City when graffiti became associated with criminal urban youth. Artists like Jaz have thus been given ample space and freedom to build a street art world that openly interacts with the city’s different neighborhoods without the need to justify their work with a political cause or rationale. Argentines that want to use the medium of public intervention for political causes have developed a separate network of activist collectives (like the GAC). I found that, like Jaz, most of the active street artists in Buenos Aires have a middle class background, have received some type of formal artistic training, and produce street art because it gives them the freedom to not only create whatever content they want, but also to construct their social role as an artist. Furthermore, due to the fact that Buenos Aires is not a high profile city like New York in the visual art world, street art has actually served as a medium that exposes artists like Jaz to an international audience, via the Internet.

Overall, Buenos Aires is an urban setting that presents more opportunities than limitations. Indeed, the street art world of Buenos Aires takes full advantage of the city’s cultural tolerance for public expression. Artists can easily gain permission to paint walls in their neighborhoods, and there are also plenty of abandoned buildings and unprotected walls free at their disposal. Therefore the street art community is generally composed of individuals like Jaz who have seized the opportunity to work outside because it is first of all, easy to do; it enables the artist to
work outside of private spaces and potentially collaborate with other artists; it makes
them visible and approachable to the local community; and it is a chance to work on a
large scale in an interesting physical setting.

5.2: Defining “Street Artists” and “Street Art”

Today the street art scene in Buenos Aires is composed of a diverse range of
individuals. It’s impossible to know how many people are actively producing street
art, but over the last five years this practice of public expression has expanded
dramatically. In just the small selective sample of my interviewees, there are both
men and women as young as twenty-one and as old as forty-three. The demographics
of my sample group are difficult to generalize, yet the majority of the twenty-three
individuals come from a middle-class background with both of their parents engaged
in full-time work. Most of these artists have are also born and raised porteños, but a
handful of these artists are from other countries or the provinces and moved to
Buenos Aires to pursue academic or economic opportunities: Gonzalo (Buenos Aires
Stencil) and Ignacio (Pelos de Plumas) both moved from the provinces to Buenos
Aires in order to pursue collegiate studies; Nerf immigrated with his family from
Seoul, South Korea to Buenos Aires when he was nine; Sebastian (Malegría) is
originally from Bogotá, Colombia but moved to Argentina to attend college as well.
As a busy port city, Buenos Aires has always been site of constant international
cultural exchange and street art is yet another medium that displays this centrifuge of
influences.

20 A word used to describe someone who lives in Buenos Aires.
Before street art gained mainstream popularity in the mid 2000s, graffiti and stenciling attracted many of first wave artists who had zero formal artistic training (Lau 2008). Mart, Nerf, Gonzalo, and Cabaio Stencil all initiated their artistic development directly through practice on the street either with graffiti or stencil making. Out of this first wave of graffiti writers and street artists, Jaz was one of the few who was simultaneously a full time art student and street artist. Throughout the entire time spent in a classroom he never saw these worlds mix: “When I was studying in the IUNA there were very few people who were interested in working in the street. It was like, ‘What is this?’—it was a strange, unfamiliar idea” (Interview on July 26, 2012).

Figure 5.2: A Jorge Rodriguez-Gerada Mural in Colegiales (June 2012)
However, after the explosion of public activity in 2001, street art as an artistic expression formed a decidedly different community than the parallel trend of activist art (Lau 2008). As the street art community expanded and demonstrated the aesthetic possibilities of street art (scale, color, detail, etc.), more individuals trained in fine arts began to pay attention. In an interview with Carolina Cuore, she claimed that she began creating street art in 2009 after some of her classmates in art school introduced her to the practice. Today, she observes: “All of the young people I know in fine arts are working on the street” (Interview on July 4, 2012). In point of fact, fifteen out of the twenty-four artists that I interviewed had at some point taken formal art classes, and ten had studied fine arts at a university level. Those who did not study fine art, but still went to college, studied related fields such as architecture, graphic design, or sound and image design.

Therefore it was unsurprising to discover that most street artists consider themselves “artists”—not activists21. Eleven of the artists I interviewed are attempting to support themselves economically entirely through artistic production and/or instruction. Artists like Jaz, Ever, Mart, and Poeta, who have been active on the street for almost a decade, have developed a recognizable style and name that attracts commercial propositions. These artists can earn money through commissioned work either by the city government, private houses, or businesses. They are also constantly producing work privately for galleries or sales (almost every

21 This is not a given characteristic for anyone who produces visual public interventions. Activists like the GAC members who use street art for purely political ends are generally not engaged in artistic careers.
single artist that I interviewed has sold their artwork in a gallery or art fair). However, most of the street artists who have not established this artistic fame, support themselves and the constant purchasing of paint and supplies through a wide variety of day jobs—clothing design, commercial screen printing, taxi driving, commercial graphic design, illustration, bartending, restaurant work, and even fixing computers. Besides the select few that attract well-paying commissions and gallery work, street artists must routinely sacrifice their time and money for work that might not generate any attention or future recognition.

Even though the individuals who create street art are also often involved in other forms of institutional artistic production, most of my interviewees embraced the “street artist” label. Street work remains the number one priority for these artists. In contrast to New York, aesthetically driven street art in Buenos Aires is not a “radical” medium of expression. Street art is welcomed in Buenos Aires, and this fact alone has permitted street art to be a relaxing and enjoyable activity in which the artist does not have to rush, worry about the police, or hide their identity. “In Buenos Aires I can be painting a mural with a police officer beside me saying, ‘Good work, kid. Are you spending all your own money on this?’ And I say ‘yes’ as he laughs” (Interview with Ever on October 26, 2012).

Based on my interviews, the procedure for obtaining a wall goes something like this: the artist finds a wall that they like, and if it is not an abandoned or decrepit building, they ring the doorbell and show the owner of the building their sketches, thus explaining their intentions, emphasizing the fact that they are not charging a fee

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22 It is important to note that all of these artists, like Jaz, have continued to produce free, non-commissioned street work.
for their artistic labor. The artists are usually granted permission. By virtue of this procedure, street artists are directly communicating with the residents of their neighborhood, gaining their trust and confidence, and eventually establishing an artistic reputation. Street artists seem to thoroughly enjoy this entire process because it imbues their work with social meaning. They get to work openly on the street for hours at a time, casually talk with people that walk or drive by (sometimes community member even offer the artists drinks or snacks while they paint). Cuore explained how she sometimes felt like she was a street “therapist”; people would approach her with all types of commentary (Interview on July 4, 2012). It is a socially interactive, artistically stimulating and challenging process that artists often get “addicted” to. All of my interviewees thoroughly enjoy this social aspect of street art: “Street art is a point of contact where people can approach from different realities—it’s the best…I have been able to meet so many people with open minds, it’s incredible…It’s what I like most about painting actually, more than the satisfaction of the mural itself” (Interview with Malegria on July 11, 2012).

Furthermore, the large and public canvas of a wall provides artists with enough space for collaboration. Indeed, there are some groups of artists, like Jaz and Ever or Mart, Poeta, Roma and Corona who have painted dozens of walls together.

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23 There are also areas in parks or around factories and bus depots in which artists are constantly painting without permission.
5.3: The Street Art Community

Although street art in Buenos Aires is gradually being introduced to the more traditional circuit of contemporary art (museums, galleries, and universities), it is still an art form that relies heavily on informal social networks for most of its material, social, and ideological infrastructure. To a certain extent, the street art world of Buenos Aires has more in common with the graffiti culture of New York than it does with its street art scene. As discussed in the previous chapter, street art in Argentina did not evolve from New York style graffiti—it emerged on its own and separated itself from the community of activists. Thus the street art community has first generation “pioneers” like Chu, Jaz, and Buenos Aires Stencil. Since they began painting street art before the explosion of urban art in the mid 2000s, these artists
have the unique shared experiences of being innovators. Just like the graffiti community of New York, the first wave artists are still present and active in Buenos Aires; they sit at the top of a social hierarchy built from respect and merit. As a result, street artists also define the borders of their community through the construction of “authenticity”. The second wave of street artists (which is significantly larger) have experienced some tension with the “pioneers”; they have struggled to find their place within the street art scene.

The stencil artists like Gonzalo and Cabaio Stencil who emerged through the chaos of 2001 and the artists like Mart, Jaz, Poeta, and Ever who began painting graffiti together in the mid 1990s, since then have formed a tight community founded on years of familiarity and painting together. Artists like Chu, Tec, Defi, and Tester from the first two street art collectives, DOMA and FASE, are also part of this “founding” community. Cooperation and social support was necessary at this time because the techniques and tricks of street art production, like using spray paint or constructing stencils, was not ubiquitous knowledge. Reflecting on the past, Gonzalo tells me, “In the beginning I made terrible stencils of only one color—very simple…then we tried two colors, and started to go a little bit bigger” (Interview on July 14, 2012). But Gonzalo became aware of other active stencil artists and was eager to communicate: “So we started to paint on the same walls to kind of say, ‘Hey, we paint too’. A dialogue started, and about two years later we knew everyone that

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24 Pelado, the city’s first muralist, is familiar with these artists yet he refers to himself as an “outsider” (Interview on July 21, 2012). Thus a shared activity does not innately produce social cohesion. Pelado prefers to work alone, and while he is friendly with everyone, he does not go out of his way to socialize with other street artists.
now works together in the gallery”. As these artists got to know one another, they also enthusiastically shared techniques and tricks. The first wave artists thus combined their skills and practices, essentially forming the preliminary conventions of the street art world.

![Image: Stencil Collaboration]

**Figure 5.4: A Stencil Collaboration With Stencil Land, Malatesta, rundontwalk, and Buenos Aires Stencil (July 2012)**

In addition to pioneering the practice of aesthetic street art, the original stencil artists, Buenos Aires Stencil (Gonzalo and “Negro”), Malatesta, rundontwalk, and Stencil Land, opened the city’s first and only collective gallery for urban art. Hollywood in Cambodia (HIC) opened in conjunction with Post Street Bar, and the pairing of these two ventures has produced a type of urban art headquarters. The gallery and the bar are physically connected and the interior and exterior of the bar is
decorated in layers upon layers of stencil art made by the HIC crew. Its location in Palermo, one of hippest neighborhoods for restaurants and nightlife, has also helped establish its success. Hollywood in Cambodia exclusively features urban artists (from Argentina and abroad), and this “crew” of old friends run the gallery as a type of “chaotic cooperative” in which they only charge a 30% coverage fee for the art they sell—just enough money to run the expenses of the gallery (Interview on July 14, 2012). Gonzalo asserted that the gallery has never had a commercial goal—they don’t gain any economic profit from the gallery—they simply wanted to create a space for exhibitions, events, and interactions between artists.

Every month the gallery features a new exhibition from a local or foreign street artist, and Dario (Malatesta) says that when they can’t line anyone up for a show, one of the members of the collective will step up and exhibit work (Interview June 27, 2012). I attended the opening night of an exhibition by Elian, a street artist from Cordoba, and almost every single artist I had interviewed attended to show their support, drink on the terrace, and hang out for the night. Overall the reception was as very informal and laidback, no one was particularly dressed up for the occasion—not even Elian himself. Dario explained to me that these monthly exhibitions are not an attempt to simulate the conventions of the institutional art world; they are excuses for everyone in the community to get together. Therefore through these initiatives of opening and operating a gallery that acts as a hub for social activity in the street art world, these first wave artists instituted their “authority” as experienced and knowledgeable street artists.
The community of street artists centered around Hollywood In Cambodia does not encapsulate the entire social world of urban art in Buenos Aires. While my research suggests that the street art community is indeed a more open and collaborative the institutionalized art world of Buenos Aires, the real social fabric between street artists is much more nuanced that its idealized version, and it continues to grow more complex as the scene expands under the attention of popular media. In one very long and animated interview with a “second wave artist”, Carolina Cuore, I was first exposed to many of the contradictions and divisions within the street art community. When I asked her about how she felt about the “street art community”, her first response was:

It’s still lacking something here…there isn’t a lot of group work. Groups exist, but not professional groups. It’s like—‘sure I’ll work with you, you, and you’—and we paint for a day, we have a great time—I mean that’s really valid. But what interests me are collective productions and group formations (Interview on July 4, 2012).

Cuore goes on to explain that most “collaborative” murals really consist of a physical dissection of space in which each artist creates their own piece that hopefully complements the other images and styles. Her observations were also echoed in my interviews with Malegria and Ice. When she works on a piece of art collaboratively from beginning to end, Cuore says: “I always learn a lot through this process, but it requires quieting one’s ego”. She then recounted an anecdote in which she unsuccessfully tried to organize a community event for street art. The event ultimately fell through because of logistical problems with the neighborhood and space, yet she said that it was also a mess organizing the artists because some artists
refused to paint on the same wall as others. The exasperation she felt with all of this “immature drama” was disillusioning for her.

Some of the other “second wave” artists (became active after 2005) that I interviewed are Malegria, Lean Frizzera, La Wife, Barbara and Nina (the Beach Girls), Alejandro Sordi and Mondo Lila. Malegria, Lean Frizzera, and Alejandro Sordi also expressed feeling some distance between themselves and the community surrounding Hollywood in Cambodia. Alejandro Sordi is an independent artist who primarily works in graphic design and illustration, but occasionally paints in the street when he is invited by friends. He didn’t express much interest in getting further involved with street art—he observed that street art is currently “in style” and already has established an “elite” (referring to Jaz, Ever, Mart, and the HIC crew) (Interview on June 24, 2012).

Lean Frizzera is also a professional artist whose primary employment involves graphic design and scenography for television and different businesses. Yet he was drawn to street art in 2006, and after his first mural with Jaz and Nerf (Jaz and Lean worked together in Teatro Colón) he was instantly enamored with the experience of working in public. But when I asked him about the community of street artists he said he “wasn’t interested” in getting involved: “Painting is a technique. Muralismo is a technique. Anyone can paint in the street, not just ‘special people’…it’s very closed off; who is above, who is below…people solidify a reputation but it doesn’t mean the quality stays the same or improves” (Interview on July 9, 2012). According to Lean, the “hierarchy” especially becomes apparent during festivals or big collaborations because the artists with the most “experience” receive the best walls.
Furthermore, Lean points out that many of these “original” street artists who are now in their late 30s or early 40s have other stable careers in art and are not very active in the street anymore. Therefore Lean insists that, “You are only a ‘street artist’ if you paint in the street” (Interview on July 9, 2012).

Between the first and second wave street artists, a clear discrepancy in conceptions of “authenticity” can be observed. The first group of street artists have established their authority through their years of experience, and the fact that they were the pioneers making street art before it became commercially “cool” and trendy. These facts alone seem to prove that they are dedicated to medium. On the other hand, “new” street artists like Cuore believe that the social hierarchy and separation within the street art community inhibits the potential for real collaborations to take place. Moreover, the “ego” involved with these rankings mimics the elitist sensibilities of the institutionalized art world. Consequently, artists like Lean Frizzera argue that “authentic” street art should be measured by the quality and dedication put into the piece.

Despite radically different cultural contexts, the street art worlds of Buenos Aires and New York City contain similar social dynamics and tensions. The similarities of hierarchical organization are intimately tied to the notion of authenticity: in both cities street artists consider authenticity a matter of experience, quality, and social intent or responsibility (with the community). In New York City, authenticity is particularly tested by the convergence of street art with the commercial and gallery world (i.e. creating street art just to attract the attention of a gallery). The intersection between the gallery world and street art scene is not as controversial in
Buenos Aires, partially because international galleries (based in the United States and Europe) are more interested than local Argentine institutions. It is also less problematic because even the street artists like Jaz who have traveled internationally for solo exhibitions, have not ceased producing street art locally.

5.4: A Sustainable Street Art Paradise?

Buenos Aires certainly contains the contextual conditions of political and cultural tolerance to foster an expansive and interactive “street democracy”. There were moments in the city’s history in which any form of public expression was a radical political action. Today however, public space has been “reclaimed” by society, and street art is not perceived as a subversive action or form of cultural resistance. The history of brutal violent repression has made human rights a salient

Figure 5.5: A Mural by Ice in Caballito (July 2012)
feature of Buenos Aires’ political culture; the right to express oneself is particularly valued. Unlike the graffiti and street art of New York City, street art in Buenos Aires is not characterized with the same rebellious, rule-breaking ethos. Street art thrives because it is publicly understood as a positive cultural force.

Thus there are very few barriers to visual public expression, it is medium that anyone can potentially use. In this sense, street art in Buenos Aires is democratic because of its accessibility. However, artistic expression requires time and materials, and while anyone can conceivably make street art, artists that are devoted to the medium must have economic support. Street artists in New York, and indeed everywhere, face the same complication. Each city has its own street art world that provides the medium with an infrastructure of social support—yet the collective galleries, festivals, and collaborative efforts do not usually amount in a stable income. Argentine artists have perhaps been more successful in negotiating this issue because the positive image of street art has facilitated more opportunities for commissions—the city government has even sponsored numerous public murals in parks, plazas, city-sponsored festivals, and in subway stations. However, as the ranks of active street artists continue to expand, an artist must have an established reputation in order to attract outside commissions.

The need for financial support, and thus a distinguished artistic reputation is perhaps the most powerful underlying force of tension within street art communities. In Buenos Aires, one’s ranking in the street art community does not affect the accessibility to wall space, yet it does affect artists’ opportunities for paid commissions. Despite the very open and collaborative nature of the street art
community, inner tension manifests itself through the conflicting conceptions of “authenticity”. Older artists want to maintain their visibility and respected status, yet the newcomers feel cheated out of opportunities because they lack the years of experience.

The positive public image of street art in Buenos Aires is what permits street artists to cooperate with their neighborhoods and establish an esteemed artistic reputation. Street artists like Mart and Ice have been painting murals for free in their respective neighborhoods for years. They are familiar public figures within these local communities, and according to Ice: “The neighborhood is my gallery” (Interview on July 20, 2012). Indeed, the streets around their apartments are surrounded by their art. As a result of his consistent public interactions with the neighborhood, Mart feels a “responsibility” to create art that generates “buena onda”\(^{25}\) and can be enjoyed by this public audience (Interview on June 28, 2012). Street artists like Mart and Ice have been able to acquire both commercial and private commissions because they have established reputation. Therefore street artists need to protect both their status within the community and the public image of street art in order to maintain the ideal relaxed and interactive working environment, and to financially support an artistic career. Yet as a result of street art’s “democratic” accessibility in Buenos Aires, street art’s rise to popular attention in the mid-2000s has sparked an avalanche of street art. Mart claims that some of these new artists recklessly run around “destroying” the neighborhoods without regard for the people that have to live with this art (Interview on June 28, 2012). He worries that Buenos

\(^{25}\) A popular Argentine phrase that means “good vibes”.

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Aires is becoming oversaturated with “bad”, “destructive”, which could strain public
tolerance and damage the positive image of street. Again, the construction of
authenticity and street art conventions help maintain these favorable dynamics, even
though it consequently organizes a type of social hierarchy.

While the Buenos Aires street art world thrive on street art’s positive public
image, it is also, predictably, dependent on it. The street art world is not an
autonomous social sphere. Consequently, Argentine street artists rely on their public
relationship more than the New York artists. In New York, the institutional art world
asserts more influence in determining the opportunities for paid work—either through
sale or commission. As Jaz observed, the institutional art world of Buenos Aires does
not eagerly open its doors to street artists. Ever confirmed this observation: “the
galleries are cliché…they need to see what is successful outside first, things happen
here 6-7 years after NY, Paris, Europe. There is still an entrenched establishment of
contemporary art in Argentina, they don’t see the work on the street as art” (Interview
on October 26, 2012). Ever also stated that Argentines never buy his work—foreign
street art collectors are always the buyers. Therefore Argentine street artists are
forced to travel if they want to participate in the art market and advance in an artistic
career that involves a portion of gallery work. Reputation and authenticity again play
a significant role in determining an artist’s opportunities abroad, however this is an
image that is also mediated through the Internet.
Chapter 6: Street Art in Cyber Space

“It was just this girl’s face cut-out, printed on a newspaper, stuck on a door. It was just kind of like an epiphany moment where I was like—‘Holy shit, what is this?’ And that really kind of got the ball rolling for everything else.”

Katherine (known as Luna Park in the street art world) has been obsessively photographing street art and graffiti in New York City since 2004. Ever since she first saw one of Swoon’s wheatpastes on her way to work, she has not stopped snapping photos. Katherine grew up outside of Philadelphia and moved to New York in 1997 to pursue job opportunities. She currently works as a librarian for the German Cultural Institute and possesses a Bachelors degree in Anthropology and German, as well as a Masters in German Literature. Before entering the world of street art she had never directly been involved with an art scene before, yet photography had always been a hobby of hers. What started out as a hobby and a curious fascination, rapidly evolved into a passion that has transformed her life.

Luna Park’s entrance into the street art world all started with a Flickr account26.

As Luna Park’s photo archive steadily grew, street artists and fans began to contact her:

“All of these people started coming out of the woodwork, and being like—‘Oh you know, that piece is by my friend so-and-so’...I don’t know, I guess the more interactions I had with people online, the more curious it made me, and I went from taking a picture whenever I happen to see something, to actively going out and looking for stuff” (Interview on August 24, 2012).

26 Flickr is a type of social media platform primarily used for photo sharing—almost all street artists and graffiti writers have their own Flickr accounts. Flickr also enables communication between users: private messages, commenting abilities on photos, and tagging or liking specific photos.
Through the simple actions of snapping and posting pictures, she gradually established relationships with the artists; she started to play an active role in the community. Now she always has her camera on her, and on “any given weekend” she will explore a different area of the city. “It’s fun…I really feel like I’ve gotten to know the city in a way that I wouldn’t have otherwise—if I hadn’t been motivated to just go out, look at walls, look for art or graffiti. I mean I just walk around a lot” (Interview on August 24, 2012). Artists will also inform her about new pieces, or they even invite her to stop by if they are out painting. Her impressive archive of over 9,200 carefully organized and labeled photographs (on Flickr alone) is understood within the street art scene as a testament to her appreciation for the medium.

“Luna Park” is now a well-known name within the street art and graffiti communities of New York. In addition to her Flickr account, Katherine runs a blog called “The Street Spot” with another street art photographer and friend. The blog allows her to add narrative commentary in addition to photographs, and she can write posts that feature specific artists or events. She does not make any money from her tireless documentation, but she now possesses an interactive relationship with the street art world which has resulted in her own participation in gallery shows (featuring street art photographs), modeling for street artists27, hosting visiting artists, and the overall development of a new social world revolving around street art. In her interview she tried explaining how street art has affected her life:

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27 ElbowToe made a series of portraits featuring street art photographers which he then installed as pieces of street art around New York
“The last thing I do before I go to sleep is look at pictures of street art and graffiti, and it’s the first thing I do when I get up or get home: ‘Oh what happened overnight? Check all the blogs!’ I think street art documentation has equally as an obsessive kind of quality that paint or pasting or whatever does…it’s never enough, there’s always something else, you’re constantly running…wanting to capture it all and feel like part of a bigger picture. It was life transforming I guess, but entirely positive…with maybe one or two exceptions, everyone I’ve met through this connection via locally or internationally, I have like hit it off, I’ve had doors open to me…the common thread. That to me is still really inspiring, that people care so much” (Interview on August 2012).

Katherine claims that she will continue to photograph the street “as long as there is interesting stuff out there”. She has amassed a vast archive of photographs that she would eventually like to donate to a library or university—some public institution that anyone can access.

Luna Park’s story is, first of all, an example of fandom. She is a fan who inadvertently found a niche within the street art community, and there are many other fans in cities around the world who have also discovered this role. However Luna Park is also a figure of authority and respect in the community—her Flickr and Instagram accounts, as well as her blog, have acquired a substantial audience. Her blogs and social media sites have been referred to, by both artists and fans, as one of the best archives of New York City’s street art. The years of obsessive dedication spent documenting and archiving street art demonstrated to the street art community that she was an individual who genuinely loved and valued the medium.

Photography, coupled with the Internet and social media sites, has augmented exposure and communication possibilities (for street artists and fans)—yet it has also complicated the constructed notions of “authenticity” which artists rely on to

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28 Over 1,700 followers on Instagram alone
rationalize and value street art (Becker 2008). In a digital world where, “It’s so easy
to be fake, it’s so easy to be King\textsuperscript{29} from your room” (Interview with Ski on August
18, 2012), both street artists and graffiti writers struggle to keep the core values and
ideologies alive as they navigate digital networks.

6.1: Photography, Street Art, and the Age of the Internet

In Howard S. Becker’s theory of art worlds, he emphasizes the fact that they
“change continuously”; art production relies on an assortment of social forces that
engage with the political and economic spheres of society—it as an orchestration of
values and materials that never stays static (2008; 300). Indeed, Becker states that no
“art world can protect itself fully or for long against all the impulses for change,
whether they arise from external sources or internal tensions” (2008; 301).
Innovations, like the use photography and the Internet, can lead to changes in “routine
patterns of cooperation” within an art world (2008; 304). Street art communities are
not isolated from the technological changes that are currently reshaping the entire
world of communication and media. The proliferation of cheap and accessible digital
media in addition to the rise of social media has dramatically changed how we
perceive events and time: “What was ephemeral, transient, unmappable, and invisible
became permanent, mappable, and viewable” (Manovich 2009; 324). Street art, as
medium that is physically ephemeral and place-based, is inherently perceived
differently through the lens of digital media. While the physical action of installing a
piece of street art simply requires an outdoor wall and some paint—a photograph
posted on the Internet allows a street art piece to live another life.

\textsuperscript{29} Being a “King” in the graffiti community traditionally means being prolifically
active and thus having tags all over the city.
Before the advent of the Internet, photography was the first “innovation” that altered the street art world. Photography is the one safeguard that artists have when they expose their work to the risks of public space. This is especially true if their piece is illegally installed; in a city like New York it could be gone in a matter of hours. Street artists are willing to sacrifice time, money, and energy to donate or “gift” public spaces with their work instead of keeping safely it guarded in a gallery or studio. The use of photography resolved a practical issue: it is enables individuals who are attempting an artistic career to still maintain a type of portfolio, not only necessary to show others but also to understand their own progress and development. Moreover, the need for documentation has created a role for fans, like Luna Park. Local photographers and bloggers act as the “curators” of street art in digital space—a vital core to both local and international street art communities.

This symbiotic relationship between the artists and fans first started with graffiti. In New York City during the 1970s, Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant were trained photographers and complete outsiders to the community, but they both independently developed a fascination with graffiti. Before fully understanding what graffiti was, and before any institutionalized body had shown any interest in this new medium, the two obsessively devoted their time to documenting it. They are now as famous as the most successful graffiti writers of that era, recognized as heroes for their commitment to the medium. Without their interest and archive of

30In fact, on Martha Cooper’s 70th birthday in March of 2013, a group of the most renowned graffiti and street artists from New York City painted the famous Bowery and Houston wall as a tribute to her.
Photographs\textsuperscript{31}, the famed graffiti trains that inspired an international movement could only be described in words.

Photography first developed a synergistic relationship with graffiti, but it naturally evolved to interact with street art as well. Yet in addition to photography, street art coevolved with the development of the Internet. Graffiti went international primarily through the popularity of hip-hop music, but also by means of the few books, magazines, and films that explicitly featured graffiti (Snyder 2009). In contrast, the global proliferation of street art is principally the result of a new generation of artists taking advantage of the opportunities facilitated by the Internet (Irvine 2011; McCormick 2010). The ability to instantaneously document, share, observe, and interact aided a rapid process of diffusion. Today any artist with access to a camera and the Internet can take a picture of their work and expose it to a potentially massive international audience. As Cern reflected on the graffiti community of New York over the last twenty years, he concluded that the space and opportunity provided by the Internet has actually decreased competition and fostered a more peaceful social environment for writers: “It seems like there is enough to go around…There seems to be enough interest that no one seems to be getting that jealous” (Interview on September 15, 2012). Unlike the 1970s and 1980s, when cameras were not installed on every cellphone, there were only a few individuals like, Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, who were taking pictures: “If you didn’t appear in \textit{Subway Art} or ‘Style Wars’ then you weren’t graffiti” (Interview on September 15, 2012). Today, the primary function of street art’s digital form is exposure.

\textsuperscript{31} Published in the world famous book, \textit{Subway Art} (1984).
Photography and the Internet introduces a new set of skills and practices which street artist use to circulate their art beyond the confines of its physical limitations. Cern explains that if you’re upset that your work is not being seen, then: “It’s kind of obvious, it’s just like make your own website, blog your own shit, blast your own Facebook shit. It’s up to you if you want everyone to see your shit…I think it’s in everyone’s own hands nowadays where everyone can do that” (Interview on September 15, 2012).

6.2: The Form of a Photograph

Artists in both cities have referred to photography and the Internet as a type of “double-edged sword”—a digital version of the medium that both limits and expands the art form. Every single artist that I met has some sort of digital platform to exhibit photos of their street art—usually social media sites (Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, or Tumblr), or a personal website. They love the fact that photography enables a piece that is physically tied down to a specific location to be seen by people around the world. Photographs also act as an archive for pieces that have been destroyed or erased. In New York I also found out that photography is used to keep the tradition of painting subway trains alive. Ski informed me: “People paint trains all the time. They just don’t run them. You do your shit, you take your flick, and that’s it. That’s the last time you’ll see it…A photo lives forever” (Interview on August 18, 2012). When I asked him why do graffiti writers bother if all that is left is ultimately a photo, he responded: “Otherwise the train era dies out and that’s the whole reason why graffiti started—because of trains, they move from one part of the city to the other” (Interview on August 18, 2012). In New York City the role of photography as an
archive, as a way to preserve the art and illegal practices that are constantly under threat of elimination, was much more pronounced than in Buenos Aires.

In a city that is considerably more friendly and welcoming to street art, photography is more valued as a tool for publicity in Buenos Aires. Argentina is a country that receives far less international attention for its art scenes than New York City, yet photography coupled with social media permits Argentinean street artists to reach a massive global audience—one that might even dwarf the attention channeled through the traditional means of galleries and museums in Buenos Aires.

Regardless of its use, photography is fundamentally a different medium than street art installed in a public space. Seeing a photograph is not the same as the experience of suddenly stumbling upon a piece on the way to work. The surprise and the spontaneity of this interaction is muted in a photograph. Moreover, when one is actually aware of the street art in a city and wants to find more pieces, they often have to explore neighborhoods and parts of the city that lie off of the beaten path. A photograph is a visual short cut that eliminates this physical (and social) process. Depending on how the photograph is presented, the contextual information of the artist’s name and the location and date of the piece may or may not be displayed—photographs can fly around the Internet without any control. There are for instance, many bloggers who just collect pictures of street art and display them in a mix without any contextual details.

The photograph itself is also a frame. The art can be shot in a variety of ways. A close-cropped photo will only display the art up until its boundaries, therefore cutting out whatever else is on the building. For this reason Dasic says that he prefers
panoramic shots that capture the entire city block (Interview on August 20, 2012). The bloggers and photographers that I talked to in both cities mentioned how photographing street art takes practice and one needs both patience and skill to capture the art. I certainly had my own difficulties photographing street art for my research. Trees, cars, people, and signs can get in the way of a shot and sometimes the piece is too massive to fit in one frame. However these visual “obstructions” are a reminder of the physical experience—street art is literally a part of the street.

A photograph is also a psychological frame. Most city-dwellers that traverse their day-to-day routines are accustomed to the constant onslaught of signs, noises, and advertisements. Today most solo pedestrians or commuters are plugged into a type of mobile device with both their eyes and ears. I found this to be the case in both New York and Buenos Aires, and in my random conversations with residents of both cities, I met many people who were oblivious to the street art in their own neighborhoods. Perhaps as Todd Gitlin proposed, today’s supertorrent of information makes capturing anyone’s full attention is exceedingly difficult (2001). As a phenomenon that has been present in both cities for a number of years, the average pedestrian might tune out street art like they ignore an advertisement. Yet when a piece of street art is isolated in the focus of a photograph, it is presented in a way that might catch the observer’s attention more that it would on the street. The photographs, and the blogs built around displaying them, direct the viewer’s attention. Once one becomes aware of the street art or graffiti in their neighborhood or city, an addicting habit can develop in which one constantly scans the city’s surface for new pieces. Every individual involved with the street art (in both cities) mentioned having
this lens of attention whenever they were out in public. Jaz explained that he never takes the subway in Buenos Aires because he wants to see observe the streets as he travels (Interview on July 26, 2012).

6.3: Blogs and Fandom

Making sense of digital space and the incessant flow of information can be just as chaotic as a bustling city street. Street art blogs and websites act as curators of this digital avalanche of photographs and information. Artists of course often have their own websites with online galleries of their work, but blogs are an organized space in which the entire scene of a city is represented. Blogs play a variety of roles. They are sources for street art “news”: new art, interviews with artists, notices about upcoming events or festivals featuring street art, articles concerning issues or opinions of the medium, etc. Street artists are rarely the individuals running blogs, although some artists occasionally write an article or submit photos of their work. Thus blogs can also act as a type of intermediary between the artists and the fans. While the artist communities have their own physical locations to hang out like the artist-run galleries (Hollywood in Cambodia in Buenos Aires or Low Brow in New York) or studio spaces that act as hubs for information and socializing, the blogs connect curious outsiders and fans to the activities of street artists.

In both Buenos Aires and New York I had the opportunity to interview some of the individuals who run street art blogs. In Buenos Aires there were two major blogs that documented the city’s street art: Graffitimundo and Buenos Aires Street Art. Both of these blogs were started by foreigners and simultaneously administer tours of street art. Therefore in Buenos Aires the practice of blogging and promotion
through tours initially came from outside of the community (and country). Both of these groups are much more than blogs; they have carved a niche out for themselves by means of a mission statement: to promote the street artists and give them national and international exposure. Melissa, an American who studied art history, works for Graffitimundo (she has another part time job teaching English) and explained to me that in addition to administering tours, Graffitimundo is a collective that also organizes events (local and international) to showcase Argentine street art, runs a blog and sells prints from street artists online, assists artists in obtaining paint sponsorships or plane tickets to participate in festivals, translates texts like biographies for the artists (most of the street artists do not speak English), and they are also currently working on a book and documentary that explores the history of public expression in Argentina (Interview on June 27, 2012). I also interviewed Matt, a British journalist who is part of the duo that runs Buenos Aires Street Art. Matt and his friend Guilherme (from Brazil) have already published a book of their street art photographs called Textura Dos. They also started the blog in 2010:

“The idea was to open things up and introduce people to all sorts of different artists…not just the best artists but we also try to showcase works by other artists, not just a select group. We want it to be open and fair. We publish interviews, latest murals, and information on events going on related to street art” (Interview on June 14, 2012).

Even though both groups proclaim a similar mission statement, each has aligned itself closely to different groups of artists and concentrated their attention on different aspects of “promotion”.

The relationships between these two organizations and the street artists of Buenos Aires reflect interesting points of tension within the community.
Graffitimundo focuses primarily on their tours and their role in promoting certain artists (selling their work, getting sponsorships, organizing events, etc.). On their homepage they have a tab labeled “Artists”, clicking on this tab leads to another page with a list of thirty Argentine street artists that features brief biographies, a few photos of their work, and links to their personal websites or social media pages. Melissa emphasized the fact that she considers most of these artists “friends” and that “there are relationships at the base of our work” (Interview on June 27, 2012). She says that trust has been established between the organization and the artists, which is why the artists allow them into their studios and constantly share “what they are up to”. Yet only this group of about thirty artists receives consistent attention from Graffitimundo, and this group mostly consists of the first generation street artists that make up the Hollywood in Cambodia crew and community. When I interviewed street artists like Malegria or Ice who are on the periphery of this tightly knit community, they expressed a little resentment towards Graffitimundo. The street artists that Graffitimundo assists have been referred to as the “elite” and the individuals who are new on the scene view this as a closed off inner circle, reinforced by this organization’s selective promotion.

It is unclear if this tension between the first generation and second generation street artists already existed before the arrival of Graffitimundo. If this indeed was a pre-existing condition of the street art scene, then this outside force of promotion and attention certainly exacerbated this conflict. Buenos Aires Street Art occupies a

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32 They offer private and group tours which run at least five times a week, every week. Although most of the participants are usually foreigners and the tour has been featured in various tourism publications, in 2012 they also inaugurated a free tour on Sundays for just Argentines.
slightly different role, which the artists outside of the “elite” prefer. As a blog, Buenos Aires Street Art is updated almost daily with photos of the newest street art and graffiti. As Matt expressed in his quote above, the blog documents the work of everyone who is actively producing art in public spaces. On the tour I took with Buenos Aires Street Art, we stumbled upon a girl in high school who was painting her first mural as part of a final project for one of her classes. Matt took photos of the work in progress, chatted for a bit and recorded her name, and the next day those photos were on published on the blog. Buenos Aires Street Art does not actively organize events and exhibitions, and it does not directly feature a specific group of artists in order to sell their work. Lean Frizzera professed frustration with what he perceives as a set hierarchy based on years of experience rather than talent or current activity: “Matt’s proposal is more for everyone…the problem with closed scenes is that they don’t let new people and new innovation enter. But the evolution of street art is driven by new people and new ideas” (Interview on July 9, 2012). However Gonzalo—who is part of the Hollywood in Cambodia crew—expressed extreme dislike towards Matt, and claims that he is simply using the art to catapult his own career in photography and journalism (Interview on July 14, 2012).

It is impossible to predict what the street art scene of Buenos Aires would be like now without the presence of these blogs. Street art in Buenos Aires is continuing to receiving more international attention, and these two blogs act as gateways for foreign eyes to get a preview of this world. It should be noted that both of the websites have “English” and “Spanish” options, yet I noticed that Buenos Aires Street Art—which dwarfs Graffitimundo’s posting activity—often lacks Spanish
translations for many of the posts. It is impossible to tell who visits these sites, but I would assume that more foreigners than Argentines view these blogs—primarily because foreigners are the main participants of the tours (at the end of both tours each participant is handed a flyer with the websites of artists to check out and the URL of the organization’s blog). This dynamic reflects the fact that street artists in Buenos Aires tend to have direct relationships with the residents in their neighborhoods. Matt also pointed out: “If you look at the coverage in the papers…every month there are features about street art” (Interview on June 14, 2012). The Argentine media and the city government of Buenos Aires have indeed taken an interest in the street art scene. The city government has even commissioned street artists to paint numerous public murals in subway stations, plazas, schools, etc. Thus street artists in Buenos Aires don’t need to completely rely on a blog to facilitate their connections to local communities—they are frequently outside painting and have become familiar figures in the city.

The political and cultural environment for street art is drastically different in New York City. Because street art is much more likely to be removed or destroyed than in Buenos Aires\(^3\), the duty of documenting and archiving is more prominent. New York based blogs like Brooklyn Street Art and Street Art NYC additionally feature interviews and studio visits with artists. Street artists in New York City are more hidden than in Buenos Aires—especially if they work illegally. Therefore the blogs can offer the rare opportunity to hear first hand accounts from these mysterious

\(^3\) In New York it is rare for a piece of legal street art to last a year, but in Buenos Aires I found pieces (that were not secluded in abandoned areas) that were at least four or five years old. Sometimes artists actually paint over their own work when it starts to show natural signs of decay.
artists. Yet because New York has many galleries that like to feature street artists, the blogs also cover these events and will announce upcoming shows or news of visiting artists. The most popular street art blogs like Brooklyn Street Art and Vandalog (the ones which were most frequently referenced during my interviews and by artists on their social media pages) attempt to provide international coverage. Perhaps this reflects the international diversity of the scene in New York, and the fact that artists are constantly coming and going. Therefore artists that have been in New York, for however long a visit, are often kept tracked by these blogs after they leave the city.

The street art blogs that represent New York’s scene are not as tailored to different segments of the street art community as they are in Buenos Aires. Perhaps this is because the scene in New York is significantly larger and in flux. However I did find that the New York blogs had a hierarchy of authority, in which getting featured in the top blogs was socially understood as achieving higher level of success. Brooklyn Street Art appeared to be the blog at the top of this pyramid, and it is notable that the majority of their coverage revolves around the activities of the most famous and well-respected street artists. The blog has likely gained this social capital through its years of active experience (since 2008), its publication of a book featuring the street art in Brooklyn (aptly named Brooklyn Street Art), its links to famous street artists and street art galleries, and even a connection to the Huffington Post which directs a significant amount of traffic to their site. Blogs such as Brooklyn Street Art serve as informal authorities that guide fans and artists to the most “noteworthy” pieces of new art. These blogs can help build the reputation of a certain artist just by featuring a post about their work. Unlike the street art organizations in Buenos Aires,
the blogs in New York are not connected to a tour business—although street art tours do exist as separate entities. The blogs of New York have a different mission statement that does not concentrate on promoting certain artists and introducing the scene to international audiences—an international audience is already fixated on New York City.

The blogs of both Buenos Aires and New York City bring street art to a large decentralized audience—an audience that often cannot be reached through the self-promotion of individual artists alone. Photography, acting as a digital form of street art, is a medium in which the original photograph (in this case the original piece of art on the street) carries no significance. Photographs, especially on the Internet, can duplicate and spread exponentially to thousands of different corners in digital space; street art in this digital form essentially amplifies the possibilities of consumption. Instead of maybe a handful of pedestrians that happen to notice a piece on the street, street art can be seen by thousands, if not millions, if a picture is uploaded to a popular blog. Blogs facilitate the growth of fandom. Fans that are not in the exact geographic location of a piece of street art can view its photograph on a blog. Most blogs also enable fans to “like” photos and comment on them. Moreover, blogs are connected to social media sites like Facebook or Tumblr, so fans can even “share” these photos on their public profiles, thus continuing the chain of exposure. It is very easy to “like” an image of street art without engaging the layers of local nuances. From the distance of a computer screen, fans can only see a filtered version of the street art scene—they will not be exposed to the street art or graffiti that are considered visual blights by local dwellers.
Street art blogs play a variety of roles in local and international street art communities. They have evolved out of a type of fandom on the local level; bloggers are typically city dwellers that became obsessed with documenting and investigating the street art scenes in their city. Blogs speak to the need and desire amongst street artists and fans to have a convenient space in which street art from the entire city is documented and discussed, so they carry out the tedious work of gathering pictures and information. Blogs have consequently constructed a type of authority, usually based on active experience and intimate knowledge through relationships with artists. Their power stems from viewership and the ability to filter the content that it presents and highlights. However, the fans that run blogs are not quite same as traditional art critics. The art and artists that bloggers chose to feature elucidates what art they think deserves attention and value. Moreover there are occasional posts, especially at the end of the year, which rank the “best pieces of street art” or the “best street artists”. Yet I have never seen any negative criticism on a blog—it is a social platform that is almost always celebratory. If blogs criticize specific artists or label and display “bad” street art, they are undermining the “democratic” notion of the medium (anyone can make street art).

6.4: The Effects of the Digital Dimension

The digital documentation and dissemination of street art is largely responsible for augmenting a favorable popular opinion. It has promoted the growth of street art in local and international scenes, and its positive platform of exposure has challenged the association of all street work with criminal activity. Yet this digital dimension comprised of blogs and social media has also affected local street art
communities. On one hand, not only has it connected street artists to fans and potential opportunities for commissions and exhibitions, it has also facilitated the growth of a communication network between street artists around the globe. On the other hand, the promotion and exposure of street work online raises questions about the original intentions of individual artists. Is the point of working on the street to create art that everyone can see? The viral short-cut to fame that the Internet facilitates makes the physical installation and local context seem irrelevant.

Even though New York City and Buenos Aires are located on opposite ends of globe and separated by language and culture in addition to distance, there were many moments during my summer research in which I realized that these two street art scenes were directly connected. Cern for example had painted in Buenos Aires during a brief trip in South America, and when I visited his studio for the interview he had a canvas piece painted by Jaz sitting by one of the windows. It is much more difficult for Argentine street artists to travel internationally, especially to North America or Europe because of the exchange rate for the peso and the wealth disparity between these regions of the world. Nonetheless, Jaz and Ever are two artists who travel frequently and are well known amongst all the New York based artists that I met. International street art festivals, events, and art fairs bring together street artists from around. In sharing these experiences painting together in foreign countries, artists bond and build friendships that then lead to future travels. Through following the activity of street artists on social media (primarily Facebook pages and Instagram accounts) I have observed that even the New York and Argentine artists that have not had much travel experience are “friends” with other street artists around the world. A
constant stream of communication and exchange between street artists exists through social media sites as they “like”, share, and comment on each other’s activity (like posting pictures of their works in progress).

The ease of communication and subsequent feeling of interconnectivity has benefited street artists in both Buenos Aires and New York City. In addition to providing more exposure and opportunities for travel and work, the digital dimension has also enhanced the ability of peers (locally and internationally) to support one another. For example, Jilly Ballistic informed me that artists from all over the world have contacted her to “swap” work (Interview on October 26, 2013). For artists who primarily work with posters or stickers (mediums that can be easily duplicated), swapping enables artists to exchange their work (via the internet or shipping). Thus Jilly Ballistic sends some of her images that she installs in the New York City subways to artists in Australia who in turn send her their work. After the exchange is complete, the artists involved will install the piece and send back a picture. Jilly Ballistic says that her work has been up in other parts of the US like Houston, Texas, but also in Spain, Australia, and Germany. Thus artists not only provide one another with social support, but they can also directly help one another get up in different parts of the world. The interconnectivity facilitated through social media has enabled local and international street art communities to maintain a degree of autonomy from traditional art institutions; street artists can organize their own events and help one another find opportunities or exposure. But as discussed in the previous

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34 This is also a common practice within graffiti communities. Writers often add the names of their friends or other members of their crew when write their own tag (Chalfant and Cooper 1984).
chapters, street art has not entirely escaped the influence of galleries and art markets—it is extremely difficult to assemble an artistic career that generates income independent from the art market.

How can the convergence of digital networking with a place-based art form best be understood? Martin Irvine, an art and media theorist and owner of a contemporary art gallery, contends: “Street art since the late 1990s is the first truly post-Internet art movement, equally at home in real and digital spaces as an ongoing continuum, inter-implicated, inter-referenced, the real and the virtual mutually presupposed” (2011; 26). Irvine maintains that the digital growth of street art in addition to the entrance of street artists in galleries and commercial work suggests that street art is a “paradigm of hybridity” (2011; 1). Today it appears as though the physical process of creating street art is just one activity in a continuum of artistic practices which must “vacillate between the specific materiality of urban space, street locations, local contexts, and the exhibition, distribution, and communication platform of the Internet and Web” (2011; 10). To be sure, street artists in both New York City and Buenos Aires all have photo archives of their work, in addition to at least one personal website or social media account to display these photos. The Internet has established a type of fourth dimension to the practice of street art, expanding the ability of artists to share, communicate, and document; it has undeniably catalyzed the appearance of street art around the world and its development into a cohesive international community.

However, Irvine fails to elaborate on the contradictions of form and ideology that interrupt this deceivingly smooth spectrum of hybridity. The digital realm of
street art is not just a mere extension of practice that has no impact on how and why artists produce street work. Are artists generating street art for the global audience online or are they engaging in a direct local interaction? Online an artist can achieve “viral” fame even if they have only made a few pieces of street art. If street art is idealized as a place-based gesture that derives its meaning from a specific urban context, disrupting the visual order of cities and the “dematerialized visual environment” of digital media by being “confrontationally material” (Irvine 2011; 4), then how do artists make sense of the abstract digital form of a photograph through which most people now experience street art?

As discussed above, artists claim to use photography in order to keep an archive of their work. Yet as soon as the photographs are presented on a public platform like a blog or social media site, the main function of the photograph seems to be exposure. Street art is idealized as an interaction between an artist and the city on a local level: because it is not presented in a ritualized way through designated and protected art spaces, the ego tied to the identity of the artist, and the reverence to art object imbued by gallery and museum space, is not present on the street. Street art inherently rejects the idea of art as a commercial object—it is a form of art that can only be experienced in a place-based way, and therefore cannot be commodified. Artists in both cities also claim to produce street art because it interrupts urban spaces and creates a type of unmediated interaction (free from the influence of art institutions) with any individual that happens to observe it. To a certain extent, the ideological ethos of street art is lost when it exists as a photo in digital space. Photos (especially when they are posted on blogs) attract attention to the artist; they produce
a type of fame inside and outside the street art community. Although a photo still
cannot directly generate a financial exchange (one can still look at a photo for free), it
generates direct recognition which operates as a type of social and cultural capital. If
a street artist has pictures of their work online that reach a massive audience, they can
build a popular name for themselves to attract the attention of galleries or commercial
opportunities. Does the picture thus become more significant than the actual piece of
street art?

A photograph does not immediately detract from the actual experience or
activity of creating art in public spaces. Street artists in Buenos Aires and New York
City who have the opportunity to actually work outside assert that it is this action of
intervention that keeps them addicted to street art. A street artist who paints a mural
outside will be physically exposed and receptive to public interactions for hours if not
days. Many artists enjoy this process and prefer it to working in isolation within their
studio or home. A photograph also does not alter the fact that the art is installed in a
public space and its existence in this form still makes a statement in favor of public
expression and exposure to art outside of the elite world of galleries and museums.
Nonetheless, the street art scenes in both cities have become suspicious of new artists
because they have recognized the trend of using street art simply as a means to
generate exposure and attract attention—which is then employed to jump-start a
gallery career. The digital dimension puts the intentions of individual street artists
into question, and it has become increasingly difficult to believe that any street artist
has “pure”, selfless objectives with their work.
What is not emphasized enough is that the Internet alone is not responsible for street art’s global presence. Street art is a form of expression that is malleable enough to realize a local need or impulse in urban contexts as different as New York City and Buenos Aires. The previous four chapters have been dedicated to exploring the process of this adaptation; how street art emerges both organically as a result of cultural movements or political situations, and as a result of outside stimulation and exposure to art and practices from other cities. Moreover, the direct social support from local street art communities is an essential force that makes street art thrive. The digital world threatens the “authenticity”—or the way artists understand the value of their work—of local scenes because all place-based context is lost in a photograph. Thus despite the fact that almost all street artists actively use social media sites or blogs, the street art communities of both cities feel a prominent need to protect the social value and rationale of their street work.
Conclusion

Let us return to a definition: street art is a decentralized medium of visual public expression. Its production is controlled by the individual artist; whatever they chose to create is installed in a public space. The lifeline of this piece is at the mercy of public attitudes and interactions. Its cultural meaning and political significance is dependent on the local context—the specific site of installation. Therefore based on its most rudimentary definition, street art does not inherently incite a specific ideology or identity. It is simply a practice, an activity—yet in most urban societies today, street art has a powerful ideological resonance.

The distinct street art worlds of Buenos Aires and New York City illustrate how the artistic and political role of street art is socially constructed through the setting of the city. It is a medium that reflects a city’s culture and history, a visual narrative of the politics of visibility and public space. The histories of public expression in Buenos Aires and New York City do not share a single moment of parallel action. Buenos Aires has a deeply ingrained cultural practice of using public space for political and social expression, and the periods of brutally imposed silence have only strengthened the cultural value of public expression. Alternatively, New York did not experience an entire century of political graffiti. When graffiti did emerge it was associated with urban decline by political and cultural authorities. Thus instead of being celebrated, this type of free and individual public expression was

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35 It should be noted that street art has a specific meaning in every city, even cities within the same country. For instance, cities like Cordoba or Rosario in Argentina are much less open to street art than Buenos Aires.
criminalized—framed as a fearful symbol of chaos. Prolific street art scenes emerged from both of these settings, and although they revolve around the same artistic medium, “street art” has a distinct life in each city.

Despite the fact that street art is locally defined in practice, ideologies have been projected onto the medium by popular media. The international rise of street art in the late 1990s and 2000s coincided with another rising trend—a popular attitude that critically evaluated the effects of globalization and consumer culture (Lewisohn 2008). Street art appeared to be a visual manifestation of this popular frustration, especially because street artists during this time period often used “guerrilla” tactics like culture jamming or subvertising: “street art became symbolic of a certain attitude. Just as graffiti writing was a visual symbol of all things hip hop in the 1980s, street art is inextricably linked with a caring, sharing ‘no logo’ anti-capitalist rebelliousness” (Lewisohn 2008; 81). Banksy is without a doubt the championed hero of this attitude—the anonymous artist whose public pranks are now world famous. Whether or not individual street artists subscribed to an anti-institution doctrine, this universalized perception of street art catalyzed its global proliferation.

However upon close examination, the actual practice of street art often contradicts these projected ideologies. Street art has become an artistic phenomenon that is simultaneously local through the construction of street art communities and direct public interactions, and global through platforms of social media and digital images that can be seen anywhere. It is a DIY art form that is produced and experienced independently from institutions, yet most street artists have created work for galleries. Street art has produced art worlds that are layered with conflicting
ideologies and needs because it is a medium that must adapt to the political and cultural limitations of an urban environment.

Street Art Communities

One of the themes that emerged from my research is that street art is a medium that hinges on a social community, or an art world. As Becker argued, all forms of art are social activities; because street art is a medium that functions independently from traditional art institutions, it requires its own social infrastructure to support and nurture its production. Within these communities, street artists construct their own conventions and values. Communities also act as a collaborative network of shared information in which artists learn techniques and skills from one another (art school does not provide instruction for mural painting or techniques in spray paint). Street artists in New York and Buenos Aires do not work in isolation, through creating street art they have developed relationships with other artists and must constantly interact with their local community. Moreover, the direct social and practical roles (assisting one another find walls, sharing skills and knowledge, collaborating, etc.) that these communities play cannot be fulfilled by online networks—they are part and parcel of the urban setting.

Each city has a unique street art community. When street artists travel to new cities they often need to get in contact with the local street artists if they want to paint or install work. As an outsider to the city and street art community, visiting artists need assistance navigating the conventions and norms of a foreign street art world (i.e. where can they safely paint and what are the procedures for finding walls). Buenos Aires perhaps has the most ideal contextual conditions for street art. Due to
the cultural tolerance of public expression, wall space is easy to obtain and legal risks are almost nonexistent. These conditions have fostered a street art world in which artists have considerable freedom to work spontaneously throughout the city and even experience direct exchanges with observers as they work in public. However, despite the fact that there is ample opportunity for public interventions and any individual with some time and a little paint or paper can act, the Buenos Aires street art community still contains social hierarchies and rifts.

Street art worlds in reality are not the idealized democratic communities of equal individuals because these communities are not isolated subcultures that are impervious to the dominant economic and political forces of a society. The public form of street art alone makes isolation impossible. In contrast to some impulses of graffiti culture that seek to be destructive and rebellious, most street artists try to interactively engage with public space by communicating a readable message or image. Furthermore, street art has had an established presence in both New York City and Buenos Aires for over a decade (several decades in the case of New York); thus both street art scenes have already experience several “waves” or “generations” of street artists. Yet because the first wave of “pioneer” artists paved the way for the later explosions of street art by developing skills and techniques (which are thus imparted on the newcomers), demonstrating the aesthetic possibilities of visual public interventions, and constructing the preliminary public images of street artists, they often occupy the most respected and authoritative tier of the street art community. Therefore street art communities often display certain vestiges of meritocracies,
which generally inform the social conventions and relationships of graffiti communities (as demonstrated in New York).

Street art is still a medium that is open for any individual’s expression, yet access to wall space, materials, and media coverage (mainly through blogs and social media sites) is influenced by the dynamics of street art communities. For example, artists who have an established reputation are more likely to be offered commissions (from galleries, businesses, or organizations) and have easier access to legal walls within informally curated spaces. The scarcity of available wall space will determine the influence of these community hierarchies; New York City and Buenos Aires clearly stand on opposite sides of this spectrum, and in New York wall spaces are definitely more regulated by community dynamics.

The internal social organization within street art communities can also be perceived as an impulse to regulate an art form that lacks entrance barriers. Anyone can potentially create street art, and while this fact is supposedly celebrated, it also means that one of the potential “democratic” consequences is an unfiltered flood of voices, inundating the streets with “bad” art. Individually, street artists often don’t immediately admit prescribing to an ideology or doctrine of what street art should ideally be, yet when their reputation as a respected artist and innovator is threatened by an onslaught of amateur newcomers attracted by the trendy popularity of street art, they reveal their belief in a concept of authenticity.

Constructions of authenticity serve a crucial ideological role in both the street art worlds of Buenos Aires and New York. However an individual artist might align their political beliefs, they somehow need to rationalize the commitment and sacrifice
of time and money inherent to the practice of street art—especially in New York where illegal work is extremely risky. The artists that I interviewed appreciated the social value projected onto street art, the fact that is it often understood as an action that improves public space by beautifying it, recreating a sense of place, and bringing art outside of the confines of gallery and museum spaces. Some artists also embrace the political connotations of street art and the power derived from its illegality. Whatever their individual rationale might be, artists benefit from producing street art that is perceived to have positive social and political value. A positive public image can lead to laxer laws or enforcement policing public space, more public and private commissions, potential gallery interest, and more opportunities and freedom to create street art. As graffiti in New York City proved, if the city authorities and public perceive the form of expression as a destructive visual blight, a crime, the city becomes a very hostile environment. Thus, in the interests of maintaining a positive public relationship and protecting the social and political value of street art, artists utilize a concept of authenticity as an authoritative force to socially regulate to content of street art. Therefore street art communities have a hierarchical understanding of what is “good” and “bad” street art, and which artists accordingly deserve respect for their work. Authenticity also operates within the community to differentiate the “authentic” street artists from those who simply want to gain fame and recognition from the institutional world.

Within street art communities, being “authentic” implies a “pure passion” for the medium that is not corrupted by fame or money. It is demonstrated by hard work and visible dedication to the form, by risk taking, by the attention and quality invested
in public pieces, and by actually showing involvement in the street art community. In both Buenos Aires and New York, street artists talked about a “passion” that differentiated the real street artists from those who were only producing street art for selfish promotion without regard to the significance of local setting. The artists that seek fame and immediately ditch street art as soon as they’ve made it into a gallery cast doubt on the practice—is street art simply an advertisement for one’s artistic career instead of an art form with a social or political ethos? The current popular hype of street art has made many street artists wary about the intentions of newcomers. Cern explained that he earned respect in New York graffiti and street art communities because “everyone in New York knew about my work back when no one cared…you can tell when people’s intentions go beyond the hype, when people are pure about their passion” (Interview on September 15, 2012). Authentic street art thus embraces the concept of “art for art’s sake”, it protects the image of street art from the invasions of galleries and commercial interests and maintains its separation from these worlds (Interview with Luna Park on August 24, 2012). Dario even suggested that the “pure” desire for street work “comes from a spirit, and you cannot learn that spirit…it is an energy and you just want to paint all over” (Interview on June 27, 2012). Authenticity does not necessarily attach an artist to a specific ideological doctrine (almost every single street artists I interview had work in a gallery or accepted commercial commissions), it better understood as an ineffable commitment to the medium: “the ones who are in it for the right reasons will still be around after the fad dies down” (Interview with Luna Park on August 24, 2012).

The Alternative Artistic Career
As street art has progressed over the last 20 years, there has been a general shift in activity away from public pranking, culture jamming, and explicit political content towards a movement of creative aesthetic expression. This trend was indeed illustrated by the evolution of graffiti and street art in both New York and Buenos Aires. Street artists around the world are now demonstrating what they are technically and creatively capable of. The recent explosion of activity within the medium is now perpetually generating innovation as artists continue to explore—increasing the scale, and discovering new materials and techniques. Street artists around the world are proving that the medium can produced artistic feats that have never been done before. Artists are demonstrating artistic vision and technical skill that is uncommon to see outside of designated art spaces.

So how do individual artists understand street art today? It is a medium that already has an established presence in many international cities, and it has been institutionalized to the extent in which galleries and museums feature “street artists” and exhibitions of “street art”—thus endowing the medium with the art world legitimacy. In considering the individual street artists, Martin Irvine argues that what unifies street artists more cohesively than a single theory or movement is the practice, the activity of creating street art. According to Irvine, “Many artists associated with the ‘urban art movement’ don’t consider themselves ‘street’ or ‘graffiti’ artists, but as artists who consider the city their necessary working environment” (2011; 1). After investigating two distinct street art worlds, the ethnographic evidence that I uncovered substantiates this assertion. Street art is not a practice affiliated with a concrete social movement geared towards a cause of social change. Yet it does
produce social organization in the form of street art communities which assist in the production and construction of value and conventions; however these local street art cultures do not define the lives of the individual artists.

In both Buenos Aires and New York City, I discovered that street art is just one of various creative activities that artists are involved in. Today, street art is still a medium of expression open to everyone, yet in practice, the individuals that are actively creating street art tend to be middle class men with a certain degree of formal artistic education. This is of course a very generalized representation of street artists; the communities of Buenos Aires and New York City both had a diverse social composition. Street art and graffiti continue to attract individuals with zero formal training; however in recent years there has been an expanding movement of art students onto the street. The art students that I interviewed had all found the institutionalized conventions of visual art to be conceptually limiting and elitist.

But while every individual I interviewed considered themselves an “artist”; many rejected the label of “street artist” because they produced more than just street art. They do not enter the street art scene with the radical intentions of bringing down the institutionalized art world. All of the individuals that I interviewed had the desire to create art constantly—yet it is difficult to create street art every day given the limitations of time, money, and legal risk. Therefore most of these artists balance their street work with private art in sketchbooks, on canvases, or through other mediums. However in order to support their creative production (especially free

36 It was beyond the capacity of this thesis to adequately discuss the role of gender in street art, yet is theme that deserves further attention.
37 Even the individuals like Gonzalo and Jilly Ballistic, who have an untrained background and didn’t initially perceive their interventions as “art”.

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street art that artists spend their own money to create), artists need free time and money. Street artists are not exempt from the patronage so central to art history; they require an outside source of capital to fund their activities. To a certain extent, street art communities have devised economic alternatives that exist outside of traditional institutions like artist cooperatives, gallery collectives, and street art festivals (organized by street artists and sponsored by local organizations or businesses). Nonetheless, most street artists cannot make a living through these activities alone.

Economic need is perhaps the dominant force that necessitates a convergence of the street art world with the institutional art world. Most street artists work a variety of day jobs to finance their street work, yet almost all of these artists would prefer to make a living from their art alone. Furthermore, with more money available, artists can produce the more costly interventions that require a massive amount of paint or materials. Thus in order to escape economic limitations, most artists attempt to construct a type of artistic career. This career often hinges on a reputation established by street work, and branches out into commercial or private work depending on the opportunities available. This “reputation” is not entirely structured by street art conventions and “authenticity”; street work also nods to the art world conventions of technique and aesthetics. Moreover, the artists with an art school education cannot entirely “unlearn” their years of instruction.

Artists who produce street art want their work to be taken seriously. The graffiti writers of New York City were the first to incite the “professionalization” of

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38 This is perhaps why street art is often more aesthetically complex and technical than traditional “community” murals or public art. Street artists often have art school training.
urban interventions. The writers who created visually complex and technical “pieces” wanted their talents to be recognized and distinguished from the image of vandalism. Similarly, street artists in both Buenos Aires and New York want to prove that street art has artistic value and demonstrates technical and conceptual talent (in art world conventions). The drive towards professionalization is additionally reflected in the social hierarchies of street art communities. Artists in both cities worry about the explosion of content due to street art’s current popularity, and their judgments about the “bad” or “terrible” quality of new street art reveals that these communities are developing critical standards.

The desire to have an artistic career has fueled the rapid expansion of the digital world of street art. The digital dimension of street art—composed of photographs, videos, blogs, and social networking—is not an independent art world from the physical action of street art. Instead, digital street art functions as a type of auxiliary world to local street art scenes, introducing new tools and practices that dramatically extend the possibilities of communication, networking, and publicity. The digital world additionally creates opportunities for fans to get involved and manage web “galleries”. As discussed in the previous chapter, blogs can exacerbate social hierarchies in street art communities through their process of selection and presentation. Yet blogs and social media sites have also made communication between artists (locally and globally) fast and easy, facilitating social cohesion and organization—which has led to international street art festivals and events. The digital world is now an inseparable dimension from the practice of street art, and
although it might have altered the individual intentions of some artists, it has not fundamentally altered the physical action of street art.

The digital form of a photograph is fundamentally different than the actual physical installation of street art; however the invasion of photography in documenting and representing street art online has not changed the process of creation and the fundamental enjoyment that all artists seem to experience with street art. Despite the fact that street art today is commonly embedded in a spectrum of creative activity, artists continue to produce street art because it is a medium that offers unique social, political, and aesthetic opportunities. In all of my interviews, artists expressed how much they enjoy the activity of street art.

Individuals are drawn to street art for a wide range of reasons. Artists like LNY appreciate the process of street art because it forces them to let go of the “aura” or “preciousness” of their art (Interview on September 15, 2012). “Letting go” is a relief for LNY after his disenchanting art school experience; he prefers producing art that has value for its concrete social function (i.e. injecting provocative art into a bleak urban environment). Indeed, the potential to have a positive social or political impact with visual art explains much of the medium’s magnetism. Rather than producing art that is sold in a gallery and never seen again, many artists are drawn to the idea of placing art directly in the context of daily life without the separation of institutionalized spaces and rhetoric. Artists also enjoy witnessing the earnest gratitude of strangers for their street work. In settings like Buenos Aires, where artists have the opportunity to work on a piece for hours outside, artists prefer this
social exposure and the random conversations with strangers to the isolation of a studio.

Furthermore, the production process of street art is straightforward. Artists take pleasure in directly working on a surface, expressing whatever they want, and then abandoning it when they are done: “If people don’t like it they can paint over, once I’m done it’s not mine anymore” (Interview with Lean Frizzera on July 9, 2012). The walls, fences, sidewalks, roads, alleyways, and signs of urban spaces are exciting and challenging physical dimensions for artists. Street art allows individuals to creatively explore in ways that are impossible within the confines of a studio or gallery space. Indeed, street art is essentially installation art; thus artists get to incorporate found materials and use their improvisation and problem-solving to work around physical limitations: “After working on the street it’s hard to be back in a gallery, and abide by their rules, sell work, etc… The magic of street art is that all you have to do is activate yourself” (Interview with the Beach Girls on July 6, 2012). Therefore it is not surprising that observers of street art have claimed that it is one of the most persistently innovative mediums of visual art (Mason 2008, Irvine 2011, Lewisohn 2008). For most artists, street art is simply fun: they get to be outside, they are physically active, and they have space to collaborate with friends^39.

The last salient attraction to street art that I observed, was the desire to work independently from the rules, expectations, and conventions of art institutions.

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^39 Enjoying street art in this capacity is of course contingent on the ability to work legally or in a space that is not strictly regulated. Most street artists in Buenos Aires have this access to public spaces, however artists in New York must have social, commercial, or institutional connections. Yet there are also New York artist like Elle who enjoy the adrenaline and risk of illegal work.
According to Ever, an artist who traveled around the world to paint street art and exhibit work in galleries:

At the moment my life is like this: I have good moments, I have bad moments. But I am most content doing what I want...When I have money I drink good wine, and when I don’t have any money I drink water...If someone starts to control things then I’ve died as an artist” (Interview on October 26, 2012).

Artists therefore produce street work in order to exert a certain amount of autonomy in their own artistic production. Street artists in both cities embraced their status as “outsiders” of the art world—they enjoy producing art that would never meet the conceptual or technical standards of traditional art spaces. Furthermore, LNY claims that the action of marking public space is “really empowering” just due to the fact that one’s voice is visible (Interview on September 15, 2012). Artists that do balance street work with private gallery work, use the opportunity of street art to maintain control over their artistic voice.

Street art’s increasingly complicated relationship with traditional art institutions poses some interesting challenges to the discussion of street art as a form of cultural resistance. On one hand, street art is a medium that has diversified artistic production, enabling any individual to make their art visible in physical space outside of institutionalized walls. Moreover, it is a medium that generates local communities of artists—art worlds and art cultures that construct their own conventions and norms that are derivative of local context and values, instead of a continuation of the institutional art world space and protocol. However, despite the fact that street art’s decentralized, public, ephemeral, and non-commodifiable form challenges the institutional conception of “art”, it is not a practice that can independently finance
itself. Even though the street art communities have achieved a considerable degree of autonomy, they must often rely on outside bodies—including the institutional art world—for economic support. As a result, street artists often traverse multiple art worlds. Furthermore, most artists are not producing street art with the radical intentions of overthrowing art institutions—street art is more frequently becoming a practice individuals engage in to balance their artistic careers with fun, creatively stimulating, socially and politically meaningful art.
Interviewee List

Buenos Aires:

6/14/2012: Matt (and tour with Buenos Aires Street Art)
6/15/2012: Grupo de Arte Callejero
6/24/2012: Sordi
6/25/2012: Georgina Ciotti
6/27/2012: Melissa
6/27/2012: Malatesta
6/27/2012: Elian
6/27/2012: Poeta
6/28/2012: Mart
7/4/2012: Cuore
7/5/2012: Pelos de Plumas
7/6/2012: Jaz
7/6/2012: Beach Girls (Barbara and Nina)
7/9/2012: Lean Frizzera
7/10/2012: La Wife
7/11/2012: Malegría
7/13/2012: Mondolila
7/14/2012: Gonzalo
7/18/2012: Nerf
7/19/2012: Cabaio Stencil
7/20/2012: Ice
7/21/2012: Pelado

New York City:
8/9/2012: Sonni
8/13/2012: Icy and Sot
8/13/2012: Lois
8/15/2012: Sammy Jojo
8/17/2012: Elle
8/18/2012: Ski
8/19/2012: 5pointz tour with Meres
8/20/2012: Dasic
8/23/2012: Rhiannon
9/15/2012: LNY
9/15/2012: Cern
10/26/2012: Gilf!
10/26/2012: Jilly Ballistic
10/26/2012: Ever
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Oxford University Press.


