



Work by Kaffeine in Melbourne Central shopping centre, 2012



Work by Dabs, Myla and Insa in Melbourne Central shopping centre, 2013

Notes on the commodification of street art

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The energy which the individual expends in order to realise himself and extend into the world according to his desires and dreams, is suddenly braked, held up, shunted onto other tracks, *recuperated*.

Raoul Vaneigem, Situationist International¹

Street art is commonly misconceived as a counter-culture, but over the past decade it has been progressively co-opted by popular culture to become the most mainstream contemporary art practice. Situationist writers like Raoul Vaneigem describe this cultural appropriation as 'recuperation'; the mechanism by which radical ideas are absorbed and defused into mass culture. Today street art aesthetics are used in advertising from cars to tampons. It adorns shopping malls, whose very commercial viability is contingent on securing the broadest consumer appeal. The wide interest in street art attracts record crowds to festivals like Outpost and it's become one of Melbourne's premiere tourist attractions.² So given its universal appeal, it's perhaps unsurprising that conservative politicians like Melbourne's Lord Mayor have shifted from a zero tolerance stance on graffiti to being 'delighted' with the city's street art.³

Although street art has been widely absorbed into mass culture, other divisions of street practice have remained immune to recuperation; tagging (signature-based graffiti) and writing (abstract lettering) remain entirely closed subcultures. Street art purists have resisted transitioning into commercial galleries. So there is a spectrum of practice and a cultural conflict sometimes arises between artists at the opposing ends of these aspirational goals. For example, Pzor and Jetso are among the foremost taggers in Melbourne, they both have twenty-five-year tagging careers and last year they systematically capped (disrespectfully defaced) works by prominent commercial street artists.

What have been the consequences in street art, as large tracts have been rapidly co-opted into mainstream culture?

1. POPULIST ICONOGRAPHY

The expanding street art audience advances the most populist motifs. As a low-brow culture, street art often rejects critical review, so it's difficult to refute popular opinion. For example, one of the most iconic street artworks in Melbourne was Owen Dippie's *The Joker* in Hosier Lane. It's one of the only artworks to have been repaired by council workers after being tagged. In a sense the work can be interpreted as an homage to the deceased actor Heath Ledger, but it's really just a facsimile of the poster of the highest grossing film for 2008. It's a literal reproduction of a quintessential mass media image. Similarly Rone and Deb are among the most commercially successful street artists in Australia but they commonly depict exaggerated images of young girls with big eyes. This is an image that saturates mainstream iconography: fashion magazines, anime, pornography and advertising. It's not about finding beauty in new ways; it's about reconstructing the most common and commercial notions of beauty, taken from photoshopped magazines. Unlike the tagging or writing cultures that exist beside it, these works aren't coded for a subculture of insiders; they're designed to obsequiously carry the broadest appeal.

2. TECHNICAL ADVANCEMENT

Realism offers a familiar framework for an artistically lay audience to gauge technical aptitude and apply it as a synecdoche for artistic merit. So it's perhaps unsurprising that the expanding audience for street art demands a refinement in technique. E.L.K. is a stencil artist who appeared on the cover of this magazine in April 2011, in 2012 he was a finalist in the Archibald prize and



1/ Multi-layer stencil by E.L.K. in Ann St, Brunswick, Melbourne, 2013

2/ 'The Joker' by Owen Dippie in Hosier Lane, 2012 (the work was painted over in 2013); Image courtesy Lorraine Ellis from StreetsmArt

he serves as a good illustration for the technical shift in street art as it conforms to popular conventions. Early stencil practitioners like anarcho-punks Crass created one-layer stencils to saturate the London Underground with politically charged content. The medium's simplicity offered a universally accessible tool to publically propagate controversial political ideas. Similarly Banksy's or Blek le Rat's appeal lies not in the craftsmanship but in the satire or simple charm of one-or two-layer stencils and the audacity in placing them illicitly. Today E.L.K. creates works with in excess of 100 layers. The medium has lost its D.I.Y. ethos and, like a scalpel cutting 100 acetate layers, also its edge. The medium is reduced to a laborious, mechanical reproduction of a photograph. Ironically, many of the technical advances in street art expose an emptiness behind it.

3. CONSUMPTION OF IMAGES

Street art enjoys an expanded audience and images are disseminated widely online, but like Internet memes, street art online is typically viewed for no more than a few seconds. Works are rarely granted a second viewing; the online community actively complains when images are re-posted. Engagement is limited to like and share buttons. Like intellectual junk food, images are consumed as entertainment rather than art. Once recuperation has fully exhausted the street cred symbolic capital of the image, it seems unlikely the voracious appetite will remain.

4. POLITICAL COMMENTARY

Recuperation neutralises graffiti's ability to shock the audience but it has also made politically activated artists almost beyond criticism from civic institutions. In 2003, two anti-war protesters painted the words 'no war' in red paint on the main sail of the Sydney Opera House.

They were sentenced to nine months periodic detention and fined \$151,000.⁴ Given the economic externalities generated by street art and the historical hegemonic oppression, it's almost inconceivable that sentences this draconian could be issued today. A tolerance to street art has become part of the national identity; it's almost become synonymous with democratic ideals like the right to free speech. Street art has a free hand for political comment, but where are the politically activated works of the early 2000s? Today it's filled with artists who aspire to exhibit in a major private gallery and win a prestigious art prize like an Archibald. Recuperated street art has renounced the ambition to give form to the world. To find these aspirations, we need to look at the periphery – street artists like Ash Keating, Tom Civil, Phoenix, Junky, Kyle Magee and Carl Scrase.

5. AN ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM OF ART

From advertising to the contemporary art market, image production is a commodity industry. The great promise of street art was its capacity to function as a second system of art, outside of the set of Foucauldian power relationships that exist between the artist and the commercial art market.⁵ In the contemporary art market, there is an artist hierarchy ordered by sale price (economic capital) and a gallery hierarchy ordered by symbolic capital.⁶ On the street, there is just an artist and an audience; there are no curatorial gate-keepers. Divisions of street practice can be hierarchical but this is internally ordered by the peer group. When shared online, bloggers editorialise the content but this places independent art critics in the position of curator, rather than financially conflicted gallerists. Online, the task of selecting and elevating cultural images becomes audience driven and egalitarian. In the contemporary art market, an analogy can



1/ Work by Rone, Elgin St, Carlton, Melbourne, 2011

2/ Unfinished portrait by CDH, 'A portrait of Australian philosopher and academic Raimond Gaita', Spring St, Fitzroy, Melbourne, 2013

3/ A Pzor, Jetso and Skout tag, Botherambo St, Richmond, Melbourne, 2013



be made to British aristocracy who purchased military commissions before the Caldwell reforms; wealthy patrons effectively purchase the status of selecting our society's preeminent culture. Academics, art critics and informed experts are relegated to a secondary role, only in their capacity to influence the opinions of patrons. The general public are merely passive observers. As street art has gained new patrons, many street artists have elected to transition into commercial art systems. Some artists exploit the elasticity of the term 'street art' to slingshot their personal gallery careers. This erodes street art's capacity to function as an independent system of selecting culture; it integrates the same systemic flaws of the art market into the street art system. For example, like many commercially exhibiting artists, recuperated street artists might value the opinions of an artistically lay private collector over an informed art critic or the peer body.

6. THE GIFT

The most powerful gesture of street art was the gift; autonomous cultural production without the expectation of reciprocity. The street art purist gifts all forms of ownership; both the physical and intellectual property.

All organised religions operate on non-commodity exchanges. Individual members voluntarily donate what they can afford and religious ceremonies are equally accessible to everyone in the congregation. This religious model speaks to a universal human value because it developed independently in almost every separate culture. We often give gifts to our friends and family, as a reified expression of love; birthday, Valentines' and Christmas presents. These are not commodity exchanges – a payment for friendship services rendered; they're a symbolic manifestation of affection. Similarly, donations to charity are not accompanied with the expectation of reward. In gifting art as common property we elevate it amongst these most ennobling human characteristics: spirituality, love and charity. Of course art as a commodity can still have intrinsic merit but art as a gift is

a different cultural product. The hammer given to me by my father isn't the same as the hammer I buy at a store, although both may serve the same utilitarian function. Ascribing no value to art recognises its higher status beyond the interchangeability of all other products, similar to a masterpiece that might be described as 'priceless'. Commodification debases this ideal; the street practice is transformed from altruism into something akin to advertising.

1. R. Vaneigem, *The revolution of everyday life*, PM Press, 2012.
2. See for example J. D'Arcy and D. Wheeler, 'Melbourne Encounter', Lonely Planet, Melbourne, 2011; and 'Sydney's Outpost returns to Cockatoo Island and calls for partners', 'Spice News', 2012.
3. K. Quinn, 'Face off over as mayor opens "wonderful" street art', *The Age*, 2012.
4. AAP, 'Opera House graffiti "an act of self defence"', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2004.
5. M. Foucault, 'The subject and power', *Critical inquiry*, 1982. 8(4): pp. 777-795.
6. P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

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