Reclaiming the Streets
- How Street Art creates a new Democratic Public Sphere -
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Reclaiming the Streets: How Street Art Creates A New Democratic Public Sphere¹

During the past presidential election, Street Artist Shepard Fairey became a cultural phenomenon when he released a print featuring an image of an upward looking Barack Obama with the word “Hope” written in a bold font on the bottom.

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magazine (which is the highest status one can achieve in pop culture). As Barack Obama captured the hearts of many Americans, so did Fairey’s image, and with Obama’s election as President, Fairey’s *Hope* print was inducted into the collection of the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Museum, concluding a long journey paralleling that of its subject matter, from the streets of the city (Obama as a community organizer) to Washington D.C. The success of Fairey’s *Hope* owes itself to one fact; the democratic power of Street art. After he put up his initial print, *Hope* became public domain; Fairey put up the image on his website, encouraging viewers to post the images on their streets, or he sent them out to street-teamers, who carried on the task of filling the streets with the image.

The success of Fairey’s *Hope* represents a national furor and reflects a renewed hope for democracy among the public. Street artists such as Fairey have come to define the times we live in with the work they produce, which impact more than just the art world, but the democratic society as a whole. More than just an art movement, Street Art is a global phenomenon, and arguably the most dynamic cultural force in modern times. In an era where democratic values such as freedom of speech have become threatened, Street art is a weapon that can be used by the masses to reclaim those freedoms of which they have been deprived. This paper will look at the Street art phenomenon and the relationship and interaction between Private and Public in the modern city and claim that, by putting art in streets and other public spaces, Street artists are creating an open dialogue in the public, consequently reclaiming public spaces from advanced capitalism for democratic use.
Public vs. Private

In “Privatizing the Public Realm,” Shirley Kressel states that public spaces are the arenas where the collective, common life which defines us as a society is acted out, and where we come into contact with those who are like and those who are different from ourselves. They are the places where we are all equal and where we are all “home.” They are the places where our freedoms of speech and assembly are protected, where we can exercise the precious right of criticizing the government. In public spaces we are reminded of the most important civics lesson: We are all in this together. (Kressel)

Public spaces, which have their root in the Greek “agora,” are where democracy is enacted on a local level and are the physical embodiment of the democratic ideology. As Kressel notes, public spaces are “places where we are all equal…where our freedoms of speech and assembly are protected.” (Kressel)

The way we think of public space stems from Jurgen Habermas’ theory of the “public sphere.” Habermas revolutionized the way we think about the “public” with his theory of the public sphere, which he first introduced when he published The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere in 1962 (translated to English in 1989). According to Habermas, the public sphere is a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens… Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinion – about matters of general interest. (Habermas 49, italics mine)

In Habermas’ view, the public sphere as a concept developed in 18-19th century Europe. As printed media developed and salons and Masonic lodges became prominent gathering places, men started to openly debate and exchange ideas about politics, gradually transforming Europe from a feudal society into something more akin to democracy in its current form.
Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, however, has been met with countless accounts of criticism. In “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Nancy Fraser notes that “We know, both from the revisionist theory and from Habermas’ account, that the bourgeois public’s claim to full accessibility was not in fact realized… women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded.” (Fraser 63) As seen in the example of Shepard Fairey’s *Hope*, Street art forms and expresses a *public opinion*, and access to the streets, the space in which these images are posted, *is guaranteed to all citizens*. In modern society, the streets, the pipeline of the city, replaces the exclusivity of Masonic lodges and salons, creating a new kind of public sphere in which those who inhabit the streets, the public, are members of the public sphere.

French sociologist Raymond Ledrut defines the city as a social practice, negating its value as a physical object. “The city is an environment formed by the interaction and the integration of different practices. It is maybe in this way that the city is truly the city.” (Ledrut 122) As Rosalyn Deutsche observes,

> The city, Ledrut insists, is not a spatial framework external to its users, but is produced by them… Not only does (Ledrut’s definition of a city) explicitly acknowledge the participation of diverse social groups in the production of the environment, it argues against an environment imposed from above by state institutions or private interests. (Deutsche “Uneven Development” 6)

Ledrut, as examined by Deutsche, champions a city that is molded by its inhabitants, the public. In understanding the importance of Street art, it is important to understand Ledrut’s notion of a city as “an environment formed by the interaction and integration of different practices” (Ledrut 122) because it exemplifies the importance of active participation of all constituents of a democracy. Fairey’s *Hope* was successful not only because of its aesthetics but because of its ability to involve the public into a political
campaign; the fact that the public united under an image and actively participated in its proliferation, thus defining a movement of hope.

By taking command of public spaces, the public takes control of the city from “state institutions and private interest.” (Deutsche “Uneven Development” 6) In his seminal text The Urban Revolution, French sociologist Henri Lefebvre describes the transition of a city (public space) to an urban society (privatized space) by depicting the transformation of the streets from a public space to a space controlled by the privatizing force of the “neo-capitalist organization.”

Although the street may have once had the meaning of a meeting place, it has since lost it, and could only have lost it, by reducing itself, through a process of necessary reduction, to nothing more than a passageway, by splitting itself into a place for the passage of pedestrians (hunted) and automobiles (privileged). The street became a network organization for and by consumption… In this sense we can speak of a colonization of the urban space, which takes place in the streets through publicity, through the spectacle of objects – a “system of objects” that has become symbol and spectacle. (Lefebvre “The Urban Revolution” 20, 21)

In the modern city we increasingly see cases of “publicity through the spectacles of objects,” (Lefebvre “The Urban Revolution” 21) advertisements, invading public space and turning them into spaces of private property. In New York City, corporations and bureaucratic forces have used the cityscape as a canvas for their advertisements, claiming their right to the city over that of the public. In an article of AM New York it was announced that the City Council of New York City contemplated the selling of ad space on garbage cans, garbage trucks, highways and bridges, in addition to the already existing ad space on buses, taxicabs, subway cars, benches and sides of buildings. (Naanes) This colonization of public space takes the citizens hostage, defining their roles in the city by taking control of their visual environment.
In his Situationist manifesto The Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord described the world we live in as a “Society of the Spectacle”, where “all that once was directly lived has become mere representation… The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” (Debord 12) In Debord’s view, life is no longer to be lived, but observed from a distance, since the circulation of images has become more important than the commodities itself. (Macey 84) The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard elaborates on this concept, calling the world we live in a “hypermarket”. In “Hypermarket and Hypercommodity” Baudrillard states that

From thirty kilometers all around, the arrows point you toward these large triage centers that are the hypermarkets, towards this hyperspace of the commodity where in many regards a whole new sociality is elaborated... people go there to find and to select object-responses to all the questions they may ask themselves, or, rather, they themselves come in response to the functional and directed questions that the objects constitute... they (the objects) are tests, and we are summoned to answer them. (Baudrillard “Hypermarket and Hypercommodity” 75)

Baudrillard talks of a world where we are controlled by the spectacle to the extent that we mindlessly gather to shiny billboards and shopping malls like moths to flame. Wherever we look, we find billboards with celebrities endorsing products. NBA stars manipulate us into believing that by purchasing the shoe they endorse, we can become rich and famous just like them. Beer companies tell us that unless we drink their product, we are not valuable members of the society. Deodorant retailers tell us that unless we smell good we will lose our chances to procreate and leave our genes for the next generation. Our lives become responses to images that are provided by the spectacle. We live in response to the spectacle, worshipping commodities and ritualizing consumption. To further utilize Baudrilladian terms, we live in a hyperreal world where the spectacle has demeaned our
existence to the extent that we are no longer worthy of true commodities, but simulacra of it.

As our society increasingly becomes spectacular, our public spaces have become increasingly colonized by private influence. As Naomi Klein notes in *NoLogo*, an influential text on modern corporatism, “Nearly every major city has seen some variation of the 3-D ad takeover, if not entire buildings, then on buses, streetcars or taxis… buses, streetcars and taxis, with the help of digital imaging and large pieces of adhesive vinyl, have become ads on wheels, shepherding passengers around in giant chocolate bars and gum wrappers.” (Klein 37) The agent of privatization and branding are nothing other than advertisements and brand logos, the enticing images of commodities that lure us (some would say intimidate us) into buying products and the iconographic imagery that we associate with the quality of products. As advertisements increase, our public spaces become less public and more influenced by private interest, becoming something similar to corporate theme parks. In modern times, we have even seen the emergence of privately created public spaces, the ultimate corporate theme park. The epitome of the privatization of public spaces, these corporate theme parks, such as the IKEA plaza in Red Hook, Brooklyn, allow the public to interact in a pseudo public space, but within the framework of the corporation that owns the physical space. In these spaces participation of the public is eliminated, thus discouraging the development of a public dialogue and eliminating the possibility of a public sphere.
Street Art, Defined

Although some would consider all art that can be seen in the street, or other public places, to be by default Street art, such a broad categorization does not do justice to a movement that is growing to be a major cultural force. In The Urban Revolution Henri Lefebvre notes that

Revolutionary events generally take place in the streets. Doesn’t this show that the disorder of the streets engender another kind of order? The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. *A place where speech can become “savage” and, by escaping rules and institutions, inscribe itself on walls*” (Lefebvre “The Urban Revolution” italics mine)

Written in the late 1960s, Lefevbre’s text was largely influential in the formation of the Situationist International, a group that is often cited as influencing and orchestrating the French student riots of 1969. Led by Guy Debord, the Situationists described the society as a spectacle and riled up students with anarchic slogans they inscribed on walls, a la graffiti, such as “Humanity won’t be happy till the last capitalist is hung with the guts of the last bureaucrat” and “Be realistic, demand the impossible.” Although both Fairey and the Situationists used the streets as the stages for their revolutions, their messages were contradictory of each other, one promoting a new hope for the government while the other promoted chaos and disorder to dismantle the social structure. But it is in that difference that we see the most defining characteristic of the streets, which is its possibility of being a realm of “savage” expression, a place where the public can gather to have their voices heard despite the content of the expression that is being made.

As Rosalyn Deutsche observes in “Art and Public Spaces: Questions of Democracy,” “The Public sphere idea replaces definitions of public art as art that occupies or designs physical spaces and addresses independently formed audiences with
a definition of public art as a practice that constitutes a public by engaging people in
political debate.” (Deutsche “Art and Public Spaces” 39) Deutsche’s elaboration of
Habermas’ theory is essential in theorizing Street art because it removes the importance
of the materiality of art from art that exists in the public and instead puts emphasis on
art’s ability to generate a “political debate.”

In “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” Claire Bishop cites Rosalyn
Deustche’s statement that “the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its
naturalized exclusions are taken into account and made open to contestation: ‘conflict,
division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are
conditions of its existence.’” (Bishop “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” 65) Claire
Bishop connects Deutsche’s statement to Chantall Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau’s theory of
“antagonism,” which states that

a fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all
antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers
are constantly being drawn and brought into debate – in other words, a
democratic society in which relations of conflict are sustained, not
erased. (Bishop “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” 66)

Antagonism in the public space is characterized by its “ephemerality.” Marc
Schiller, co-founder of the influential Street Art website Wooster Collective states that
“Street art is by its very nature, ephemeral...The work begins to emerge as a true
collaboration between the artist and the city itself.” (Schiller) Armsrock, a street artist
from Denmark, demonstrates this “collaboration” by sketching inhabitants of the city and
later posting life-size images of them in the locations where he initially spotted them.
Subject to the harsh conditions of the streets, the sun and rain, wind and snow, the traffic
of the people and of the automobiles, Armsrock’s simulacra of the public slowly
disintegrate, eventually becoming part of the urban landscape.
Nature and other environmental forces, however, are not the only conditions of the streets that cause a Street art piece to be ephemeral. Street art is not private property. They do not belong to individuals, and therefore their existence in the public is not protected. Also, streets, unlike galleries and museums, do not choose the work that is exhibited in them. Anyone who is willing to face the consequences can post their recent creations. However, as Steve Lambert of the *Anti Advertising Agency* notes

> Our city is read-only. You’re free to read advertising, business signs, and city signs. But dare you write or hang anything of your own; you will be labeled as a criminal – a graffiti vandal. In many cities it’s even illegal to hang a sign for a garage sale on a light pole. If you happen to have a several thousand dollars, you might be able to say what you want – as long as it’s not too political. But this is public space. You’re free to say whatever you want in public space, but freedom of speech does not extend to the visual environment. The visual environment is pay to play. Public visual space has become commercial space.

(Lambert)

In response to a city being read-only, Lambert demands that a city be an environment of read and write. “(Read and write) is how we think critically. This is how we learn. You can talk back. You can express yourself. You don’t just consume expression, you create expression. Read/write is how democracy works.” (Lambert) Read and write encourages the public to take control of their visual environment. “Being able to write means being able to affect your environment. To change it. You exist in the world not as a consumer, but as an active citizen.” (Lambert) The tension between read and write creates an antagonism between the iconography that is posted on the streets of the city, resulting in the creation of an ephemeral public dialogue. Street art pieces are put up against each other, often times overlapping, destroying the aesthetics of each other. Street art is put on top of advertisements, eliminating the message of the advertisement, and eventually taken down, only to be replaced by new advertisements. In this antagonistic struggle between read and write, street art and advertisements, the iconography of the city, become
ephemeral. Thus the ephemerality of Street art is a necessary condition in its construction as a democratic art form.

Shepard Fairey’s *Obey* campaign is an example of Street art that combats the infestation of corporate brands and logos in public spaces by creating its own kind of iconography and pitting them against other iconic images.

(Image 4)

The *Obey* logo is as ubiquitous as a Nike or an Apple logo in the streets. What differs, however, is the philosophy behind the logo. As Fairey notes in his “Obey Manifesto,”

> The OBEY sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings. Because people are not used to seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the product or motive is not obvious, frequent and novel encounters with the sticker provoke thought and possible frustration, nevertheless revitalizing the viewer’s perception and attention to detail. The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker. Because OBEY has no actual meaning, the various reactions and interpretations of those who view it reflect their personality and the nature of their sensibilities. (Fairey)
Thus, Street art, exemplified here by Fairey’s *Obey* campaign, is an attack against the dominance of the simulacra that dominate the spectacle, an anarchic struggle for a voice to be heard in an ocean of chaos created by advertisements, which impose an iconographic hegemony on public space. By posting images on the streets, Street artists demonstrate to the public that the simulacra that seem to dominate our lives can be violated. What is important is not the content of the street art, but rather the fact that by nature of its existence it questions the relationship between the public as a viewer and his/her surrounding, the visual environment of a city.

The antagonistic nature of advertisements and Street art makes their existence in public spaces ephemeral. In the streets of the cities, however, iconography is not the only thing that is ephemeral. As Henri Lefebvre notes “The street is where movement takes place, the interaction without which urban life would not exist, leaving only separation, a forced and fixed segregation.” (Lefebvre “The Urban Revolution”18) Lefebvre illustrates movement as integral to the urban experience. This movement, however, makes the street a place of temporal residence, a place of passage like an artery in the body, constantly moving to pump blood to the heart. Without this movement, the heart would not be able to function. The inhabitants of the city are the agents of this movement. As Baudrillard notes in “The Ideological Genesis of Needs,” “any system of productive growth (capitalist, but not exclusively) can only produce and reproduce men…as productive forces. (If a person) reproduces himself, it is because the system requires his self-production in order to reproduce itself: it needs men.” (Baudrillard “The Ideological Genesis of Needs”) This production and reproduction of men in the capitalist city leads to life as an ephemeral experience, since the men produced and reproduced eventually
become redundant. The ephemeral existence of inhabitants in the city results in exclusions from societies; those who are redundant are evicted and flow into the streets, where their private life is lived in public, thus turning them into exclusions from society, where distinctions between public and private are made by the distinction of one behavior in public and private spaces.

Artist Barry McGee, who once was a graffiti artist who operated under the moniker “Twist”, notes that

To me, that’s the most interesting thing: how in today’s climate there can be huge billboards and bus stop kiosks with advertising, and then comes along like a simple tag or something that someone does on it, and that thing is immediately removed over night. To me, that’s what is really interesting about the whole thing now. It’s about the idea of public space and how people can function in public space anywhere. It’s gotten tighter and tighter, since the Reagan-Bush era, the idea of private space and who can go into that space or park, what is considered a park now. (McGee)

As McGee notes, modern public space operates under the understanding that exclusions are necessary. Parks often have patrol officers forcing the homeless out, while other public spaces have other strict rules that control the public when they enter them. Alexander Kluge speaks of a “pseudo-public sphere,” where “exclusions enacted to homogenize public space by expelling specific differences are dismissed as deeds necessary to restore social harmony.” (Kluge) In the modern city, some might argue that the whole of the society, all those who constitute the public are naturalized exclusions. In the hands of the capitalist city, the public is like a disposable toy, used as devices of operation but excluded from the use of public space. As Rosalyn Deutsche asks, “Is it possible to speak with assurance of a public space where social groups, even when physically present, are systematically denied a voice...What does it mean to relegate groups to a sphere outside the public, to bar admittance to the discursive construction of
the public, and, in this way, prohibit participation in the space of public communication?”
(Deutsche “Art and Public Space” 38) By documenting the life of the general public, the
naturalized exclusions, and inscribing their image (voice) on the walls, Street artist
Armsrock creates art that reflects a true democratic public sphere, one that has a wholly
inclusive understanding of the term “public.” In All My Friends are Made of Paper
Armsrock observes

The city is a sonnet of fragments, and it is impossible to describe it in
any other way than fragmentary. Any attempt at trying to decipher
these frenzied bits and pieces will be incomprehensible due to the fact
that the city is rebuilding itself this very moment, adding new
compositions of elements, breaking down old ones, forming patterns of
change, their dimensions beyond the ability of human hands to
reconstruct or fully understand. (Armsrock)

By designating the city as a “sonnet of fragments,” and describing how “the city is
rebuilding itself this very moment,” Armsrock goes beyond the notion that street art or
the public are ephemeral, suggesting that the city itself is an ephemeral existence. Thus,
the ephemerality of Armsrock’s work creates a parallel to the life of the city itself,
becoming art work that represents the true ephemeral nature of modern life in the city.

In a forum titled “What the Hell Should We Call It?” conducted on the Street art
website Wooster Collective, site-founder Marc Schiller asked several members of the
Street art community what the movement should be properly called. Answers varied,
from “The Disobedients”, a term suggested by Aaron Rose, who once operated the
influential Lower East Side gallery space Alleged Gallery, where many of today’s
prominent street artists, such as the aforementioned Shepard Fairey, got their first official
break, to more art-historical terms such as “post-structural urban symbolism” and “public
expressionism.” Although the terms suggested varied in their terminology, they all
seemed to have one aspect in common; they all indicated that street art is “post-graffiti”.
(Wooster Collective) This differentiation of Street art and graffiti is important because, similar to street art, graffiti also creates an antagonism on the streets. In the late 1970s, when Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper documented the lives of inner city youth and the art of graffiti, the world took notice of (and criminalized) the act as vandalism, but also as a disenfranchised youths reaction against the colonization of their lives.

As Street artist Faile notes, “Street art is more about interacting with the audience on the street and the people, the masses. Graffiti isn’t so much about connecting with the masses… it’s an internal language, it’s a secret language.” (Lewisohn 15) Although a legitimate act of creation of antagonism, tagging has evolved to signify an act of claiming territory. Rather than creating a democratic public sphere around it, the dialogue graffiti creates is more contained within a closed culture, and is not as effective in creating an
democratic dialogue among the public as Street art is. Also, graffiti is more of an art of typography; a contest of who can create a tag that is more original and bombastic while still expressing the name of the artist. In terms of inclusivity, Street art’s visual culture seems more effective in creating a public dialogue. Therefore this paper, while paying due respect to the culture of graffiti, will not be discussing it extensively.

There are three elements that are integral to Street Art’s creation of a new democratic public sphere; site-specificity, the Situationist concept of detournement and Street Art’s ability to involve the public by encouraging interaction and participation from the viewing public. These three elements represent three factors that are integral in maintaining a healthy democracy; site-specificity claims the public’s right to use the streets and public spaces as their own, detournement monitors advanced capitalism from colonizing our lives, and interaction/participation of the public is an essential democratic practice. By looking at these three elements and Street art works that successfully employ them, this paper will claim that Street art is reviving the notion of a Habermasian public sphere and democratizing it by creating a public dialogue through the posting of ephemeral art work that contests the domination of private property in public spaces.

**Site Specificity**

In the early 1980s, as artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat revolutionized the art world by moving their work sites from the streets into the galleries, artist Richard Hambleton utilized the characteristics of having work in public space to create art that was truly unique to the streets. Titled *I Only Have Eyes for You, Putting Yourself Up for Abuse*, and *Spreading Yourself Thin*, Hambleton placed over 800 life-size
prints of himself in a Napoleonic pose on urban walls in ten cities. These images were most unique because of their ephemeral quality. As Allan Schwartzmann notes in Street Art, “The upwardly mobile figure was produced by black-line printing…which results in the entire image fading uniformly over a three month period, and printed on paper that stretched when moistened to conform to the wall’s texture, thus leaving behind a white ‘ghost’.” (Schwartzmann 35) By placing his work in the streets, Hambleton utilized the ephemerality of Street art. His Napoleonic pose is a posture of egotism, a condition a lot of people find themselves in modern times, a confidence that, perhaps, motivates people to search for success in cities, and helps them survive once they have faced its harsh reality. By letting his images fade, Hambleton comments on the urban condition of life, and the ghostly remnants people leave as they move from one city to another. Hambleton’s “ghosts” are also similar to the shadows left behind the victims of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Thus, they can be understood as simulacrums of modern man post-atomic era. The anonymous shadows of the victims of the atomic bomb are reminders of the fragility of man in contrast to the environment that he has created for himself. As Richard Hambleton demonstrates, street art is ephemeral by nature of its location.

In the French language, the term “c’est le Bronx” translates to “what a mess,” a colloquium created because of the notoriety of the collapsing infrastructure of the New York City borough of the Bronx in the late 1970s. During this time, the Bronx was subject to many cases of arson, as many landlords decided to burn their property to profit from the insurance money. Because of the Cross-Bronx Expressway project orchestrated by Robert Moses, the wealthy, mainly white, residents of Bronx fled to the suburb,
eventually leading to In this degradation in the quality of life among the remaining residents of the Bronx. Around this time, artist Gordon Matta-Clark, under the guise of anarchitecture, forced his way into abandoned buildings in the Bronx and tore them apart using various tools, exposing their skeletal core.

His activities were an allegory of the deterioration of the quality of life in the Bronx; by exposing the structure of the abandoned buildings, Matta-Clark exposed the deterioration of the quality of life in the Bronx. Aside from exposing the structure of the abandoned buildings, Matta-Clark also drilled large holes on the side of buildings. This was an allegory of hope for the future; by drilling holes, Matta-Clark created new points of view toward the sky for the citizens of the Bronx, and also created a light source for light to pour into the streets.

The most important aspect of Matta-Clark’s work is “site-specificity,” the idea that
An art that has to some extent originated in response to a broad audience or to a section, a community, of that audience – an art that rises up from the experiences of the people... it must be able to engage at least a proportion of its audience at the core of its own experience. The art must relate to the space in which it is located... in terms of the ambience, the spirit, the significance of that space for its residents.

(Lippard 38)

When art doesn't “relate to the space in which it is located,” its content becomes lost to its environmental surroundings. Fine art can only successfully exist in galleries and museums where it is ensured that it will be examined in an appropriately aesthetic and analytical context. Similarly, Thomas Kinkade’s paintings can only exist in offices, hotel lobbies, and on cookie boxes. The importance of the site to Kinkade’s paintings is that his work is rooted less in the canon of fine art than it is in folk art; Kinkade’s images, similar to Norman Rockwell, offer comfort to those who are less interested in the historical context of fine art, and therefore best exist in realms that people associate with comfort or home. And Matta-Clark’s *anarchitecture* can only exist in realms that have seen the effects the burgeoning privatization of life has had on the public sphere. If his acts of *anarchitecture* were carried out in a quiet hamlet town or a townhouse in the Upper East Side, the work would be less effective because those sites are not commonly associated with deterioration. Thus site specificity is the life force of most art work, and especially of Street art; the politics of the streets, the privatization of public space and the shunning of public dialogue, is combated by Street art because of its location, the streets, a realm of public space where the activity of the city takes place.

In 1974, Matta-Clark ventured away from the city as his site of work and cut a house in Englewood, New Jersey, a suburb of New York, in half. Titled *Splitting*, this
work commented on the suburbanization of the American society, and the consequences that followed the development of the suburbs.

As Pamela M. Lee notes,

If the mass-produced boxes of popular stereotype crystallized the image of the suburbs as a cultural wasteland for many, they generated a powerfully seductive myth nonetheless: the cult of privacy...The intimate sphere of privacy...idealizes the nuclear family and its hierarchy and lays claim to its autonomy, bracketed off as it is from the demands of civil society.” (Lee 23)

“The cult of privacy,” or the creation of a “private sphere” acts as a “spatio-temporal retreat from (the) public sphere.” (Lee 23) Thus, those who are involved in suburbanization are removed from the public sphere. As Lee notes “Suburbanization came at the expense of including many – namely low-income families and African-Americans, while virtually imprisoning others.” (Lee 24) Matta-Clark notes that he
“would not make a total distinction between the imprisonment of the poor and the subtle self-containerization of higher socioeconomic areas.” (Lee 24) Thus the cut he creates is an allegory of the divide suburbanization creates between the public and the private in the society, the increasing color divide and race relations in the contemporary society, and the divide of the wealthy and impoverished that is further deepened by suburbanization.

Banksy, a prolific British Street artist, uses site specificity to comment on our hyperreal age, an age in which reality has been replaced by simulacra. Banksy, who uses the rat as his symbol, operates exactly like a rat. Rats live in urban areas; they live off of the waste of others, adapting to the urban environment and using the nature of the city as means to survive. The spoil of humanity is the fuel for a rat. Similarly, Banksy’s artwork feeds off of the ruins of humanity; to him, there is no better site than a place that exemplifies the failure of humanity to act humanely. And like a rat, Banksy operates incognito, only being recognized after the damage has been done. A defining piece by Banksy is the mannequin dressed as a Guantanamo Bay Prisoner he placed in Disneyland.
As Jean Baudrillard notes in “The Precession of Simulacra,”

Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America that is Disneyland…Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas... the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.” (Baudrillard “The Precession of Simulacra” 12)

Baudrillard claims that reality is Disneyified; the fantasy of Disneyland is set up to conceal the colonization of reality, the hyperreality of America. By placing a mannequin, a simulacrum, of a Guantanamo Bay Prisoner in Disneyland, Banksy intervenes into Disneyland’s colonization of reality by completing its recreation of reality; the reality of America’s ongoing War on Terror, and Guanatanamo Bay Prisons legacy of torture and human right’s violations. Thus Banksy’s simulacrum of a prisoner intervenes with the Disneyland’s visitors foray into a disneyified reality by confronting them with the gritty reality of the war, and its consequences, which remain unreal to the public because of the media’s attempt to conceal it from our reality.

As Rosalyn Deutsche notes, “critical site specific art…attempt(s) to intervene, through the artwork, in its site. The reciprocity between artwork and site alter(s) the identity of each, blurring distinctions between them and preparing ground for the enhanced participation of art in wider cultural and social practice.” (Deutsche “Uneven Development” 14) According to Deutsche, then, site-specific art needs not simply “relate” to its site, as Lippard noted, but “intervene” in its site, not just using the site as a canvas but actually attempting to improve the site through the placement of artwork. In August of 2008, on the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Banksy entered the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and painted images ranging from wheel-chair bound citizens waving American flags under an ominous “no loitering” sign, to the national guard looting abandoned houses and a marching band wearing gasmasks haunting the streets of
an empty New Orleans. By posting these images, Banksy commented on the lingering affect of Katrina and the government’s tardy response to the national disaster. Each of the images Banksy created was specific to the site of New Orleans. The wheel chair bound citizen under the “no loitering” sign represents the elderly and disabled who were left behind in the catastrophe, due to the late response of the government. The national guards image is a response to the widely publicized news that the impoverished residents of New Orleans were seen looting stores before escaping the catastrophe, and the marching band in gas mask is a tribute to a lost culture, the New Orleans that once was that never will be again.
Banksy’s site-intervening site-specific artwork confronts its viewers with reality, an element of life that is distilled by the growing domination of hyperreality. By putting artwork that reminds the public of reality, Banksy attempts to reclaim reality from the grip of the spectacle. In this sense, critical site-specific art can be understood as reclamation of the site from foreign sources that attempt to dictate their function. In the case of Street art, critical site-specificity is an element that situates the art piece in a context in which it cannot be ignored, the streets, thus invigorating a public dialogue and creating a new democratic public sphere.

**Detournement**

According to Henri Lefebvre, our society is increasingly occupied by what he calls “abstract space.” Abstract space, “a means of production, an object of consumption, and a property relation…also a vehicle for state domination, subordination and surveillance” requires that “space be objectified and universalized.” (Lefebvre “From Absolute Space to Abstract Space) The city becomes abstract through the proliferation of
advertisements. A city of abstract space is a city not meant to be inhabited but to be commodity, the prize for the highest bidder; the capitalist’s playground.

Commenting on the news article in AM New York that the City Council was considering the selling of ad space on garbage cans, trucks, highways and bridges, director of special projects at the Municipal Art Society Vanessa Gruen stated that “Once it (advertisements) spills out to residential areas…people object to having it in the neighborhood…I can’t see Chanel or Gucci putting an ad up on a garbage truck.” (Naanes) In this statement Gruen makes two false assumptions. One is that “people object to having it (advertisements) in the neighborhood.” (Naanes) The general public of New York City is naturally reluctant to object to advertisements in their neighborhoods. It is not because they are passive, however, but because the public generally sees the infiltration of corporations into their neighborhoods as something that is inevitable. Every street corner in New York City is adorned with an advertisement. Walls in subway stations promote everything from the newest movie to the best divorce lawyer. Buses drive by with pictures of the newest sneaker or TV show. There are those, such as activists, who object to the infiltration of advertisements into neighborhoods, but in general advertisements are seen as a nuisance similar to dog feces or littering; something that can never be eliminated, and therefore an effort is no longer made.

The second false assumption is that mega-brands like Chanel or Gucci wouldn’t put “an ad up on a garbage truck.” (Naanes) Corporations have been known to employ progressive advertising tactics, often engulfing modern art and underground cultures in their advertising schemes. Alt Terrain, a company that operates under the motto “Engagement Media, Brand Experiences, and Consumer Involvement,” (Alt Terrain)
employs forms of Street art, such as graffiti-murals and wheat-pasting, for the purpose of advertisement. The results are advertisements that blur the boundary of art and corporatism. Using terms such as “guerrilla advertisement”, the Alt Terrain website promises to “(create) unique art-advertising initiatives that are respected, talked about, and a part of the local street culture scene-scape.” (Alt Terrain) The contradiction in their statement is the fact that they promise to be “a part of the local street culture scene-scape.” (Alt Terrain) With companies such a Disney commissioning them to paint murals of Mickey Mouse (thus, in the truest sense propagating a Baudrillardian Disneyification in the streets of New York City), it is impossible for a company such as Alt Terrain to be a part of the “local street culture” unless they assume that advertisements are “public” beings, which is a false assumption since the aim of an advertisement is to promote the “private” profit of a corporation.

In recent years the number of corporations using tactics similar to that of Street art to promote their products has seen a rapid increase. The rental car company Hertz was recently exposed by advocates of public space rights for using “found” notes posted on the side of phone booths and electric polls to promote the interests of their company. The viewer is directed to tear a piece of paper from the ad with contact information on it, which leads the viewer to the Hertz website.
Similarly, to promote their new show “The Cleaner,” television station A&E spray-painted the phrase “Who is the Cleaner?” on storefronts and walls around the city. Those who were curious and technologically savvy would search the phrase “The Cleaner” on the Internet, which would return the television show as its first search result. These advertisements are no more or less legal than a Street art piece is. In fact, their existence creates antagonism, which invigorates a public dialogue. However, as these advertisements exist in order to gain a profit for their companies, the intention of the piece becomes more important than the interpretation made by the public, and therefore they have no place in the public.
The manipulation of the public space by corporations demands an urgent response by the public. In *NoLogo*, Naomi Klein talks about the act of subvertising advertisements in the city as an act of reclaiming public space. “(Culture Jams) are not stand-alone ad parodies but interceptions – counter-messages that hack into a corporation’s own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended.” (Klein 281) By reversing the context of the message, “culture jammers” utilize the resources of the corporations that invest in advertisements and turn them against them. As Klein notes, it was “Guy Debord and the Situationists, the muses and theorists of the theatrical student uprising of Paris, may 1968, who first articulated the power of a simple *detournement*.” (Klein 282)

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord elaborates on the Marxist theory of the alienation of the worker, stating

> The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation… The spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation… The world the spectacle holds up to view is the world of commodity ruling over all lived experience. (Debord 12, 23, 26)

To combat the spectacle’s dominance over the lives of the masses, Guy Debord and the Situationists attempted to change the society by creating alternative life experiences, or “situations.” A key method in the creation of situations was the aforementioned “detournement,” which Debord described as “the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble” aims at “the loss of importance of each detourned autonomous element, and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect.” (Debord 67)
The strength of detournement lays in the fact that the imagery used is recognizable. When something familiar to us is decomposed, disfigured, or rearranged, we immediately notice the difference. A forerunner to the Situationist detournement can be seen in Dada art and the use of “ready-mades.”

By using a familiar image, Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, and painting a moustache on to it, Marcel Duchamp forces the viewer to see something old and overwrought with a fresh perspective, while also reexamining the context. The Situationists, however, did not aim to merely provide new perspectives on familiar imagery. Elaborating on Duchamp’s use of ready-mades, detournement attempted to create a technique that would totally reverse the content of the original, using its content and familiarity as a weapon against itself.

In the tradition of the Situationists, Posterboy has declared war on the advertisements of New York City, detourning their content to produce images that are “anti-media, anti-established art world.” (Raferty) To create detourned images, Posterboy
relies heavily on the art of collage, an art form that Jacques Ranciere notes in “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art,” as being

One of the great techniques of modern art, it is because its technical forms obey a more fundamental aesthetico-political logic. Collage, in the most general sense of the term, is the principle of a ‘third’ aesthetic politics… collage can be seen as evidence of the hidden link between two apparently opposed worlds... In this case, it’s not any longer the heterogeneity of the two worlds that should nourish a sense of the intolerable but, on the contrary, the making evident of the casual connection that links one to the other.”(Ranciere 84)

In the images he creates, through the use of collage, Posterboy speaks of the correlation between the “media, established art world” and the “other” New York, a city of disenfranchised people. In Posterboy’s theory, the “casual connection that links one to the other” (Ranciere 84), in this case the “media, established art world”, and the disenfranchised New York City are advertisements, the foot-soldiers of capitalism. This disenfranchisement, according to Guy Debord, who elaborated on Marx’s concept of alienation, is caused by the spectacle “a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.” (Debord 12)
The strength of advertisement lays in the fact that it possesses the ability to “alienate” the viewer from his/her reality, instead offering them a hyperreality ruled by simulacra of commodities. Posterboy sees how advertisements “disneyify” New York City, sugarcoating its problems with images of products and television shows that do not speak to the inhabitants of the city, the public, who are alienated by the content of the advertisements. Posterboy uses the familiarity of ads, imagery that every New Yorker is subject to, and turns the content into a commentary on the situation of the city, thus rewriting the “read-only” advertisements.

Asked why he attacks advertisements, Posterboy responds, “Advertising’ struck first. By preying on people's insecurities the advertising industry has been coaxing me, and countless others, on how to look, feel, and act. Some companies that advertise on a mass scale, like coca cola, are involved in outright violations of human rights.” (Raferty)

Posterboy represents the resistance of a generation that grew up saturated by advertisements. As Posterboy notes

I'd like people to consider the role of advertising and the companies/institutions behind them. I'd like people to ask themselves whether they're truly happy with the way “things” are, and if they aren't then what they can do about it. And of course, I'd like people to question art. After all, isn't that one of the major roles of art? To push and question what is possible and beautiful. In the end if I can get someone to chuckle during their drab commute then I'm happy. (Raferty)

With his detourned imagery, Posterboy encourages the public to question the status quo, both of the art world and the society in general. Posterboy envisions the future of his activities as something similar to the group of criminals in the movie “Fight Club,” hoping to start a “decentralized art movement where anyone can claim to Posterboy…No copyright, No authorship.” (Posterboy) By eliminating the aura of the author, Posterboy not only creates a movement in which the public can take control of their environment, he
eliminates the concept of alienation by creating movement that is public domain. If one agrees with the philosophy of Posterboy, one can literally copy his tactics (it should be noted, however, that Posterboy’s tactics are not originally his; it is revolutionary ambition of his tactics, the detournement of advertisements in surveillance and police-heavy New York City that sets him apart from his precedents) and go out on to the streets and detourn posters. In this sense Posterboy’s detournement of advertisements is beyond an artistic practice or a political act, it is an invitation to a world in which the public determines what they see in their visual environment; it is an invitation to revolution.
An inevitable problem that emerges with Posterboy is that his mash-ups inadvertently bring viewer’s attention to advertisements. Although Posterboy abstracts the view of an advertisement by mashing up its image, one can still, in many cases, decipher the original advertisement, and the other advertisements, that were used in the process of detournement. Although one might enjoy or agree with the content which Posterboy has replaced the original one with, the imagery is a collage, and therefore, according to Ranciere, requires familiarity in the original to be effective as a piece of art. One could argue that in here lay the weakness of detournement, since as long as some portion of the advertisement is apparent, viewers will have a visual input of the product being advertised.

Evan Roth, co-founder of the Graffiti Research Lab (GRL), a group “dedicated to outfitting graffiti artists with open source technologies for urban communication,” (GRL) avoids this dilemma by bypassing the critique of advertisements and directly attacking the products themselves. Avid believers of open source technology, GRL subvertizes the profit of mega-corporations by placing “available online for free” stickers on products such as CDs, DVDs, and computer software.
By placing these stickers, which are available for free download on their website, Evan Roth comments on copyrighting laws, which have become stricter over the years in accordance to the advancement of the internet, and reminds consumers of their ability to impede the ongoing dominance of the spectacle over our society. As Debord notes in *The Society of the Spectacle*, “commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.” (Debord 29) With his *Available Online for Free* stickers, Roth attempts to destroy the aura of the commodity, the source of alienation that disenfranchises the public. In this case, the visibility of the product is crucial, as the viewer is then able to avoid purchasing the product, thus putting a clot in the flow of capital into corporations.

**Interaction/Participation**

Keith Haring, a pioneer of the street art movement, stated in a diary entry that

> The public has a right to art… I am interested in making art to be experienced and explored by as many individuals as possible with as many different individual ideas about the given piece with no final meaning attached. The viewer creates the reality, the meaning, the conception of the piece. I am merely a middleman trying to bring ideas together. (Haring)

Haring’s view of art is inspired by Walter Benjamin, who, in “Author as Producer” argued that “when judging a work’s politics, we should not look at the artist’s declared sympathies, but at the position that the work occupies in the production relation of its time.” (Bishop “Viewers as Producers” 10) By encouraging interaction and participation of the public with the artwork, artists inspired by Benjamin have diffused the aura of the author, instead creating artwork that is a true interaction between the viewer and the artist.
A public sphere becomes truly democratic when it is a realm of interaction. The interaction/participation of the public is a necessary condition to a healthy democracy, and by existing on the streets rather than in galleries or museums, street art makes itself viewable to a much larger and inclusive crowd of people, thus inviting the public to participate/interact with the artwork. French Art critic Nicolas Bourriaud first popularized the theory of audience interaction/participation in art, coining the phrase “relational aesthetics.” Bourriaud speaks of the possibly of a relational art, “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.” (Bourriaud 3) This theory, similar to the Situationists creation of “situations” has had a great impact on modern artists who have grown to despise the capitalistic relation between the artist and the viewer as a customer, instead wishing to create art that invites the viewer into the world of the artist.

As Haring notes, a key theory in Street art is the idea that “the viewer creates the reality, the meaning, the conception of the piece.” (Haring) Crateman, a project by a group of anonymous artists in Melbourne, involves the creation of gigantic sculptures made out of found objects, mostly milk crates. By remaining anonymous, Crateman diffuses the ego, the authority of the creator, and instead allows the viewer to fully interact with the clumsy figures that seem to be in the process of some kind of an action.
The creators of *Crateman* have never spoken in public, but they have left a sentence long comment on the Wooster Collective website along with pictures of the first *Crateman* they created. “Last night Sam, Gab and Jerry hit the factories of Melbourne to give morning train commuters something fun to look at as they ride into town.” (Crateman)

The comment, apparently by one of the creators, displays an interest in public interpretation of the artwork rather than the intention of the artists. In a sense, *Crateman* exists solely for the entertainment of the viewing public, which makes it an effective agent in the creation of a public dialogue. If, for just a moment on a passing “morning train commute” a mass of people witness a *Crateman* and start to talk about it, a public dialogue is created in which the viewer takes control of the meaning of the work is created. Thus *Crateman*’s existence is a generator of public dialogue, which, by
encouraging the public to interact with one another, facilitates democratization in the public sphere.

Darius and Downey, a team consisting of Street artists Darius Jones and Brad Downey, who now operate individually, also made three-dimensional objects in the public realm. Darius and Downey, who dressed up as public service workers when installing their work on the streets, used familiar objects in public spaces, such as public payphones, electric poles, street signs, and bricks, to create street art that not only enticed the public but also directly reclaimed public spaces by utilizing existing objects in them.
Darius and Downey’s tactics are similar to the Situationist detournement except for the fact that they don’t aim to demolish the original meaning of a work and replace it with something that has a revolutionary context. In fact, in the work of Darius and Downey, the original meaning of the object is intentionally kept intact. Instead, Darius and Downey, in a sense, evolve existing artifacts in the public, making them objects that interact with their environment and the public. The familiarity of the object helps the public interact with them, as it is the humorous deformation of the familiar object that garners the attention of the public, resulting in the creation of a public dialogue.

In his manifesto, Darius Jones, also known as Leon Reid IV states how important it is for art to be devoid of name recognition of the artist.

> The duty of the artist today must be to regain the authenticity lost in the early 20th century. We can accomplish this by excluding name recognition and monetary incentive from the values by which a work of art is measured. Such exclusions have already been made by many illicit street artists and is in part responsible for street arts popularity world wide. (Reid IV, italics mine)

Name recognition, or the brandification of Street art and Street artists has become a controversial topic. Shepard Fairey, whose *Obey* campaign challenges corporate and governmental control over life by invoking Orwellian terminology, also operates a successful design studio with clients such as Pepsi and Netscape, and his prints sell at an initial price of $400 at art auctions. Banksy’s pop culture status has risen to the point where Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie purchased several of his prints for a total of $40,000, while several journalists have practically set out on an international manhunt to reveal his true identity. And Posterboy, who made his name public domain in order to create a “decentralized art movement where anyone can claim to Posterboy…No copyright, No authorship” (Raferty) has been enjoying his foray into the art world by supposedly
teaming up with an advertisement agency to “detourn” the posters of art pieces at the 
MOMA promotion campaign at the Atlantic/Pacific train stop in Brooklyn, which was 
criticized as a publicity stunt by many news sources (although it is unknown whether the 
Posterboy that detourned the MOMA posters was in fact the original Posterboy or a 
money grubbing imposter, the truth remains that the moniker Posterboy was a name 
quality that was deemed worthy of investing into by the agency), while also giving an 
extensive interview after an arrest in which he revealed his identity and biographical 
information (although it is questionable whether the personality, one Henry Matyjewicz, 
is in fact THE Posterboy, a follower of the Posterboy movement, or a poseur).

As artists, it is natural to desire name recognition. The cult of the author is a long-
standing tradition, and fame is tempting to a young artist, especially one who has 
garnered a lot of attention pseudonymously. However, name recognition is a quality that 
results in the alienation of the viewing public from the artist. As the author becomes the 
focal point of the work, the interaction/participation of the viewer becomes less important 
in the existence of the artwork. In other words, when the name of the author becomes too 
important, the piece become something akin to Nike sneakers or Gucci handbags; they 
exist solely for the logo, and not for the context or the dialogue that the piece could 
otherwise create. Imagine Crateman having as much name recognition as Shepard Fairey 
and his Obey logo. If the public were to view a brandified Crateman, a Crateman that has 
achieved some sort of capitalistic name recognition, their first response would be to 
wonder what it is advertising, what they are supposed to be seeing, in contrast to what 
they want to be seeing, what they are supposed to be talking about rather than what they 
think the piece might be about. When Street art pieces are auctioned off for large amounts
of money, or when they are inducted into the collection of galleries and museums, they become disconnected from the general public that cannot afford them, resulting in a loss of a democratic ideal of inclusiveness, instead becoming a bourgeois pass-time, an art form that divides its audience by the amount of money it can invest. Although this may not be the intended consequence of the artist, it is inevitable that, when taken out of the streets, where ephemerality is a precondition of its existence, and put behind closed doors, Street art loses its ability to create a truly democratic public sphere. Thus the brandification of Street art mutes the importance of the viewer in the construction of the work, and turns the iconography into mere commercial logos which act as “read only” as opposed to an interactive “read and write.”

The importance of the author poses a further problem that plagues the street art community; its “microtopian” exclusivity. In her criticism of relational aesthetics, Claire Bishop states that “(relational aesthetics) produces a community whose members identify with each other, because they have something in common… Everyone has a common interest in art… Such communication is fine to an extent, but it is not in and of itself emblematic of ‘democracy’.” (Bishop “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” 67) Although Street art has reached a level where it is critically acknowledged while also hosting a wide fan base that transcends the art world, while producing art work that addresses the “naturalized exclusions” (Bishop “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” 65) of the society, it is still largely produced and enjoyed by those who have had some kind of an exposure to the fine arts. The reason graffiti was not able to create a dialogue but was instead labeled a crime, vandalism, was because of its exclusive nature, the fact those involved in it kept a small, tightly knit community where their typography became
a coded language. A threat that emerges from this is the possibility of alienation of the viewer when street art attempts to address issues that are remote from the authors that address them. Street art often attempts to be the voice of the disenfranchised. Shepard Fairey has been criticized extensively for his use (appropriation) of iconography of cultural heroes such as Angela Davis, Che Guevara, and the Zapatistas, and Posterboy, who detourned a subway ad to spell out “gentrification,” (allegedly) lives in Bushwick, a neighborhood in the process of large scale gentrification (this is assuming that one Henry Matyjewicz is Posterboy). What is important to notice here is not the validity or authenticity of the criticism that these artists receive, since the criticism can be considered to be generated from a community that is itself exclusive, since they are ready to point out the fact that the artists are alien to their communities instead of welcoming them, but rather the fact that such criticism exists in general. Matters such as gentrification or revolutionary resistance leaders are controversial, and addressing them could possibly result in the alienation of the viewer.

A Street art project that succeeds in actual interaction/participation from the public is the Bubble Project, founded by Ji Lee. The Bubble Project operates through a website where visitors can download quote bubbles, the little clouds that come out of characters in comic books when they speak. Visitors are then encouraged to write inside these bubbles and paste them on advertisements in the public. In “The Bubble Project Manifesto,” Lee notes

Our communal spaces are overrun with ads… Once considered “public,” these spaces are increasingly being seized by corporations to propagate their messages in the interest of profit… We the public are both targets and victims of this media attack. The Bubble Project is the counterattack. The Bubbles are the ammunition. Once placed on ads, these stickers transform the corporate monologue into a public dialogue… More Bubbles mean more freed spaces, more sharing of
thoughts, more reactions to current events, and most importantly, more imagination and fun. (Lee)

Lee, similar to Posterboy, comments on how advertisements intrude into our communal space without being questioned by the public. But instead of detourning the content, by “(transforming) the corporate monologue into a public dialogue” (Lee) the Bubble Project turn advertisements into a public message board where the public can directly comment on the advertisements they see, comment on the world, or simply use the space occupied by corporations as communal space to communicate with each other. Thus, the Bubble Project promotes a truly interactive/participatory movement where anyone can help reclaim public space by creating a public dialogue.

(Image 18)

(Image 19)
CONCLUSION

On Saturday April 29th, 2009, artist and anti-advertisement activist Jordan Seiler of the Public Ad Campaign and a group of volunteers took to the streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn and white-washed over 120 advertisement spaces that had been deemed illegal by the Department of Buildings of the City of New York.

Seiler and co.’s action demonstrates a truly democratic ideal of resistance; fed up with the corporate control of the streets and the city government’s lack of response, they formed a group consisting of volunteers, the public, and took matters into their own hands.

After whitewashing the advertisements, over 50 artists turned the newly blank spaces into canvases by painting and posting their artwork, turning the commercial streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn into art galleries for the public.
By taking control of their visual environment as a group, Seiler and co. reclaimed the streets from advanced capitalism, creating an antagonistic dialogue that is sure to continue between the two forces, the concerned citizens and advanced capitalism. Seiler and co.’s whitewashing and posting of artworks represents an amalgamation of the three essential elements that help Street art a democratic public sphere. Their work was site-specific to the streets of New York City, where advertisements are the most dominant and intrusive visual language of the streets. By white-washing over advertisements they detourned advertisement space, using its placement in the city as a way to reach the citizens of the city. And their action is a result of interaction/participation of the public; consisting of volunteers, the white-washing crew was a group of voluntary participators, while the artwork posted ranges from images
that reflect on the dominance of advertisements in public spaces to those that make the public stop in their path and reflect upon the image and their visual environment.

QuickTime™ and a TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor are needed to see this picture.

Seiler envisions the public’s interaction/participation not just through the act of viewing, but also by using the whitewashed spaces as their own communal space. Asked whether he would consider opening up the whitewashed canvases to the use of the general public, Seiler responds,

kids from local schools should be the the first to use our public walls, not advertisers. The painting of murals by young people provides a sense of worth and attachment to the physical environment that can only be gained by physical interaction with your public space. Through this type of interaction you become more invested in our shared spaces and therefore a more concerned and valuable citizen to the public at large. (Seiler)

The future success of Street art lay in its capability of becoming a truly democratic art movement that is orchestrated by the public. With individuals such as
Seiler and his group of volunteers using Street art to reclaim the streets for the public, it is possible to envision Street art as creating a truly democratic public sphere where all constituents of the democracy can gather and approach a public opinion through a public dialogue. When a democratic public sphere is formed, the urban society will once again become “an environment formed by the interaction and the integration of different practices,” (Ledrut 122) and the public will once again have a right to their city and their public spaces.

Images

Image 1.
National Portrait Gallery: Face to Face blog. 29 October 2008
<http://face2face.si.edu/my_weblog/2009/01/now-on-view-portrait-of-barack-obama-by-shepard-fairey.html>

Image 2.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/streetheart/3483686782/>

Image 3.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sabeth718/2596367552/>

Image 4.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/changesterdam/2560298270/>
Image 5.
   <http://www.flickr.com/photos/kenstein/65317463/>

Image 6.
   David Zwirner Gallery, 1 May 2009

Image 7.
   Zwirner Gallery, 1 May 2009
   <http://www.davidzwirner.com/artists/4/work_47.htm>

Image 8.
Wooster Collective. “The Story Disneyland Doesn’t Want You to Know.” 8 September
   2006. Online Image. Wooster Collective, 8 February 2009

Image 9.
   <http://www.banksy.co.uk/outdoors/horizontal_1.htm>

Image 10.
   <http://www.banksy.co.uk/outdoors/horizontal_1.htm>

Image 11.

Image 12.


Image 13.


Image 14.


Image 15.


Image 16.


Image 17.


*Image 18.*


<http://www.flickr.com/photos/28348930@N07/2707187058/in/pool-bubble_project>

*Image 19.*


<http://www.flickr.com/photos/28348930@N07/2706362763/in/pool-bubble_project>

*Image 20.*


*Image 21.*


*Image 22.*

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