

**Location Aesthetics Paper. IDENTITY/DIVERSITY THEME**  
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**`Stop leaning against the wall – it's wet' (Banksy): The Limits of Urban Visual Practice?**

Cities desire to be seen. The visual order of urban experience – and its relation to the shaping of `public' and `private' locations– has been dominant in cultural debate about the nature of the city, even as it is acknowledged that the cityscape is a territory of interactivity between the visual, architectural, aural, and technological.

This paper will investigate the extent to which visualities of the urban landscape can be understood in terms of an *everyday materiality* and, in turn, an embodied sense of dwelling in space and place. It will move beyond ocular-centric theories of landscape as a way of seeing to consider a variety of artistic interventions in urban space, specifically **graffiti and street art** (produced by European-based individuals and collectives); **walking** (the practice of the Belgian artist Francis Alys), and **sculpture** (the British artist Rachel Whiteread's work *House*).

With each intervention, we can ask `how is a particular location transformed?' What, collectively, do the interventions say about mark-making (`leaving one's mark on'), anonymity, and identity?

The German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin's notion of the `trace' is useful to consider at this point – Benjamin sees `the buildings of a city...[as] casings for human action, in or on which human subjects leave...signs of their passing; markers or clues to their style of existence.'<sup>1</sup>

This notion of `traces' has since been developed by cultural geographers (informed by the work of phenomenologists) to emphasise the relation between place (occupying or inhabiting), identity-formation and, crucially, moving through spaces, in doing so defining things and locations.

As Fran Tonkiss points out `the inert form of the city...houses a multitude of little spatial histories told by bodies moving within it'<sup>2</sup> – these are the paths which can't be conventionally charted. Michel de Certeau reminds us, `paths through the city are as much stories as maps'<sup>3</sup> and it is the visual and narrative potential of these tracks across the city or cities (themselves grounded in materiality) which fascinates many makers of art in urban public spaces.

Playing with the notion of the unconscious trace, the urban interventions I'm considering here display a self-conscious mark-making which invites engagement with the material and the textural.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, essays on *Charles Baudelaire*

<sup>2</sup> Tonkiss, *City A-Z*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> De Certeau (1984)

## GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

Graffiti (from the noun 'graffito: a drawing or writing scratched on a wall or other surface') has been defined by European commentators on the urban as inhabiting an inbetween or 'twilight zone of communication'<sup>4</sup>, raising questions about the ownership of location and artistic language.

As assertions of anonymous identities and signs of embodied dwelling *through* space, graffiti articulates temporary ownership and as such can come to be interpreted as the aesthetic of a place, rather than as illegal art – for example, we might think of the classic 'tagging' and wild-style lettering of graffiti writing in late 1960s New York. Writing your name or tag was used by individuals or gangs to mark out territory, or to gain recognition from fellow graffiti artists – as Tristan Manco puts it, 'logo as ego'. This practice produces what the writer and psychogeographer Iain Sinclair has termed "alternative cartographies"<sup>5</sup> of the city, or the potential versions of how public streets and buildings delineate placement and identity.

Graffiti (in the classic tagging sense) evolved into urban art forms described (in the 1980s) as 'street art' (or post-graffiti, or 'brandalism'). In European cities it embraces new graphic forms (the typographic has given way to the iconographic logo), uses new materials (to reflect the urban environment), intervenes in urban spaces (eg subvertising) to challenge ownership of space, and provides social commentary (eg 'free-form' graffiti (eg mural) as a 'community of actions'). In these ways graffiti as street art invites re-examination of areas thought to have had no artistic interest or validity.

Graffiti logos, produced by European-based individuals or collectives, are an unofficial artistic intervention in the urban arena. Logos of ordinary objects such as plugs or toasters are trademarks for the creators, but they also act as recurrent visual devices which connect cities and map space. The image – whilst integrated with the texture of the street – also 'clashes' with it (the element of surprise in situ), thus highlighting its own aesthetic.

The effect of street stencils in particular – a style associated with the artist or 'quality vandal' Banksy (whose work appears all over the world) – comes from a self-conscious placing which makes us reassess our surroundings; the street as canvas. Banksy's 'Hanging Figure and Window' problematises the separation of inner and outer, private and public spaces.<sup>6</sup> The incorporation of an alarm box into 'Girl with a Pierced Eardrum' reinterprets a pre-existing artwork (parodying Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*), and

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, 'Graffiti' in *City A-Z*

<sup>5</sup> *Lights Out*, p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Simmel, 'Bridge and Door' in *Rethinking Architecture* (DS, 9)

becomes part of the broader cultural industry surrounding it. Almost immediately, another layer of paint was splashed on the image.

Whether graffiti is art or vandalism depends on variables of perspective, context, property and on the arbiters of taste.

The Banksy artwork 'Mobile Lovers' was made on a piece of wood and screwed to the wall near a cash-strapped Bristol youth club. Members of the club removed it with a crowbar, exhibited in and sold it for £400,000 to a private collector, sparking an ownership dispute with the council. Banksy then wrote to the club saying it was theirs to do what they wished with, and the boys worked with a creative team to produce a 'thank you' mural for the artist. Are such works the property of the artist or the public? Should the artist have a say in whether a work is removed or destroyed? Does the crime of theft outweigh the initial crime of vandalism? Such questions about the moral and legal landscape of street art culture were crystallized by 'Stealing Banksy', a selling exhibition of street art which had been removed from, well, 'the street'.

The significance of location and the debate between graffiti culture and art establishment was highlighted by the Banksy retrospective in Bristol City Museum (2009), a 'full-scale infiltration and "remix"' of the museum and its works. Banksy 'celebrated...the institution while teasing it' through small interventions (a hash-pipe in the museum pottery display). Had he compromised his 'street' credibility and 'sold out'?

## **IAIN SINCLAIR**

Street art, and graffiti in particular, punctuates the urban walks undertaken by psychogeographers such as Iain Sinclair and the Italian collective Stalker. Walking as an aesthetic act destabilizes the visual and spatial order of the city, a reconfiguration which is heightened by the accompanying graffiti. For Sinclair, graffiti reflects the ideological dimensions of urban cultures and is the only constant, forming a track or 'language contour'.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, it is not the artistic status of the graffiti that matters, but the 'process, the discipline of repetition.'<sup>8</sup>

The calligraphiti – produced by 'disenfranchised graffiti [author]-artists'<sup>9</sup> is a playful adaptation of surfaces and spaces. Moreover, this form of mark-making becomes, for Sinclair and others, a claim to identity as an antidote to corporate ownership symbolised by strings of advertisements. 'Pick your view and sign it' exclaims Sinclair<sup>10</sup>, pre-empting Banksy's challenge to 'imagine a city where graffiti wasn't illegal...which belonged to everybody.'

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<sup>7</sup> *Lights Out*, p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Lights Out*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Profile of Iain Sinclair, *Guardian Review*, 24 April 2004

<sup>10</sup> Sinclair, *Lights Out*, p. 2.

## WALKING (FRANCIS ALYS)

The Belgian artist Francis Alys is one of a growing number of contemporary artists for whom walking as urban intervention converts the everyday 'material' of the city into a new visual narrative.

In the way that a repeated graffiti logo (eg of a toaster, envelope or hand) defines a specific place and connects cities, the recurrent visual details which Alys observes (eg milk bottles on doorsteps) are a way 'into' a city.

With 'Ice 4 Milk' (2004-5) - 160 colour slides on 2 slide projectors - 'delivering milk bottles [in London) or dropping large blocks of ice [in Mexico City) are the recurrent phenomena, the daily routines and practices which allow 'entry' into, and connect, the two cities. They are also, for Alys, 'about a...respect [for] and use of the public space.'<sup>11</sup> The artist's practice with urban projects is not to 'add' to the space, 'but more to absorb what [is] already there, to work with the residues, or with the negative spaces, the holes, the spaces-in-between.'

'Ice4Milk' was part of the project *Seven Walks*, enacted over 5 years, which attempted to 'unearth' the 'everyday rituals and habits of the metropolis.'<sup>12</sup> The multi-media components of the project were presented in two distinctive London buildings: 21 Portman Square and the National Portrait Gallery.

Similarly the 2005 exhibition *Walking Distance from the Studio* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona) brought together artworks created over ten years which all refer to places located within a ten-block radius from the artist's studio in the centre of Mexico City.

Alys comments 'You cannot perceive the city as a whole. My perception of the place was sequential and fragmentary...'<sup>13</sup> In the face of this, it becomes vital to hold onto, say, an architectural detail or a social mechanism which characterises the city. These 'actions' by the inhabitants 'may or may not leave traces, which the artist collects'<sup>14</sup> as samples of the visual city.

## SCULPTURE (RACHEL WHITEREAD)

Like the 'half-life' of graffiti, the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread's public art works *House* and *Ghost* resonate beyond their material form.

A house already in limbo – the deserted shell of a late-Victorian terraced house lived in by an ex-docker at 193 Grove Road, Bow, London – became the art object *House*.

Whiteread videoed the process of contractors peeling off brickskin, spraying Lockrete across a grid of steel rods (building a pyramid, from the inside) before tapping and casting the unpeopled space. The process took from August until October 1993, and

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<sup>11</sup> *Seven Walks*, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.artangel.org.uk/pages/present/present.htm>

<sup>13</sup> *Seven Walks*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Alys, Barcelona exhibition leaflet

House was demolished 11 January 1994. Perhaps ironically, as an art object the house's walls invited spraycan graffiti - 'WOT FOR', 'WHY NOT', 'Homes for all - black and white'. As soon as House was, controversially, demolished, it gained power as an absent structure, its very invisibility a reminder of vanished lives and buildings, the city's cycles of renewal, and its own provisional status.

The precedent for *House* was *Ghost* (1990), a cast taken from a sitting room in a terraced house on Archway Road, North London. Both are casts of the space which a room defined, examples of artography which blur boundaries between private and public spaces.

But whereas *Ghost* was gallery art, *House* was/is part of a process, a temporary urban intervention between a property ceasing to be inhabited and its demolition. Artangel, who was involved in commissioning *House*, is an organisation known for its support of temporary, site-specific (urban) art or happenings internationally. It is not interested in the 'neutrality' of the 'urban plaza'; rather, in seeking spaces alive with the associations of history and memory which can be utilised to subvert notions of civic memorials, public art and understandings of the spaces in which that art is situated.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, Banksy's injunction to 'Stop leaning against the wall - it's wet' draws attention to the materiality and provisionality of public urban art in the forms I've considered. Street art - whether 'controlled' in designated, 'legal' areas or not - is part of a wider debate about the role of creativity in 'improving' the cities of the now, or in imagining the cities of the future.

Urban geographers such as Manuel Castells have argued that the organisational logic of the 'networked society' that we now seemingly inhabit is placeless, dependent on the 'space of flows'. By contrast, the artistic interventions and urban inscriptions discussed here - whether by named or anonymous artists - speak to the importance of place specificity, and to being aware of micro-dynamics. The 'creative city' (as envisaged by Charles Landry in his book of that name) is very much a physical setting, an 'open-minded, cosmopolitan context' in which interaction takes place and new forms of public art are co-produced.

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