The Contested Gallery: Street Art, Ethnography and the Search for Urban Understandings
by Justin Armstrong

Street art is a transitory phenomenon, the moving of images across urban spaces and the gradual decay of both surface and application (Manco 2004). Street art is layers of posters, the fading and familiar "Hello My Name Is" stickers and modern pictographs of urban artists painted in quiet corners of the city. This art acts as urban visual ephemera; it is images placed in the night to create an iconic language in 'a place by the side of the road' (Stewart 1998).

Street art is not about taking space; it is about repurposing space (Dorrian, Farrelly and Recchia 2002, Hundertmark 2004, Manco 2004). Similarly, this writing is not about taking space among the multitude of discussions on art and aesthetics, rather it is about making space for an understanding of the way that street art and similar forms of cultural resistance influence our interactions with the visual environment.

I submit this work as a study of the city and its imagery, as a discussion of the ideas that bubble to the surface and attach themselves to light posts, electrical boxes and boarded-up buildings. Here, I attempt to expose the world of street artists and their understanding of the cityscape to people who may not have ever thought to look at their subcutaneous surroundings as they move through everyday urban spaces. I imagine this project as a re-thinking of modern vision, as a new way of seeing space and place. With this in mind, I present this work not as an ethnography of street art and artists, but rather as an ethnography of the city and its spaces of cultural production. The city is a culture, a being that changes and grows; it produces visual culture that is as *ethnographic* as any study of Northwest Coast masks or Micronesian bark mats. Street art is a visual culture of the city, an artistic expression that appears, disappears, and reappears. It has become a vehicle for the people who live in these urban environments to reclaim a small segment of space through the creation of illegal art in public places. Street art is a grotesque creature painted on a wall in Brooklyn with accompanying text that reads "NECKFACE – LOSE WEIGHT, ASK ME HOW".

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Street art can be defined roughly as unsolicited art that is somehow attached to a surface or placed in public view, either by the artists themselves or by someone supportive of their cause or project. It is similar in many ways to the spray-can graffiti movement that emerged in New York City in the late 70s and early 80s, yet it holds a unique place within the history of public art. Street art can generally be grouped into specific styles or media that include: **wheat-pasted posters** (wheat paste is a homemade adhesive solution of flour and water that is used for attaching posters and paper cut-outs to various surfaces), smaller **self-adhesive stickers** (of which the ubiquitous "Hello My Name Is" badge is a prime example), **spray-painted stencils** (stencil patterns cut from cardboard and spray painted onto the desired surface) and **sculptural** or **three-dimensional** works. Obviously there are as many variations on these themes as there are street artists, but for the purpose of introducing street art and for setting it apart from graffiti, I believe that this is the most useful way of conceptualizing this form of art.

It is also important to address the notion of graffiti in relation to street art since I am primarily interested in illegal/unsolicited public art that exists outside of the scope of

what might be called traditional graffiti. While these two art forms share several significant elements, they are also quite different in both ideology and form. Graffiti, in its contemporary and urban form, began to take shape in the late 1960s in New York City and developed through the 70s, 80s and 90s into more and more elaborate forms. This type of urban art started with simple 'tagging': the practice of writing one's pseudonym, or 'tag' on subway cars, abandoned buildings and anywhere else it is likely be seen by other graffiti writers. This was a means by which young and primarily African-American and Latino writers could effectively reclaim the urban spaces they inhabited; it was a means of territorializing the city and its neighborhoods (Miller 2002). These inscriptions of identity acted as *rhizomes* (seemingly random artistic emergences that continually reappear across the city) that define and employ the city as a home to a *nomadic* visual culture. They are constantly moving and reemerging at various locations in various/variant forms (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

In an attempt to make names or 'tags' more unique, writers continuously developed new and increasingly cryptic forms of graffiti using readily available aerosol paints and permanent markers. Because this style of art was based on the lettering in the writer's tag, graffiti developed into three main sub-categories: *tags* (a form of highly stylized calligraphy where letters were often indiscernible to anyone but other writers), *throw-ups* (larger pieces usually taking longer to complete than a tag and characterized by rounded, balloon-like lettering) and *pieces* (short for masterpieces that are large, stylized and highly detailed works with multiple colours, shading and 3-D elements) (Chalfant and Prigoff 1987, Miller 2002). In this way, graffiti developed from a simple name scrawled along a train car to a highly advanced artistic endeavor, often taking several hours to complete. I would not argue against graffiti's legitimacy as an art form, but I do believe that it also operates as an aesthetic means of occupation, like a flag waving on the shores of a newly captured territory. Street art, on the other hand, is less about claiming ownership over spaces (often the pieces are not associated with any name or lettering) and more about repurposing them. If graffiti is territorial by nature, then street art is reterritorial. Where graffiti is concerned with occupation, street art operates on a model of coexistence and hybridization, blending with the city and quietly existing in its hidden corners, acting in subtle ways to breathe art into the deadening grey of the city.

For the purpose of this discussion, it seems fitting that we also discuss the work of New York City artists like Keith Harring, Kenny Scharf and Jean-Michel Basquiat, as well as the work of various anonymous proto-street artists operating in New York's Soho neighborhood during the 1980s. With the advent of this type of public, unsanctioned art came a renewed interest in art for the streets outside of the world of graffiti. Following Harring's simple chalk drawings in subway stations and the stencils in Soho, many new street artists emerged from the lofts and apartments of New York's Lower East Side to cover their city with art-for-art's-sake in an exuberant display of expression outside of the confines of the gallery walls. Unlike graffiti writers, these new street artists often emerged from a more privileged class background and therefore operated in much more affluent surroundings than the train yards frequented by graffiti writers (Manco 2004, Miller 2002, Robinson 1990, Silver 1983). This sense of entitlement and freedom contributed to the notion of street art as an act of repurposing rather than occupation. Because there was nothing to rebel against other than the city itself, these artists

developed their art based on the understanding of what could be called the repurposing, or reterritorialization, of urban spaces. This early form of street art was a velvet revolution against the built environment and the city.

Stylistically, contemporary street art most often takes the form of stickers, stencils and posters (also know as paste-ups). In addition to using these techniques, street art has also developed into other unique forms. These media include mosaic tile sculptures by France's Space Invader, plaster castings by New York City's Andrew Sutherland, wooden sneaker mobiles by Brooklyn's Skewville and painted cardboard left on the streets of East London by Adam Neate. Because street art can be seen as an act of aesthetic resistance against the dominant visual landscape in urban areas, it shares some similarities with graffiti in its motivation to resist visual hegemony and reclaim space. But while graffiti resists the power of the city through revolution and reclamation, street art challenges these ideals by subtly reworking the urban environment. Graffiti seeks to cover as much ground as possible and go *all city* (a term used to describe a graffiti writer's coverage of an entire city) (Labonté 2003), whereas street art is generally more concerned with specific and strategic placement of pieces that works *with* and not *against* the built environment (Manco 2004). In this way, street art tends to add to a city's visual identity by promoting new ways of seeing, whereas traditional graffiti seeks to make these urban spaces its own. The graphic language of street art is also a new form of pictographs, image-based calling cards that have taken the concept of the graffiti writer's practice of 'tagging' in a different direction. No longer are artists always associated with a name; the image is often more powerful than the word in street art (Manco 2004). These pieces of street art constitute letters in a new urban alphabet; together they spell out the possible directions in which our vision might proceed (see Michael DeFeo's 2004 children's book on street art entitled *Alphabet City*). Viewing street art is about more than the aesthetic appreciation a new art form, it is about allowing your eyes to follow alternate paths of understanding and to open up the experience of everyday life to acts of urban poesis (Buck-Morss 1991, 2002; Benjamin 1999).

In the writing that follows, I ask questions about the significance of street art as a form of cultural resistance that tells us about the development of cities and how our lives have been (and continue to be) formed by these urban structures. Through the study of street art, it has been my goal to try to understand the motives and ideas behind the production and implementation of this art form, and how it speaks to certain elemental forms of our contemporary urban culture, as well as the aesthetic response that it evokes in people. I have questioned the dominance of certain codified imagery (advertisements, architecture, statuary, garbage, pigeons, cars, buses, shoes, t-shirts, fast food, street lights, surveillance cameras) by looking at street art as a form of aesthetic resistance, as means of challenging the visual culture of the city.

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> *Those of the rebels whose aim was to restore to the creative genius of the masses the necessary freedom for its creative activity, so that it might work out the required new institutions, were imbued with the Anarchist spirit.*
> - Peter Kropotkin (1912) from *Modern Science and Anarchism*

The city is a dream, a long and tired dream of technology and progress, followed by a waking life of decay and endless expansion. In this space of industrialized and data-encrusted realities, there is often little room for the advent of random beauty. Everything appears utilitarian and is only beautiful in relation to the commodity-sphere, itself a life-force of unending influence over our visual landscape. The modern city dweller is only provided with uniform office blocks, eye-blistering advertisements and the constant din of muted and mundane conversations between people and their machines. The city is not a 'machine for living' (LeCorbusier 1927), but rather a machine for consumption and alienation. The city is the primary locus of humankind's fall from aesthetic grace.

Yet in an isolated corner of Wooster Street in New York City, a beacon of hope emerges from a decrepit candy factory. This place is one of the best collections of street art in the city, a sort of hall-of-fame for the global street art community, a sounding board for new and exciting ideas and, above all, a location of difference. Here, amongst the fading stickers and wheat-pasted posters, we find freedom from the visual hegemony of the modern capitalist city-machine. The Candy Factory provides a place to see art that is not in the service of some other goal, it is art-for-art's-sake, it is art for the joy of creating ideas and sharing them with anyone and everyone who passes by. The artists who choose to display their work here reflect a movement where art seeks to add a layer of humanity to the city to and to produce meaning outside of the commodity. These are the 'rebels' Kropotkin of which speaks, these are the anarchists of art.

A primary focus of this research is the motivations for practices of street and the significance of the work to its creators. Why do street artists risk personal safety and arrest to spend time and money in a pursuit of artistic expression that prizes anonymity and fame outside of identity? What drives them to create and document this fleeting cultural form? By discussing notions of motivation with street artists, I was surprised to find that many street artists are driven by the will to escape their daily routines and to present an element of themselves that reflected pure creativity to the world, an expression that is unmediated by gallery guidelines or design possibilities. It is often the freedom of the abandoned night of the streets at 2 A.M. that provides the greatest inspiration to create this work.

Because many street artists channel their creative energy into a livelihood of graphic design, illustration, art direction, etc., their art is only allowed to move within a limited sphere. It must be palatable to clients and must therefore conform to their aesthetic whims. Street art provides a kind of release for many of these people, allowing them to freely express their true creativity in an unmediated environment. This is not always the reason behind an artist's move to the street. Some artists see their work as a means of democratizing art. In a 2004 interview with Steven Heller of *Voice*, influential street artist Shepard Fairey discussed how his sticker featuring Andre the Giant, a professional wrestler, initially began as an inside joke but eventually emerged as a biting commentary on the politics of consumption. Here, Fairey has taken an almost opposite path of the artists who seek an escape from their corporate design day jobs because his imagery has spawned a whole line of clothing and a respected design firm. And while some may claim that this movement could constitute a move toward 'selling out', I would argue that Fairey has actually managed to infiltrate the corporate visuality that dominates our society by offering a small glimpse of how we might re-envision our visual landscape within the city. Far from 'selling out', Fairey often funds his unsanctioned street art by

working on corporate contracts. He is taking his imagery to the highest level and then returning it to the street from whence it came. Perhaps Fairey is engaging in his own type of ethnographic examination of the city by engaging with it and moving through its spaces as an ethnographer might move through a cultural landscape.

Drawing on the article 'Post-Modern Ethnography' by Stephen A. Tyler (1986), I would like to suggest that pieces of street art 'evoke' meaning but are not necessarily representations of meaning. By this I mean to say that the content of street art is not as important to understanding it as its placement or *framing*. This idea is what might also be called positionality; it is the vantage point from which to observe and be observed. These street art pieces become members of a community in their own right and begin to produce and document the rise and fall of the visual landscape of the city. They are also ethnographic writings since they absorb and reflect the movements of/in urban spaces. As it gets noticed or goes unnoticed, street art begins to compile a catalogue of responses to its existence while its authors become the fiction they once wrote.

Tyler writes:

"The ethnographic text is not only not *an* object, it is not *the* object; it is instead a means, a meditative vehicle for transcendence of time and place that is not just transcendental but a transcendental return to time and place."

In the case of street art, its existence as a text is used not to impart some aesthetic value, but rather as a means to transcend the pre-fabricated worldview of the average modern city dweller. The presence of street art allows these urban populations (providing they are willing to be 'hailed' by it) to move beyond the billboards and neon-glow and to find a fleeting second of reflection amongst the commodity imagery that surrounds and drowns us on a daily basis. Street art gives some respite from pre-programming and offers a brief escape to a time and location when art was only beautiful or ugly without pretense or circumstance. Tyler goes on to say that:

"Post-modern ethnography is an object of meditation that provokes a rupture with the commonsense world and evokes an aesthetic integration whose therapeutic effect is worked out in the restoration of the commonsense world."

In this regard, street art can function as node of meditation, a focal point for reflection on the condition of urban existence. The "aesthetic integration" that Tyler speaks of is the goal of street art (if not the street artists themselves): to allow those who are willing to change their ways of seeing – if only for a moment – to incorporate new understandings of their visual surroundings and their commonsense perceptions of the reality that they have created.

As I peel away my own intellectual layers and expose them to the light of my chosen field, new ideas and understandings continue to emerge; and while I am in the process of revealing these hidden conceptions that I have harbored throughout my life, I also hope to present unique opportunities for interaction with other people and places that make up this community of street artists. As an anthropologist, I exist in a feedback loop of continuous exfoliation and renewal of ideas. As one falls away, another bubbles to the surface. Ideas about my place in these worlds (ethnography, street art, academia, the city) become tiny particles of meaning that meld together to form new and exciting

perspectives and Geertzian webs of meaning. In this role, I am both insider and outsider, I am the community and the individual, I am the subject and the object.

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In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Jean Baudrillard discusses the notion of modern museums as sites for cultural mourning. In the same way, our cities have become sites of mourning; we mourn everything and romanticize the death of our old ways of being. Our advertisements seek to reclaim happiness that has long evaporated from our thoughts by selling us images that are devoid of content – the image of the car is more important than the car itself. In this way, our cities' visual landscapes have become a kind of gallery of our lost ideals. No longer are we concerned with beauty in urban life; our dreams are now collected on the surfaces of billboards. But are these images our *real dreams*? How can we even understand the dialectic of Real vs. Unreal in dreams? How can we ratify our waking dreams (consumerism, ownership, speed) with our sleeping dreams (freeform brain activity)?

My point here is to present street art as an antidote to our mausoleum of consumption and corporate imagery. Rather than speaking to a dying culture, as is the case with contemporary urban visuality (such as video games, films and music), street art attempts to celebrate the living city by presenting a forum for free expression and an ever-changing cast of characters. The city-canvas changes and sheds its skin to street art (and graffiti) like a living organism. In opposition to street art, the sterilization of the city through various anti-vandalism campaigns promotes a grey unity of clean surfaces and state-sanctioned advertisements.

Benedict Anderson (1991) writes of museums as locations for state preservation of tradition. In this way, the state is responsible for what is considered to be important in terms of art, what is historically acceptable to the public. If we look at the city as a large-scale museum, a location of cultural mourning (Baudrillard 1994), we can see that the images that are chosen to mark our lost happiness are embedded in advertisements and the built environment of the city. Our shopping malls have become hollow memories of vanished experience, something of which Walter Benjamin (1999) was aware when he undertook his *Arcades Project* in the early part of the last century. He sums this idea up quite effectively when he says: "In the arcades we relive, as in a dream, the life of our parents and grandparents, just as, in the mother's womb, the embryo relives animal life." Here Benjamin implies that we are trapped, in a sense, by the history of the city and its structures (both architectural and ideological). Benjamin goes on to say that "The history of dreams has yet to be written…", an idea that references the need for a poetic awakening in the streets. Perhaps it is street art that can offer us this new 'dialectic of seeing' (Buck-Morss 1991).

As the city mourns its own demise through its museum of capitalist compliance, street art begins to seep through the unguarded fissures that continue to emerge in the city bureaucracy and its structures. Street art is a rhizome, where one poster is removed, ten more appear to take its place. I am reminded of an interview that I conducted with Marc and Sara Schiller of the Wooster Collective (an online street art gallery and weblog) and their view of street art as a strand of urban DNA, an integral part of the city, an essential element of the city-as-super-organism.

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"The posters produced by the ATELIER POPULAIRE are weapons in the service of the struggle and are an inseparable part of it. Their rightful place is in the centers of conflict, that is to say, in the streets and on the walls of the factories. To use them for decorative purposes, to display them in bourgeois places of culture or to consider them as objects of aesthetic interest is to impair both their function and their effect. This is why the ATELIER POPULAIRE has always refused to put them on sale. Even to keep them as historical evidence of a certain stage in the struggle is a betrayal, for the struggle itself is of such primary importance that the position of an "outside" observer is a fiction which inevitably plays into the hands of the ruling class. That is why these works should not be taken as the final outcome of an experience, but as an inducement for finding, through contact with the masses, new levels of action, both on the cultural and the political plane."

-statement of the Atelier Populaire, 1968

Street art is revolting and revolutionary; it is layered descent and the colours of resistance.

Contemporary street art is similar in many ways to the activities of the French student rebellions of 1968. It maintains similar motives and provides a new vehicle for protest. Street art of today may not maintain the same kind of violent resistance toward specific apparatus (the police, the state), however, it does however hold a kind of subtle and subversive influence on the urban imagination. Street art is not violent, but is still resistant to the organized understanding of how a city should or should not behave. The above quote defines many of the same ideals present in both street art and the revolutionary activities of the French student Left.

Both street art and the '68 movement (specifically the production of posters and flyers by the Atelier Populaire) reflect a drive to impart messages of resistance to pre-packaged ways of experience. The experience of the city is uniform, an idea that must be resisted through aesthetic revision. In the case of the Atelier Populaire, the medium was posters and the message was one of awakening alternate ways of conceptualizing French society. For the street artists, the medium is all forms of public expression (posters, stencils, stickers, etc.) and the message is resistance to the uniformity of the city and all that it embodies.

This idea of resistance to the city is not only resistance to the visual landscape of the urban environment, but also to the revision of what it stands for and who stands for it. An excellent example of this is the work of a New York City artist known as All City Council and his response to newly proposed anti-graffiti legislation, which stated that an artist could be fined up to five-hundred dollars for each sticker/poster bearing their name or 'tag'. Previously, one could only be brought up on charges if they were caught in the act of putting up their work. All City Council has executed a unique example of *détournement* (the practice developed by the Situationists whereby everyday ideas or items are re-worked into new aesthetic artifacts and understandings) of its own by utilizing United States Postal Service mailing labels to print out images of the various city councilors responsible for passing the law and then placed these installations in the streets of that person's riding (All City Council 2004). By reusing these stickers for another purpose and depicting the council members on these pieces of street art, All City Council presents a true *détournement* of urban/civic ideology. Because the new law stated that one could be fined if their name appeared on any publicly displayed street

art/graffiti, All City Council turned the question back onto those who originally posed it. Were the people pictured and named on the stickers now subject to their own laws?

The activities of All City Council and like-minded street artists and activists reflect a continued drive to reform the cityscape that we take for granted and to suggest critical questions about the use of space and authority within the structures of the city. In the same way, the French student networks and the Situationists were attempting to rework the political and social ideals of the day through art and resistance, an idea that is manifest in the Situationist notion of *unitary urbanism* (Knabb 1981).

Street art has become so powerful as an idea and as a movement that it has been able to build entire cities that exist only for the purpose of street art. These imagined (but not *imaginary*) communities (Anderson 1991) exist as on-line spaces that span the breadth of the World Wide Web, creating even more Webs of meaning that thrive outside of the jurisdiction of authorities and commodities. The Web serves to promote this artform across all borders, beginning by forming a space outside of *lived* space, a city of the interior. With nodes like Wooster Collective (www.woostercollective.com), StreetRes (www.streetres.com) and Ekosystem (www.ekosystem.org) offering gateways into this world, a virtual city has been built in cyberspace. This city is composed of parts of every city in the world and sees more travelers than any other *actual* location at any given time. The viewership of a specific piece of street art can increase from a select group of locals to literally thousands of like-minded artists and supporters as a result of a single posting on one of these websites.

With the advent of digital photography and high-speed Internet access, street art has become even more democratic in its pursuits. This is an idea that Marc and Sara Schiller of the Wooster Collective believe has helped move street art from isolated activities in specific locations around the world to a truly global phenomenon. This husband and wife team told me that they have been shocked at the continual increase in traffic on their site over that past few years. Both agreed that the advent of the Internet has spurred the development of a global street art community, something traditional graffiti lacked in its formative years during the late 70s and early 80s. My research on street art also owes a great deal of its success to the influence of the Internet; if it had not been for the Web and its many street art related sites, my exposure to world street art would have been far less wide-ranging. Whether through email correspondence or art portals like Wooster Collective, a study of street art would have been much more difficult to conduct without the easy access to this community that is afforded by the Internet.

Another primary location of Internet street art activity is a website called Fotolog (www.fotolog.net). This is a site that was initially developed to allow people to share digital photos over the Web, but it has recently morphed into a diverse community of street artists who regularly organize Fotolog 'meet-ups' where street artists can gather together to exchange ideas and go out as a group to put up individual or collaborative works. The site also offers a discussion forum where users can post comments and messages to other members of the community, critique each others work, and organize showings of street art in clubs and galleries. This Internet community of street artists and their supporters is not the true imagined community that Anderson described, rather it is imagined in part because it does not geographically exist, even though it is quite real in the sense that the communal element is present. In Anderson's notion of the imagined community, it is imagined because nobody actually knows anyone else in the community

(e.g. the Nation), but within the online street art community, it is more of an imagined city block where everyone is on the same ideological wavelength and maintains similar goals and aspirations.

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Grammar is the key to making use of language; without it we have only loose collections of letters and words that have no real relationship to one another. It is grammar that tells us how to organize our thoughts into meaningful ideas that can be readily expressed and understood by other speakers of our language. The sentences, paragraphs, and phrases that we create allow us to present meaning in a logical and sometimes beautiful framework. With street art, I believe that we have created a grammar of aesthetics that functions much like traditional linguistic grammar.

This grammar of beauty/non-beauty is known to all of us and is enforced via various media channels, the education system, and what are often described as common understandings. There are certain things that are generally considered to be beautiful and others that are thought of as non-beautiful. These ideas are the result of thousands of years of human cultural existence and offer very culturally specific notions of aesthetics; the Western capitalist notion of beauty/non-beauty is no exception. Our society values order, efficiency, symmetry, and harmony in its visual landscape. As a means to this end it has also created a grammar of vision into which artifacts and images can be placed. And we are all very content to pursue our urban(e) lives with this neatly organized grammar intact. Yet for all of our efforts to codify this way of seeing, the random nature of the universe exerts its entropic force on every aspect of our being and creates its own grammar. Sadly, we sometimes miss these discreet visual sentences that our surroundings whisper into our eyes. I have called these occurrences *aesthetic harmonic instants* (AHI) and I believe that street art can act as a vehicle for opening up our grammar of vision and allowing it to be reworked.

AHI are randomly occurring visions in which multiple aspects of the cultural and/or natural environment converge to create aesthetic 'sentences'. The interesting thing about these events is that it is as if our surroundings are randomly generating new grammars of seeing that oppose or divert the planned understandings that we hold in our modern capitalist mode of aesthetic vision. But what if we were to take these random notions and study their grammar in an effort to create our own new ways of producing and consuming our visual landscape? Would it be possible to reinvent the ways we see the world? I believe that this project has already begun with the practice of street art. Street art conveys a sense of resistance to commonly accepted forms of visual understanding in the city. And by doing this, it also creates new ways of conceptualizing the urban environment and its structures. By reworking surfaces and interacting with existing elements of the city, street art(ists) have begun to create new modes of vision. No longer is a doorframe a simple entrance/exit portal; with the application of a poster or stencil, it becomes a portal for reenvisioning the state of the structure and the structure of the state. The surface, the art, the artist, and the viewer all work in conscious and subconscious routes to create these *instants* of aesthetic experience. The environment and the art work in conjunction to silently re-imagine the uses and abuses of city surfaces. The walls of the city meet the eyes of the pedestrian via the re-imagined presentation of the urban world as street art; the AHI emerges from the brief convergence of multiple trajectories of aesthetic and environmental influence to produce an instant of re-

cognition. Street art is the catalyst for the rearrangement of this grammar, our visual grammar of space.

If Clifford and Marcus' now famous collection of essays on refiguring ethnography, *Writing Culture* (1986), can be said to offer new insights into what it means to 'write' culture, I believe that my project serves to begin to re-imagine what it means to paint (draw, print, spray, paste, etc.) culture. As I see it, the street artists with whom I spoke and whose work I documented constitute a new breed of ad-hoc ethnographers. They record their understandings by inscribing our collective ideas onto the walls of the cities where we concentrate our lives and lived experience. This pursuit is not one that emerges from the ivory tower of academia, but rather it is a street level inquiry and response to our crumbling urban cultural fabric. The street artist is an activist and archivist in one, fighting for new ways of seeing while trying to preserve some semblance of aesthetic uniqueness amongst a sea of cultural forms.

Aside from simply recording the demise of urban variation in aesthetics, street artists are attempting to explode our scope of vision through a resistance to popular grammar. No longer is an urban 'sentence' made out of repeated advertisements and street signs that culminates in a 'period' that shapes itself like a coin. With these new possibilities, we can see additional possibilities for the cityscape as a gallery, a library, and a *nouveau salon* where ideas are exchanged free from the influence of the commodity. City-culture no longer needs to be written in neon and LCD – it can now blossom in the form of the street art and people who make it. Culture is written on the walls.

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