

A Gallery for the Outlaw: Archiving the Art of the Iconoclast

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The term “outsider art” was first developed by art critic Roger Cardinal in the 1970s. By using outsider art, Cardinal was expanding the *art brut*, a name that was created to describe the art of psychiatric patients.¹ In the introduction of the book *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, editors Vera L. Zolberg and Joni Maya Cherbo outline how Cardinal “expanded the notion of outsiders beyond mental patients to include a variety of persons making art outside the mainstream”² by introducing “outsider art” as a concept. While this was certainly a positive development toward diversifying the genres studied in the art canon, it also designates a certain group of artists as being “outside” or different from an established set. Using the label “outsider art” suggests a dichotomy: either one is an insider artist or an outsider artist. In what has proven to be a common result of “otherness” and the process of “othering,” the art-world establishment has fetishized and exoticized the “other.” Zolberg and Cherbo define insider art as “a canon in which artistic products and their makers are evaluated, along with a body of work that represents those standards.” The art world, however, does not exist in a reality that black and white. It is a world of gray, and the outsider-art classification is a fluid category. Artists or art forms designated as outsider art often move into being considered insider art through exposure, hype, trends, and other measures of publicity. Zolberg and Cherbo point out that “genres we now accept unquestionably as art were once not part

of the mainstream” and go on to list art forms that have come to be welcomed into the artistic fold such as photography, modern dance, hip-hop music, and site specific performance art.³ A genre or artist labeled as outsider art, several decades later may be considered part of the canon and the works of art items worthy of collection.

The duality and exoticization the concept of outsider art presents often becomes problematic, as does its amorphous definition. In an attempt to resist othering marginalized artists and art forms, the authors of this paper have strived to develop a less complicated and more nuanced label for the works of art described here: outlaw art. Often artists of outlaw art represent a larger marginalized artist community. With their work, they adopt guerilla tactics in their struggle to give voice to voiceless and often—but not necessarily—seek to be a catalyst for social justice and the elimination of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia, and/or transphobia. A marginalized or alienated art community often mirrors the similarly marginalized groups of society that have been divided by lines of gender, race, sexuality, class, or age.

One of the most notable recognized examples of this phenomenon is the art collective, Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of feminists who use the visual arts to expose gender and racial bias in the art world. Guerrilla Girls takes its mission of guerilla art seriously, as reflected not only in the name, but also the gorilla masks they wear while struggling against the patriar-

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chal machinations so prevalent in the art world. In the essay, “The Feminist Roots of Guerrilla Girls’ Creative Complaining,” DePaul University’s Joanna Gardner-Huggett argues that “[d]onning gorilla masks, appropriating the names of dead female artists, and embracing the absurd and satire, the Guerrilla Girls disrupted the old order and established new voices of authority that demanded a visibility for women artists and artists of color.”⁴ First established in 1985, the Guerrilla Girls were quick to embrace graffiti and street art. Graffiti was seen as a way to claim public spaces and provoke a discourse when they felt shut out of traditional exhibition spaces such as galleries and museums.⁵ This public illustration of their struggle against racism and sexism joined works by other “political transgressors, outsiders, and ‘culture jammers,’ all of whom were railing, in their own way, against ‘The Man.’”⁶ For these culture jammers, marring antiseptic public property with opinions and messages that clash with the *status quo* was a victimless crime that held immense power because it forced people to look, to consider, and to question.

By adopting a similar philosophy from “culture jammers” such as the Guerrilla Girls, it becomes possible to identify outlaw art as a term used to describe artistic expressions that push societal norms, remove art from the gallery or museum, and place it in the everyday. The iconoclastic nature of such artwork often precludes collection and documentation due to cultural standards or illegality. Outlaw art has a Robin Hood connotation that implies artists are giving to the poor what the rich have in multitude. In this case, the gift is a voice, a point of view, and a public space—regardless of legality—where a conversation about how the “others” live may take place. Outlaw art embraces the sentiment of “free art for the people” and eschews the assumed exclusivity of the museum/gallery, which loftily judges what is or is not art by the very act of collecting and acquiring. Outlaw art, and consequently outlaw artists, also invoke the myth of the “outsider artist” and his or her crusade to spread social justice through art. The outlaw artist is often described in the shadow of “the daring formalist rebellion accompanied by flamboyant gestures of social defiance... artist poets consumed by their lonely creative quests.”⁷ Marc and Sara Schiller, street art collectors and founders of the Wooster Collective, embrace the archetype of the outsider artists, stating:

They give away their art for free, bucking the pressures of commerce that govern both muse-

ums and galleries... They look for the rundown building with the paint chipping off, with weeds growing out of the sidewalk. Their motivation is to beautify these buildings and to create something truly special. They believe that the art adds something to the city, creating an energy that enhances an eroding building.⁸

Outlaw artists and their artistic endeavors serve a greater purpose of redesigning and brightening the gray, brick-and-mortar, urban landscape. Art in the urban public space rejects the predetermined concepts of what is legal, what is art, and what is an appropriate exhibition space. Outlaw artists adhere to a more utopian, inclusive mission: art is free and art is for everyone.

This paper will examine the opportunities, challenges, and cultural imperative inherent in attempting to document and preserve street art.

A Historical Examination of Street Art

One of the most prevalent examples of outlaw art is street art. Though freight monikers and creative box-car drawings have been documented in the United States as early as the late-19th century, perhaps the first instance of an item of graffiti with cultural relevance in the modern historical era was the “Kilroy was here” slogan. It first appeared on tanks at the Fore River Shipyard in Boston during World War II. Writing these words with chalk or grease crayon was the strategy rate-setter James Kilroy employed to mark the tanks he had inspected. Soon the phrase began to appear on tanks before Kilroy had had the chance to inspect them. Though the first artist to place the sketch of a man peering over a wall above the slogan has never been identified, before the war’s end the image and slogan appeared on tanks aboard thousands of battleships, cruisers, and aircraft carriers, becoming a sort of comforting coded message among soldiers who were far away from home. The image eventually made its way onto signs, war bonds, and other war-related materials across the United States. After Rosie the Riveter, “Kilroy was here,” was one of the most iconic images associated with World War II paraphernalia.⁹

Chronologically, the next notable cultural graffiti in the United States is associated with neighborhood gang activity, when groups marked the boundaries of their neighborhoods by scribbling on walls and streets.

This has been documented as occurring as early as the 1850s in Philadelphia and was considered to be purely functional, without artistic aspirations. More than a century later, this city also served as one of the first American cities to display artful graffiti as well. In the mid-1960s, a group of Philadelphia teenagers became inspired by the gang graffiti around their neighborhoods and began coming up with increasingly artistic methods of writing their nicknames on subway advertisements they encountered on the way to and from home. This behavior escalated, and eventually the teenagers were painting the subway cars themselves.¹⁰

This marks a significant development in evolution of street art: Gang graffiti was intended as territorial markings and coded communication with members of rival gangs. The prospective audience for artful graffiti was the public at large and, at least originally, had no other message than to entertain.¹¹ The epicenter for graffiti creation very quickly moved to New York City in the early 1970s. Over the next decade, a confluence of events led to a cultural explosion, a phenomenon that has yet to be repeated. A sense of lawlessness in certain neighborhoods, a listlessness and identity crisis following the 1960s, and declining ridership of public transportation all contributed to the fact that an entire generation of disaffected youth converged in this location to create and define a myriad of new art forms, including musical genres (punk rock, rap music) and visual arts (graffiti, alternative comics).

Subway cars proved to be a strategic as well as convenient canvas for these new visual artists. Not only were various subway routes abandoned late at night, allowing them plenty of time to work uninterrupted, these cars traveled throughout the city. Therefore the prospective audience for the works increased exponentially. This led graffiti artists to become more competitive, prompting graffiti style wars and stylistic tagging (signing artwork in a way that is indicative of the identity of the artist, yet can remain unidentifiable for law enforcement or other undesirables). Graffiti is considered one of the four core elements upon which hip-hop culture was based at its genesis, the others being DJing, break-dancing, and the rhythmic, rhyming vocal delivery known as rapping.¹² To this end, graffiti became an entire population's method for expression and youthful rebellion against an establishment that had exhibited nothing but contempt or indifference toward it.

The Relevancy and Legitimization of Street Art

Street art has become increasingly relevant and accepted as a true art form, with an established aesthetic, a provocative ethos, an effect on culture. Graffiti has frequently been condemned as puerile and illegal, most notably in the 1980s when New York City Mayor Edward Koch began a campaign to rid the city of spray paint tags off of public property such as subway cars.¹³ Such a move only further pushed street art the realm of the "outsider art." Yet in the following years, street art was helped into the mainstream, partly due to its connection to hip-hop culture and also when celebrated artists rose from the street-art aesthetic and forced a discerning public to recognize the artistic statement the graffiti taggers were making. Prime examples of this include Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, artists who worked outside of the mainstream but whose works are now appraised highly and sought after by art collectors.¹⁴ Due in part to the popularity of Shepard Fairey's ubiquitous homage to President Barack Obama during the 2008 election, street art and street artists have moved from the sphere of graffiti into the label of "works of art" for the first time in almost 30 years.

Banksy, arguably the most popular street artist in the 2000s, has also furthered the exposure and presence of street art. Many of his works make a strong political statement and advocate for social justice. A major aspect of the interest in Banksy is his anonymity. In this digital and information-accessible age, Banksy has maintained a level of secrecy over his true identity, in part due to the illegality of his acts, which could be literally described as defacing private and/or public property. He has also maintained this anonymity to imbue his work with mystique, which only heightens the public's interest into the controversial artist.

This endeavor has proved to be very successful in validating street art and procuring an audience for it. While Banksy's work is most often found on the side of buildings in large cities such as London, those who wish to procure a Banksy piece, may visit a gallery and purchase one of the prints. While this action is not sanctioned by Banksy, this exchange of money—the business of art—has lent Banksy, and by extension street art, legitimacy in the art world.¹⁵ Adding to his respectability, the 2010 film *Exit Through the Gift Shop* explores the world of street art, Banksy, Shepard Fairey, and other street artists. *Exit Through the Gift*

Shop won several prestigious film awards including Best Documentary awards from the Toronto Film Critics Awards and the Independent Spirit Awards, culminating in a Best Documentary nomination from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Banksy has been recognized and noted by the academy, literally and metaphorically.

Collecting, Describing, and Archiving Street Art *Considering Street Art as Ephemera*

When considering the obstacles, benefits, and best practices of archiving outlaw art, the ephemeral nature of street art influences how it should be described and arranged by art librarians and art archivists. Ephemera was once considered to be limited to broadsides such as menus, invitations, greeting cards, and pamphlets. In recent years, however, the definition of ephemera has expanded to consider born-digital items, political and activist art, as well as street art. The consistent characteristic of ephemeral items is their short-lived existence and currency.¹⁶ Ephemeral art's brief life exists because it is consumed quickly by its audience who are very often transient; the hurried, harried, urban dweller. Cedar Lewisohn remarks that "In the street, the work appears from nowhere, is viewed quickly, and then is gone again."¹⁷ Street art was rarely created to have permanence; the creation of street artworks is meant to exist for a brief episode of the viewer's life and affect—in that short exchange between the artist and the consumer—how the urban landscape is considered and experienced.

When examining the ephemeral qualities of outlaw art, the temporal state of street art is not only influenced by artistic intent but also by forces beyond of the control of the artist must be taken into account. Street art, for example, is vulnerable to the forces of nature—wind, precipitation, and flooding—and the policies of municipal powers. Trucks with power hoses attached, commonly known as graffiti blasters, sanitize exterior services of uncommissioned street art and city sanitation workers are often commissioned with removing street art that cannot be removed with water hoses, such as sculptures. The phrase "here today, gone tomorrow" is easily applied to street art. A collector of street art can miss the opportunity to document an artwork if they choose to wait to return to a location where street art was discovered. The curation and collection of street art by information professionals requires a balanced measure of expediency and principled urgency.

Legal Issues

The ephemeral nature of street art is but one limiting factor that makes it more challenging to exhibit, collect, describe, and archive than other works of art. Attempting to do so also brings to the fore several questions of legality. Perhaps the most obvious identifying factor for outlaw art is evident in the adjective itself. Outlaws, by definition, often operate outside the confines of the law. The method in which different countries deal with street art is quite telling. Under some circumstances, if a pedestrian is found near a piece of graffiti and is revealed to be carrying an aerosol paint can, this is grounds enough to be disciplined by law enforcement. Yet, in other countries, graffiti is considered to be completely legal.¹⁸ Public universities, municipalities, research institutions, and federal agencies wield a considerable amount of power in determining which art is preserved and exhibited. There are often ethical and political implications to providing a forum for unsanctioned art objects. Implications that many in the art preservation establishment may be more interested in eschewing than confronting on behalf of their institutions.

It is often much more difficult to discover the creator of an art object if that art object is illegal. The artist has more than likely taken steps to keep his or her identity anonymous. For street art, the object itself is often a photograph of a mural or image as it appears on a wall or other outdoor surface. It is helpful that an archivist's host institution may claim creatorship of the photograph of said object, but even diligent research and interviews on the part of the librarian may yield no information on the authorship of the original product. This circumstance makes the cataloging process for works of art created the same person exceptionally, if not prohibitively, difficult.

Street art is revolutionary in that it brings art objects out of the revered buildings (galleries or museums). Similarly, to be successful in their quest, art librarians/archivists must leave that hallowed ground (the art library/museum) and seek out these gems. This necessitates cultivating relationships with new information sources and creators. It requires additional research aspects beyond the traditional catalog-record metadata or finding aid to discover the most likely locations for street art to occur. Though these may be foreign or unique concepts to the current state of collection development, they are absolutely essential for the street art archivist.

Conclusion

While street art remains illegal unless commissioned by a municipal department and/or property owner, a paradigm shift is taking place: It is one of the few remaining art forms where the level of critical receptiveness is mixed. Street art is considered, by some, to be destruction of public property and by others, a legitimate art medium with a distinct aesthetic and cultural perspective. Street art is frequently mislabeled as vandalism or corporate/public art. Therefore, art librarians and archivists often have difficulty rationalizing to their institutions the significance of its documentation and exhibition.

As outlaw art gains more relevancy, additional media are gaining credibility from the art canon. In the future, collections of outlaw art may include art objects presented in different formats, such as skin art and alternative performance art. Skin art includes body modifications, permanent tattoos, and body painting. Drag shows, flash mobs, and street performances illustrate a third category of outlaw art, alternative performance art. A digital collection of such art instantiations should embrace outlaw art's philosophy of inclusivity and should contextualize the cultural pressures under which such artwork was created, preserving its original purpose: to shock and awe.

Notes

1. Roger Cardinal, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic Perspective," in *Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, ed. Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. with Roger Cardinal (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 21-22.
2. Vera L. Zolberg and Joni Maya Cherbo, introduction to *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Vera L. Zolberg and Joni Maya Cherbo (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. Joanna Gardner-Huggett, "The Feminist Roots of the Guerrilla Girls' 'Creative Complaining,'" in *Not Ready to Make Nice: Guerilla Girls in the Artworld and Beyond*, ed. by Neysa Page-Lieberman (Chicago: Columbia College, 2012) Exhibition Catalog, 23.
5. Kymberly N. Pinder, "Guerrilla Girls, Graffiti, and Culture Jamming in the Public Sphere," in *Not Ready to Make Nice: Guerilla Girls in the Artworld and Beyond*, ed. by Neysa Page-Lieberman. (Chicago: Columbia College, 2012) Exhibition Catalog, 27.
6. *Ibid.*

7. Joanne Cubbs, "Rebels, Mystics and Outcasts: the Romantic Artist Outsider," in *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, ed. by Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. with Roger Cardinal (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 78.
8. Marc Schiller and Sara Schiller, "City View," preface to *Trepass: a History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*, ed. by Ethel Seno (Cologne, Germany: Tacshen, 2010), 10.
9. Roger Gastman and Caleb Neelon, *The History of American Graffiti* (New York: Harper Design, 2010), 41.
10. *Ibid.*, 50.
11. Cedar Lewisohn, *Street Art: the Graffiti Revolution* (New York: Abrams, 2008), 27.
12. Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: a History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 90.
13. New York Times, "Remembering Ed Koch," *New York Times*, February 1, 2013, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/01/remembering-ed-koch/>.
14. Carl Vogel, "Basquiat Painting Brings \$16.3 Million at Phillips Sale," *New York Times*, May 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/11/nyregion/basquiat-painting-brings-16-3-million-at-phillips-sale.html?gwh=F0A8752653EA2952F54F235C392D25AC>.
15. Banksy, "Shop (TM)," *Banksy*. www.banksy.co.uk/shop/shop2.html (accessed February 14, 2013).
16. *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science*, s.v. "ephemera," accessed February 15, 2013, http://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_e.aspx.
17. Cedar Lewisohn, *Street Art: the Graffiti Revolution* (New York: Abrams, 2008), 127.
18. Juliane Huang, "10 Places Where Graffiti is Legal," *Matador Network*, <http://matadornetwork.com/trips/10-places-where-graffiti-is-legal/> (accessed February 16, 2013).

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