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Moving beyond Banksy and Fairey: Interrogating the co-optation and commodification of modern graffiti and street art

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EDITORIAL

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ABSTRACT

This editorial reviews the co-optation and commodification of modern graffiti and street art. In so doing, it analyses attempts by individuals and organizations to monetize the creation, production and dissemination of graffiti and street art. The commodification process often starts with attempts by graffiti and street artists to earn money through their work and then progresses to efforts primarily by cultural industries to integrate graffiti and street art into the products and services that they sell. This latter development can also include how selected property owners and real-estate developers invite artists to create works in or on their buildings or in particular neighbourhoods to make the areas more desirable. After the authors have established this context, they draw together the divergent themes from the four articles contained in this Special Issue.

KEYWORDS

graffiti
street art
commodification
co-optation
street culture
urban culture

1. Ronald Kramer and John F. Lennon share second authorship.
2. Although numerous definitions of graffiti and street art exist, the authors, for the purposes of this article, use the one developed by Ross (2016, Chapter 1). For an overview of reactions to graffiti and street art, see, for example, Ross (2016d).

INTRODUCTION

Over the past six decades, highly populated urban environments have seen the appearance of graffiti and street art (Ferrell 1993; Philips 1999; Austin 2001; Macdonald 2001; Miller 2002; Snyder 2009; Hamdy and Karl 2014; Young 2014; Bloch 2019). Reactions have varied and changed over time.² On the one hand, these practices have been vilified by many establishment politicians, criminal justice practitioners, heads of departments of public works and folks who find graffiti and street art to be nothing more than brazen vandalism. On the other hand, the practices have been celebrated by those who engage in this subculture, a core of aficionados and some real-estate developers and politicians who see an advantage for ‘edgy’ art to attract entrepreneurial investment. Thus, graffiti and street art have gone through many changes in recent decades, as have public reactions to these practices.

One of the most interesting responses has been the tendency to view some graffiti and street art as objects with high market value. Not unrelated, graffiti and street art aesthetics are used to promote and sell other products or services. We define these tendencies as *commodification*. Commodification, in this sense, is the way that graffiti and street art as both an object and a practice have been packaged as something to be sold. Graffiti-style (itself an evolving phenomenon) has been used to sell specific products, such as clothing items, while its association with illegality creates an aura within marketing campaigns that appeals to certain demographics and psychographics. For some practitioner-purists, the idea of deriving money from graffiti debases the spirit of the subculture, especially insofar as graffiti and street art are understood as rewarding in itself. For others, the idea of making money from their creative practice is a welcome bonus and recognition of their work. For keen observers and graffiti and street art scholars, the same spectrum of responses can be found: there are some who see the commodification of the graffiti and street art subculture as a sully-ing of both the activity and the people who engage in it, while others celebrate the commodification and are eager to buy the products, pay money to see the shows and follow on Instagram and Facebook all of the major ‘names’ in the graffiti and street art world.

A parallel process of *co-optation* is also evident in this process. By co-optation, we mean the use of the aesthetics associated with graffiti and street art in various aspects of public life, including as design elements in advertising campaigns (Borghina et al. 2010). Co-optation can also involve the incorporation or addition of phenomena that lead to the diluting of opposition, critique and/or resistance. Scholars have shown how the graffiti subculture and the advertising industry share common particular practices (Alvelos 2004; Cronin 2008; Mason 2008; Cudmore 2012; Schacter 2014b; Mould 2018). While their end goals may be different, graffiti and street art practitioners and advertisers desire to be seen. In graffiti and street art, the goal may be to have one’s name recognized by others in the subculture; in advertising, the objective is to have one’s brand noticed by their target audience. The way to be recognized is through saturation of a tag or advertisement in a particular environment. These practices do not just run parallel to each other, but often intersect. Cudmore (2012), for example, suggests that corporations see where graffiti are located in city spaces and that advertisers appropriate these ‘reading’ spots and place targeted ads in these locations. In essence,

Cudmore views graffiti and street artists as unpaid labourers who scout locations for companies to sell to a particular audience, appropriating their labour in a way not initially intended. Graffiti co-optation can be relatively benign (using a graffiti-style font in advertising materials, for example) or can have wide-reaching effects (the use of graffiti and street art as part of a gentrifying campaign that seeks to replace a set of residents with a different class of residents, as in the case of the Wynwood neighbourhood in Miami) (see, e.g., Alvarez and Edgar 2011; Schacter 2014a).

This article begins by exploring the problems of commodification and co-optation and some of the ways in which they intersect with the subcultural worlds of graffiti and street art. The next section charts graffiti and street art incorporation into galleries and museums, popular culture and the rise of a graffiti industry. With this broad overview in place, we then provide a summary of the articles that build this Special Issue by noting their major arguments and how the pieces relate to each other.

Before we turn to commodification and co-optation, however, a brief note on defining graffiti and street art is necessary. Attempting to define these cultural practices is beset by numerous problems. What are the implications, for example, of insisting that 'graffiti' and 'street art' constitute radically distinct aesthetic practices? Does this exalt one at the expense of the other? Does it transform 'street art' into a 'respectable' art form that rightfully garners economic rewards and commands cultural respect while dismissing 'graffiti', or vice versa? What are the politics that lurk behind and animate differential graffiti and street art constructions or the failure to distinguish the two? Why does one find so much talk of 'authenticity' and 'selling out' in these subcultural worlds? What kinds of assumptions underpin the view of graffiti or street art (or both, or neither) as 'problems'? These are the types of questions that have been discussed in the scholarly literature over the past four decades.

For those seeking resolutions to these kinds of challenges – that is, what epistemological standpoint seems most appropriate for analysing graffiti and street art and what are the implications of adopting different standpoints – it might be fruitful to consult 'canonical' and emerging scholarship on graffiti and street art (e.g., Austin 2001; Ferrell 1993; Kramer 2019; Lennon 2009; Waclawek 2011; Schacter 2014b; Ross 2016a; Avramidis and Tsilimpoundi 2017; Ross et al. 2017; MacDowall 2019; Phillips 2019), the numerous graffiti collections found in books (Ganz 2006; Cavalieri 2011; Edlin 2011; Gastman and Nelson 2011; Schacter 2013; Freitag 2014; McCormick 2017), and the many online sources and spaces devoted to graffiti and street art (Art Crimes; Fatcap; Spray Daily; Bombing Science or any number of sites on Instagram).

COMMODYFYING AND CO-OPTING GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

The commodification and co-optation of graffiti and street art constitutes the core focus of this issue. Commodification is not new. Marx (1867) argued that the commodity form is capitalism's nucleus, where virtually any object or human activity can, and probably will, be reduced to an 'exchange-value' and sold in the marketplace. For Marx, the capitalist imperative to seek profit in all things necessitates that powerful economic players exploit large swaths of the population or the majority who are compelled to sell their labour power

(Marx [1844] 1932, 1867). From this perspective, it is important to consider who constitutes the audience of a product or service, who makes these products and who reaps the economic rewards when products are exchanged. While most followers of street art will know that Banksy can make millions of pounds when one of his works gets sold at Sotheby's and hung in a spare bedroom of a wealthy art patron, much less attention is paid to numerous markets for graffiti-inspired products. Either end of the scale, however, illustrates that graffiti and street art are not immune from commodification and that both forms are deeply incorporated into the circuits of capital. Of course, this does not guarantee that graffiti and street art producers reap the economic rewards from this commodification process. Even the 'Banksys' of the world are exploited in some sense: the major economic players that dominate the art world derive advantage from trading, or investing in, Banksy's works more so than Banksy (Ellsworth-Jones 2012).

Amongst subcultural practitioners, aficionados and some scholars, the commodification of graffiti and street art is a topic that provokes intense debate. Oftentimes, the problem is addressed in categorical terms: one side posits that commodification is a welcomed blessing, while the other construes it as an inherent evil. On the positive side, commodification and co-optation can disseminate the work of an artist, which may educate, engage and entertain an audience beyond the original creators. It also has the potential to financially compensate the creators, something that may allow them to continue their practice. On the negative side, commodification and co-optation can easily distort the communication beyond the original intent of the message and its creator/s (e.g., Cowen 1998). Here, we are not simply talking about different artwork interpretations, but in the effort to be compensated for their work, graffiti writers or street artists may decide to change the focus of their work (Powers 1996). The action of compensation, of course, is also not a simple act of one person paying another for an aesthetic object; the transaction has ramifications of how graffiti and street art are accepted and ultimately what street writing and painting is allowed in particular areas. As certain types of graffiti and street art are valued, others are devalued if not criminalized.

The commodification of graffiti and street art, then, is bounded by value judgments, strong emotional investments and sociopolitical contexts. And, arguably, it is debated within this context. Some graffiti writers and street artists, in particular 'old school' practitioners and aficionados, have a romantic notion of both the aims and effects of their work. Many believe that graffiti – and in some cases, street art – amounts to a form of political resistance (Ferrell 1995; Droney 2010). This resistance is typically presumed to reside in graffiti's illegality, its disregard for state authority and its proffering of aesthetic conventions that are incongruent with the sign economy promoted by capitalism and the state (e.g., advertising, prescriptive signage posted by the state). From such a perspective, to turn graffiti writing into a money-making activity is equated with the notion of 'selling out'. Not surprisingly, any such appropriation of graffiti symbols and iconography is read as a negative development (Rabiega and Burger 2017). To be sure, efforts to 'police' graffiti and street art subcultures (by individuals and the community) is obviously not unique to these communities but is an issue that arises when almost any subculture expands beyond its original audience and begins to be more readily accepted by mainstream culture.

Other graffiti writers and street artists adopt certain attitudes or sensibilities concerning appropriate limits (e.g., Jacobson 2017; Rabiega and Burger 2017). Some are inclined to claim that there is no contradiction between commodification and ‘authenticity’. That is, one can participate in the overt commodification of their practice without diluting or losing its meaning and critical potential. For others, different types of economic activity will be evaluated differently. They may be okay going to block parties and getting paid to spray paint a t-shirt or be remunerated for doing a memorial for a deceased person or in honour of a loved one, but when a developer contacts them to paint an advertisement for their property, or a restaurant owner wants an ‘edgy’ piece on a wall, they may object. Even still, others may take money from advertising companies to help fund their illegal street art campaigns. In other words, this is often a personal ethical decision that an individual makes for themselves (Schacter 2014b). According to Schacter, individuals can reconcile ethical standpoints with making money from graffiti and street art (2014a), but there is always some risk that they will be co-opted in ways that support the worst attributes of commodification (2014b).

The commodification and co-optation of graffiti and street art cannot be thought of in absolute terms but as a range of practices. One way to frame this issue tends to focus on its dialectical or ambiguous, double-edged nature. For example, when examining hip hop graffiti, Lombard (2013) argues that

it is necessary to resist a uniform understanding of the incorporation of hip hop graffiti, which should be seen as a complex process. Incorporation is not simply a case of gentrification, corruption, or exploitation, but has diverse and often contradictory potentials.

(2013: 102)

Pabón-Colón makes a similar point when examining a wide range of women graffiti hip hop practitioners, arguing that graffiti can be used in a numerous, complex ways that support community engagement (2018).

SOME MANIFESTATIONS OF THE COMMODIFICATION AND CO-OPTATION OF GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

As in most art fields, certain graffiti and street artists (e.g., JR, Banksy, Swoon, Shephard Fairey, etc.) may become famous and make a good living from their work, but most practitioners are not able to be graffiti or street art professionals. While these practices may not be financially lucrative for a vast majority of graffiti and street artists, this does not mean that large amounts of money are not made by entrepreneurs and companies who have profited from the emergence of street art and graffiti as a valuable commodity.

Manufacturers and entrepreneurs are constantly looking for new products and markets within which to sell their goods, and, as Frank explained in *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), subcultures are one way to cultivate these new markets and consumers. Macdonald focuses specifically on the graffiti subculture underlining how subcultures are the sources of new marketing trends (2001: 151). Lombard (2013) suggests that

following the success of artists such as Shepard Fairey and Banksy, graffiti writers command a notoriety that extends well beyond the subculture, challenging assumptions that graffiti is fueled largely by subcultural

recognition. Recontextualized onto product labels, on clothing, and into advertising changes graffiti, thus legal graffiti is not only displaced from its location but also from another important aspect of the graffiti aesthetic: its mode of production.

(2013: 98)

In other words, graffiti and street art have emerged from a local phenomenon to a larger economic entity that now touches well beyond specific subcultures. Graffiti-style is now part of the clothes we buy, the art we examine and the advertising lettering of products from cars to juice.

Commodification, then, takes a wide variety of forms. Some are relatively subtle and can easily escape notice, but others are quite obvious and would be missed by only the most blasé of observers. Concerning commodification forms that are relatively subtle, graffiti writers might create shirts with graffiti designs on them and sell them on the street to tourists or people in their social networks. Many are also open to commissions from friends and from small businesses. Go to Craigslist, and periodically you will see shopkeepers seeking a custom piece for their buildings. Social media has also opened up this market exponentially with Instagram being a way to market a street artist's brand (MacDowall 2019), or individuals selling their graffiti-inspired designs on Redbubble. But this was and remains a tenuous way to make money. A handful of graffiti writers were able to make a more consistent income by engaging in graffiti-style work. Lombard (2013) suggests that

by creating their own brands and businesses, graffiti writers are able to profit while 'representing' the culture. New York-based Tats Cru, Inc., has been instrumental in the commercialization of hip-hop graffiti. Tats Cru is symptomatic of the way in which those involved in graffiti are evolving due to its closer relationship with the mainstream.

(2013: 95)

More obvious forms of commodification and co-optation, on the other hand, would include attempts by cultural industries (e.g., commercial galleries, museums, films, the publishing industry, real-estate companies) and cities to exploit the creative capacity of graffiti writers and street artists. In some cases, graffiti writers and street artists might be invited into this process, but this is not necessarily the case. Graffiti and street art can be commodified and co-opted without involving those who have laboured behind the aesthetic objects' production. And, of course, there are numerous businesses who appropriate graffiti street styles and sell them without having any specific connection to the graffiti or street art subculture. In what follows, we briefly describe some areas of social life and practice in which the commodification and co-optation of graffiti and street art transpire.

Graffiti and street art tours

In almost every big city, small-time entrepreneurs have established graffiti and street art tours. These are marketed directly through the web and/or through travel booking sites like Airbnb. Tour guides take interested tourists to infamous graffiti haunts so that they can learn about local graffiti and street art, take photos and in some cases, post on their social media accounts, etc. (Andron

2018). These tours, of course, do not exist in a vacuum, and depending on the location, they can have very different goals. Some tours are embedded in the local cultures focusing on how the art is part of the local community (and often resisting 'urban renewal'), while others concentrate more upon the aesthetic quality of the art and the artists who paint them, celebrating the changing neighbourhood. A street art tour in Tel Aviv will have a very different ideological perspective and goal than a graffiti tour of the separation wall in the West Bank. An 'anti-gentrification' street art tour by a local who lives in the Mission district in San Francisco will be much different from a tour advertised on the city owned *Visit Detroit* page organized to bring tourists into the downtown area.

Galleries and museums

In many respects, no sooner did modern graffiti and street art start appearing on surfaces in New York City than various entities began exploring how they could profit off its existence. At the forefront of the commodification process have been commercial art galleries, their owners and their curators (Dickens 2010). This was not a unidirectional process. Almost since the day graffiti materialized on New York City streets, there has been an interest by some graffiti writers to get their work in commercial galleries and by selected galleries to represent them (Wells 2016).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, attempts were made by the New York arts community to decriminalize graffiti by framing it as art. [...] Over a short period of time, graffiti was transfigured as a canvassed commodity, responding to the demand of commercial galleries. This process of commodification began with the advent of an organization called the United Graffiti Artists (UGA).

(Waclawek 2011: 58)

This was followed by another organization, the Nation of Graffiti Artists (NOGA), which was 'founded in 1974 and functioned as a type of community arts workshop for all those interested in graffiti' (Waclawek 2011: 58). According to Lombard (2013), '[t]he Post-Graffiti exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1984 was an early attempt to rebadge graffiti as art. Soon after that, however, graffiti began to recede into the underground' (2013: 94).

The epitome or ironic nature of galleries striving to appropriate graffiti and street art is well-articulated in Banksy's 2010 mockumentary, *Exit through the Gift Shop*. This movie depicts how Thierry Guetta – who goes on to adopt the moniker 'Mr Brainwash' – was obsessed with the work of a number of graffiti writers and street artists and, in the course of filming them, managed to become what many might label as an overnight celebrity of sorts by doing graffiti and street art himself. Towards the end of the movie, we see Thierry, now 'Mr Brainwash', directing a number of assistants and arbitrarily assigning prices to the artworks that appear in a show of his work. He seems to be a caricature of the art world's reaction to graffiti and street art.

While *Exit through the Gift Shop* is told from the perspective of an artworld insider (i.e., Banksy) who has been afforded some licence to playfully mock the realm of fine art – much in the same way that, say for example, Duchamp was permitted – it is important to emphasize that significant racial and class tensions can inform the artworld's relationship to graffiti and street art. When galleries first began showing graffiti art, the racial marginality and class

background of the writers were often highlighted, framing the art as ‘primitive’ for their wealthy, mostly white, patrons (Austin 2001). Graffiti on the street was seen as ‘dirt’ done by ‘sick’ individuals who needed to be controlled and stopped (Cresswell 1992) unless they could be ‘cured’ and made into ‘artists’ (which galleries as cultural arbitrators could do). Nonetheless, and as Schacter argues, there can be more progressive relationships between street artists and graffiti writers and galleries (2014b).

In addition to the mainstream commercial galleries, some larger art museums, including the Tate Modern in 2008 (London), have hosted exhibitions on graffiti and/or street art. In 2011, for example, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, featured *Art in the Streets*, which showcased graffiti and street art throughout the world (Deitch et al. 2011). While major museums may run temporally limited exhibitions, recent years have seen the establishment of more or less permanent graffiti and street art museums. These include the Urban Nation Museum for Urban Contemporary Art established in 2017 in Berlin, and the Museum of Graffiti opened in 2019 in Wynwood, a neighbourhood in Miami, Florida. There have also been periodic exhibitions and travelling exhibitions, like the *Beyond the Streets* show, that opened in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2019 with the hope that it would go on the road (Caramanica 2019). In addition to these exhibits, visit various museum bookstores or gift shops, and you are likely to find books on graffiti and street art (mainly on Banksy 2006, and Shepard Fairey 2009), or ephemera like postcards, posters, calendars and fridge magnets featuring this kind of work. These exhibits within museums institutionalize graffiti and street art, putting a price tag on the art representations while helping to frame its discourse.

An interesting twist on the entanglement of galleries or museums and graffiti and street art can be seen when these pieces are removed from a surface (by, for instance, the owner of the property) with the intent of selling the piece to a third party (Bengtson 2016) or because the property is slated for demolition (e.g., Five Pointz, NY case study with its attendant legal case). For example, when Banksy went on a ‘graffiti activist tour’ in the West Bank in 2007 and painted ‘Donkey Documents’ – an image of an Israeli soldier checking the identity papers of a donkey – many Palestinians did not appreciate the ‘joke’ and understood the mural as equating Palestinians with donkeys (issues of cultural blindness are embedded in much of Banksy’s political work). The image, though, was cut out of the wall and sold for \$250,000 at auction (see Prosperpio’s documentary *The Man Who Sold Banksy* [2018]). What this and comparable examples show are that the work of graffiti or street art can be commodified by disconnecting it from its original location, thereby transforming it into a ‘canvas’ for sale at auction or perhaps an ‘item’ in a museum exhibit.

Popular culture: Films, books and fashion

One might easily argue that popular culture formats have been more receptive to, and perhaps better positioned to commodify, contemporary graffiti and street art (Kramer 2017). Graffiti and street art have come to saturate popular culture – a realm typically equated with offering ‘entertainment’ rather than ‘high art’ – evidenced by the proliferation of films, books and fashion that incorporate these aesthetic practices in one way or another.

Numerous movies have used graffiti and street art as backdrops or individuals who engage in these practices as characters to tell their narratives, while other films have attempted to chronicle practitioners in different locations.

These films, both fictional (also referred to as commercial, feature-length, Hollywood and popular) and documentary, may contain images of graffiti and street art, as well as interviews with the individuals who either engage in or respond to this activity. Not only have many of these films been screened at movie festivals and local theatres, but they have also been available through television programming and various online content providers. According to Ross, from 1979 to 2014, approximately twenty-two full-length English-language, US-made films depicting graffiti and/or street art and artists/writers were created (Ross 2016c). Of this total, seven movies were fictional accounts, and fifteen were documentaries. While the fictional accounts tell a story, the documentary genre consists of films with nonfictional content, the intent of which is instruction or the capturing of a part of the historical record (Ross and Kramer 2018).

Concerning books, a number of trade publishers have produced texts that document examples of graffiti and street art and those who create this work in various cities and countries. Seeing graffiti and street art as desirable subject matter for book content can be dated to early 1970s, if not slightly earlier. Some of these monographs have been general treatments (e.g., Reisner 1971; Mailer and Naar 1974; Lewisohn 2008; Reisner and Wechsler 1980; Seno 2010; Deitch et al. 2011; Gastman and Nelon 2011; Schacter 2013), with copious photographs documenting examples of graffiti and street art. Others have focused on specific graffiti writers (e.g., Powers 1999; Fedordhak 2005; Gold 2007). Alternatively, almost every major city has a thriving graffiti and street art scene, and site-specific books have been published documenting many of the artists/writers who have created the pieces that appear in these locations (e.g., Gastman 2001; Grévy 2008). The books focusing on either cities or artists predominantly include numerous photographs of the works with limited text written by the focal graffiti or street artists. These efforts occasionally include graffiti and street artists' interviews, which may make them celebratory in nature. The books may seem to romanticize the graffiti and street artist's subculture (Campos 2013) and are minimally interpretative.³

Arguably, though, the most important tool allowing graffiti and street art to reach a mass audience is the Internet. Graffiti websites like Fatcap, Art Crimes, Pure Graffiti, Bombing Science, Spray Daily amongst others have been influential in having graffiti reach a large number of people throughout the world. Websites and social media platforms have promoted certain practitioners and elevated particular styles, resulting in a profound effect on graffiti and street art. McDowell (2019), for example, argues that Instagram has shifted both the producing and viewing of graffiti and has facilitated the production of street art 'stars' that brings a wide range of graffiti and street art from around the world to viewers with a click of the button. Graffiti and street art are not something that need to be discovered within a particular place but exist in the 'everywhere' of the Internet.

It has long been recognized that clothing, jewellery and accessories – and by extension, the fashion and styles we adopt – consciously or unconsciously reflect our values, moods, personality or self-image and provide us with a sense of belonging or identity. Clothing can also be used to separate people and categorize them into groups, thereby providing a type of psychological and physical distance between real, imagined or potential antagonists. It should be noted that fashions are not simply embedded in dress but can extend to speech, hair and body customization (Goffman 1959). Scholars have

3. The authors recognize that a handful of other books that have been published appear to be how to do graffiti or street art (e.g., Graffiti Diplomacy 2013; Mariano 2019).

long recognized that particular subcultures wear unique styles of clothing and engage in particular types of body modification (e.g., tattoos) (Miller 1995; Hebdige 1998). Over the past four decades, graffiti–street art styles have been slowly integrated and/or copied by mainstream clothing manufacturers (Alabi 2013). Because certain articles of clothing are seen as hip (e.g., manufactured and distributed by companies such as Vans, Supreme, etc.), they are adopted into mainstream culture, often through middle-class voyeurism or fascination. In turn, this connection can make graffiti writing and street art works seem acceptable. Graffiti and street art iconography is present in contemporary fashion. In this manner, graffiti and street art, which mainstream society typically characterizes as bad or deviant, are now seen as legitimate and appropriate content for selling clothing. In many respects, the clothing is iconoclastic. One of the most noted street artists whose images have been commodified is Shepard Fairey, whose ‘Obey’ icons have been reproduced on all manner of clothing (Daichendt 2014).

Fashion brands that use graffiti and street art iconography periodically come to public attention when there is a news story or lawsuit about them. For example, in 2014, Williams, Chapa and Rubin, who are part of the San Francisco-based Mad Society Kings graffiti crew, claimed that ‘Just Cavalli’s Spring/Summer 2014 collection amounts to copyright infringement, unfair competition, and false designation of origin under the Lanham Act’ (Zerbo 2014). Not only was the company charged but so were the retailers who carried the clothes, including Nordstrom, Amazon.com and Zappos.com. That same year, David Anasagasti sued American Eagle for allegedly using his Miami ‘Ocean Grown’ graffiti ‘in a global advertising campaign without his authorization’ (Zerbo 2014). On a related note, Maya Hayuk sued Coach, Inc., and singer Sara Bareilles for using images of one of her murals in advertisements. Fashion companies attempt to have these motions dismissed, but some judges are siding with the graffiti writers. What these cases illustrate is the ambiguous role of ‘ownership’ over street art and graffiti branding that involves questions of intellectual property that will continue to make their way through the courts.

The graffiti industry: Spray paint, caps, markers

Alongside graffiti and street art’s integration into galleries, museums and popular culture, a graffiti industry has been created. This aspect of commodification started around the mid-1990s, and it began with companies focused on producing and selling spray paints specifically designed to meet the graffiti writers’ needs. While many such companies have come and gone over the years, there has emerged what could be described as the ‘Big Three’ – or those few players who have monopolized the spray paint market: Belton/Molotow, Spanish Montana (94, Hardcore) and German Montana (Gold, Black). Alongside these major players, there are a growing number of companies and manufacturers that focus on meeting the needs of graffiti writers at lower price points. In this band of the market, one finds companies like Ironlak, Loopcolors, Kobra, Flame and, among others, Onetake.

The other core component of spray paint is the cap that dispenses paint when pressed. Cap making is a robust industry, and there is a large diversity of caps now available. A graffiti writer or street artist can purchase caps that produce very fine lines, caps that have a width of twelve or so inches,

and everything in between (Kramer 2010, 2016). While spray paint and caps probably constitute the core business of the graffiti industry, companies have increasingly ventured into markers and inks as a further revenue stream.

Of particular interest is the way that this graffiti industry capitalizes on official opposition to graffiti and its emphasis on 'target-hardening'. Seemingly every innovative strategy to combat graffiti is counter-balanced by new products. For example, not long after New York City created a 'graffiti-free' subway, graffiti writers turned to 'etch', which is basically an acid that corrodes glass. This makes it impossible to 'clean' graffiti with conventional solvents. Instead, one must replace the entire panel of glass. And, to give a second example, as CCTV systems have been installed in metro systems, the graffiti industry has created 'stealth' ink. When applied, this ink is initially clear, going on almost like water. It turns to a darkish-brown, however, when it is hit by UV rays.

Also of obvious importance are the retail and online stores that bulk purchase directly from spray paint manufacturers to sell directly to graffiti and street artists. This is a global trade with a rapid market expansion into areas that previously had very little access to quality spray paint. Online buying has made spray paint more accessible whether you are in rural Georgia in the United States or in Alexandria in Egypt. Graffiti-centric stores that sell quality spray paint and accessories in cities such as Beirut, Tel Aviv and Cairo have recently opened up in places with burgeoning street art and graffiti scenes. As street art becomes more accepted by both city governments and citizens, we suspect these markets will continue to expand.

ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles included in this Special Issue cover a variety of focal points or objects of analysis, but they all fall under the banner of the co-optation and commodification of graffiti and street art. There is, of course, a logic that underpins their arrangement and ordering. The Special Issue moves from a focus on artists (Moran) to those who promote street art (Bengtson), and from here, to the broader economic forces embedded in gentrification and 'urban development' processes (Strom and Kusenbach). In a final move, this Special Issue explores how the commodification of graffiti has 'come full circle', which is evidenced by opposition to graffiti now emerging as an economic pursuit in itself (Hannerz and Kimvall).

Ruth Moran's piece offers an intricate analysis of Subset, an anonymous collective of street artists based in Dublin, Ireland, focusing on how they have appropriated narrative elements associated with graffiti and street art and become enmeshed in commodification processes. As a collective, Subset have appropriated the anonymity, illegality and, amongst other things, the impetus for prolific output often associated with graffiti writing culture. From the street art world, Subset have grafted the prescription to focus on 'pieces' instead of (name) writing, an emphasis on aesthetic elements that are likely to appeal to a much broader audience, thereby making it difficult to read their work as an expression of the marginalized, and the tendency to wrap aesthetic production in a philosophical world-view.

As Moran argues, Subset are adept at exploiting social and traditional media to promote the brand and associated philosophy that they have forged via a synthesis of graffiti and street art. This has led to the collective and various pieces they have created garnering cultural and political recognition.

Somewhat ironically, synthesizing elements from graffiti and street art worlds generates a contradiction of sorts. On the one hand, there is a claim to be subversive, a threat to established political-economic order and a promise of an alternative vision; on the other hand, however, much of their creative output and philosophical messaging is consistent with powerful economic interests. The contradiction becomes much more comprehensible by Moran's suggestion that subversiveness – or a carefully crafted image of subversiveness – is not antithetical to commodification. If anything, quite the opposite: subversiveness is readily amenable to commodification.

Peter Bengtsen's article shifts the focus from street artists and onto those who seek to professionalize or organize the street art world. The defining feature of such actors, arguably, is that they position themselves between street artists and property owners or larger commercial interests. Positioned as such, organizers of the street art world negotiate with property owners for commissioned works and/or wall space. They make a profit and pass some of the proceeds on to the artist. Bengtsen, however, pushes this argument further by suggesting that the major threat posed by this form of commodification is the 'fossilization' of street art.

With fossilization, Bengtsen argues that street art will be denied the very things that define it. In his view, the 'openness', 'ephemerality' and 'unsanctioned' nature of street art are profoundly threatened by monetization and fossilization, all of which amount to saying that street art's critical potential will be lost. As more and more space is occupied by commissioned paintings, less room is available for free and autonomous expression. Works of street art become permanent because they have been paid for by powerful economic actors. Moreover, because it is difficult to reconcile a politicized street art with commercial messages, the former will fall by the wayside. In short, fossilization summarizes the way in which street art is increasingly being curated by powerful economic interests and players, thereby ensuring a stagnant urban environment loaded with corporate messaging disguised as art.

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted at three cities in Florida (i.e., Tampa, St. Petersburg and Miami and sites inside those locations), Elizabeth Strom and Margarethe Kusenbach examine the various ways that street art interfaces with urban development and gentrification. While it may have become somewhat common sense to posit that street art is part and parcel of gentrification projects, Strom and Kusenbach find that things are slightly more complicated. Through a systematic comparison of the three cities, they show that the significance and impact of street art can shift depending upon the larger assemblages within which it manifests.

Miami, especially well known for its Wynwood District, is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of how street art can become so wedded to commercial interests and urban growth machines. Tampa and St. Petersburg, however, reveal that the link between street art and urban development can be quite tenuous and weak. Comparing three cities leads to an important concluding point: trying to establish whether street art fosters gentrification and residential displacement may be a theoretical dead end; of more importance is understanding how street art and urban change are deeply connected to larger, fundamental dynamics of capitalism.

Finally, Erik Hannerz and Jacob Kimvall examine the prolonged moral panic that engulfs graffiti in Stockholm, Sweden, and leverage this to show how constructing graffiti as a problem entails a novel form of commodification.

While much scholarship concentrates on how subcultures are subject to commodification and the impact this may have (such as co-optation or incorporation), Hannerz and Kimvall suggest that anti-graffiti practices are by no means immune from such processes.

In their account, the commodification of opposition to graffiti can be understood as an outcome of the prolonged moral panic that has been directed against graffiti writing since the mid-1990s. They show how available discourses on graffiti underwent a profound change in this period, discernible in articles published by *Metro*, a newspaper circulated within Stockholm's transit system. Prior to the 1990s, graffiti was often construed as art *and* vandalism; transit companies, businesses and the city were understood as the primary 'victims' of graffiti; and graffiti writers constituted the primary audience for anti-graffiti rhetoric, which generally sought to remoralize young people. Beginning in the mid-1990s, a new discourse arose and quickly dominated. It suggested that graffiti was understood as *only* vandalism; the entire community was reframed as the 'victim' of graffiti and the audience for anti-graffiti rhetoric shifted to those who appreciated graffiti or failed to construe it as a serious problem.

Stockholm, it would seem, took the idea of 'zero tolerance' and pushed it to its furthest limit. Given the weight of anti-graffiti rhetoric, one does not discover the subculture of graffiti being subject to commodification. The same cannot be said, however, for the moral panic directed against graffiti. This is evidenced by the proliferation of graffiti removal companies and, amongst other things, the millions of Swedish Krona spent each year on eradicating graffiti.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to analyse the various manifestations of the commodification and co-optation of graffiti and street art, the contexts where this has appeared and the numerous nuances connected to this phenomenon. In so doing, it has tried to help the reader better contextualize not just these situations but the scholarship that has been produced in this field. The articles included in this Special Issue add to our knowledge base by exploring variations of commodification and co-optation in multiple contexts.

We have selected four articles that look at the issue of commodification and co-optation of contemporary graffiti and street art in different geographic areas. In so doing, they illustrate how people who engage in this activity must deal with numerous complexities. These articles also depict slightly different responses by cities, moral entrepreneurs and monied interests as they try to respond to graffiti and street art.

Both this introductory article and the ones that follow demonstrate the multiple interpretations and uses of graffiti and street art and illustrate how the notions of commodification and co-optation as applied to this contemporary urban art form are not as straightforward as one might think but instead imbued with considerable nuance. The field requires sensitivity to the hopes, desires and imagination of people who engage in graffiti and street art and the multiple pressures that they are confronted with including the necessity of paying bills, the risks they may take, the push and pull of being in the limelight no matter how fractured and fleeting it is and the regular need to evaluate one's commitment to an activity that comes with changing risks. Commodification and co-optation are always present in market economies,

and it will attempt to influence or use new practices and procedures to achieve its purveyors' objectives.

We hope the readers find merit in this Special Issue and use the articles to facilitate exploration of commodification, which is emerging as a core aspect of contemporary graffiti and street art.

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