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The (In)Visible Artist: Stencil Graffiti, Activist Art, and the Value of Visual Public Space

Public debates about graffiti often involve value judgements about the conditions under which art should be created, displayed, experienced, and appreciated. Urban graffiti art continues to act as a provocative site of debate over the social utility of artistic expression in shared public spaces. Stencil graffiti has most recently raised this debate anew, eliciting impassioned views about the role of the stencil graffiti artist in relation to the urban public landscape. This renewed public interest in the political potential of graffiti stems from the particular characteristics embodied in stencil graffiti “style.” Stencil graffiti is modelled on utilitarian signage and packaging; it is clear, instructive, and consistent.¹ Stencil graffiti has what Tristan Manco calls “enduring aesthetic appeal,”² stemming from the juxtaposition of its aesthetic roots in the utilitarian style of official signage and its political roots in countercultural practices of graffiti writing. Rather than undermining the political potential of stencil graffiti, this apparent contradiction in form and content underlines stencil graffiti’s transformative potential for public audiences. This potential contributes to the growing mainstream popularity of stencil artists.

The perceived usefulness of graffiti has long been publically debated in relation to two polarized positions. On the one hand, graffiti can be seen as a productive activity through which the artist practices self-expression. On the other hand, graffiti can also be seen as a selfish act of vandalism which defaces a publically or privately owned surface. Stencil graffiti challenges this discursive framework because it is widely recognized as embodying artistic style in its aesthetic form. Graffiti artists who practice stencil art are increasing visible on the mainstream cultural landscape because of their links with a specific aesthetic art-form, troubling the formerly strict distinction between “legal” and “illegal” graffiti, suggesting instead that stencil graffiti is able to move between these categories. Stencil graffiti, and the

growing celebrity status of its practitioners, suggests that public judgements of the social utility of graffiti are constantly in flux, and are made and re-made in relation to public opinion.

Stencil graffiti is ubiquitous in the North American urban landscape, and explanations of its history and purpose remain diverse. Kurt Iveson sees stencil graffiti as a newer form of urban street expression characterized by its “iconographic” nature that “provoke[s] surprise and play in the urban environment, as a commentary on the encroaching corporatization and routinization of city life.”³ In an entirely different vein, Tristan Manco argues for a comprehensive history of stencil art that stretches back 22,000 years to include cave painting techniques.⁴ In fact, Manco stresses that our current cultural interest in stencil graffiti can be explained as a resurgence of a particular utilitarian technique, used in printing practices and signage, and appropriated by graffiti artists. This style has been used over time and in various contexts to evoke countercultural notions of rebellion.⁵ While these two histories are quite different, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, each highlights an important element central to the cultural discussion surrounding stencil graffiti – that of *form* and *content*. As Iveson explains, stencil graffiti is not just the circulation of content (ie. words or images), but “when texts or images in the form of graffiti circulate this is also the...circulation of graffiti itself as a *form* of public address.”⁶ Stencil graffiti is the product of the complicated relationship between form and content, and the apparent contradiction between the two.

Stencil graffiti is a simple do-it-yourself (DIY) technique in which a design is cut from a piece of cardboard, creating a template that can be used to transfer the image to another surface by applying paint to the holes of the template. Stencil style is characterized as inherently political because its transformative power is seen to be embodied in its aesthetic form.⁷ As a DIY technique that requires only a can of spray paint and a cardboard cut-out, stencil graffiti is fairly simple to produce and can be executed in a short amount of time (from thirty seconds to two minutes, depending on the complexity).⁸ Because of its simple, straightforward design, stencil graffiti can be read and easily understood by pedestrians and passers-by.

As a countercultural art form, graffiti plays with the notions of *seen* and *unseen*; art should be seen and recognized, but in the case of graffiti the artist should remain unseen. While the purpose of graffiti is to disrupt the public visual sphere and draw our attention to the ways in which public space is constructed and controlled, the graffiti artists themselves remain largely unseen. Of course, part of the reason for this is that the act of defacing both public and private property is illegal, so the graffiti artist remains unseen in order to avoid legal prosecution. In the case of stencil graffiti, however, there are aesthetic and contextual concerns related to the importance of remaining unseen.

First, aesthetically speaking, stencil graffiti closely mimics official text found in public and private outdoor spaces. Stencil style purposefully copies or echoes the utilitarian lettering styles used on packaging in manufacturing and industrial practices, and in public signage.⁹ This means that stencilled text and images are designed to act as official text, directing our behaviour in a particular way. Stencil graffiti exercises its transformative power through the act of mimicking “the official,” but at the same time mocking it by subverting its meaning through the artful juxtaposition of image and text or the remaking and remixing of recognizable icons, symbols, and phrases.¹⁰ In this way, the graffiti artist should remain unseen both in the design and in the execution of the stencilling.

In relation to context, the stencil graffiti artist should also remain unseen because, as members of the stencilling community have argued, the transformative power of the stencil piece comes not just from the piece itself, but from the conversations created with other artists, who react to the original work (adding to it or altering it), and thus change its meaning.¹¹ The original author of the work should in some ways remain unseen in order to facilitate the cultural conversations that are generated through and between the graffiti itself. It is curious then that, in the face of these concerns about remaining unseen, stencil artists like Banksy and Roadsworth have become recognizable through the style of their artwork. To mainstream audiences, these are graffiti artists who shift between anonymity and popularity. This shift raises questions about the role of this figure in popular culture.¹²



Fig. 1.

IMAGE SOURCE:

<http://www.banksy.co.uk/outdoors/>

out1/horizontal_1.htm

Banksy is a notoriously reclusive British graffiti artist whose identity remains a guarded secret. He often employs the use of ironic silhouette figures to invoke timely political commentaries, stencils that he feels have a “political edge” because of hard lines of the style and the medium’s historical associations with cultural dissent.¹³ Banksy often employs rats as symbols of urban life, symbolizing pestilence, the underground, and the unseen, and mocks figures both authoritative and iconic by placing them in humorous or subversive contexts, such as his popular piece featuring two British police officers kissing, or the figure of the street protester throwing a bouquet of flowers (Fig. 1). He completed a series of popular pieces in New Orleans on the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina that played with the notions of authority and subverted American values: “The murals depict a variety of scenes, including Abraham Lincoln as a homeless man pushing a basket, a marching band wearing gas masks, an old man in a rocking chair with an American flag below the words ‘No Loitering,’ and a boy on a swing made out of a life preserver.”¹⁴

In the recently released book *Banksy: Wall and Piece*, produced with Banksy’s cooperation and featuring the first comprehensive catalogue of his work, he notes that he was first inspired by stencils in the early 1990’s in his hometown of Bristol while hiding under a train carriage from the police, at which time he noticed the serial number of the train car stencilled on its underside.¹⁵ It was after this incident that he experimented with stencils, which had a much shorter execution time than other forms of graffiti art that he had been practicing, and over time he gained notoriety for his stencil art in Bristol,¹⁶ and later in London, across Europe, Australia, and the United States.



Fig. 2.

IMAGE SOURCE:

<http://colossalmedia.com/case-studies/banksy>

Banksy has become a celebrity figure inside DIY activist communities and in mainstream popular culture. His work is now seen as having public value, is increasingly featured in gallery spaces (purchased by audiences who admire his public work),¹⁷ and often has longer exposure times in public spaces owing to his artistic and celebrity status. More recently in 2008, Banksy became involved in the renting of private billboards in New York City to promote his private art shows. He had large-scale versions of his graffiti art reproduced on the sides of buildings (Fig. 2).¹⁸



Fig. 3.

IMAGE SOURCE:

http://gothamist.com/2008/10/05/banksygate_2008_the_natives_respond.php



Fig. 4.

IMAGE SOURCE:

<http://roadsworth.com/main/index.php?x=browse&category=2>

These legal murals likely remained exposed for a longer period of time than an illegal piece, which might be covered up in the course of several days. Interestingly, this means that Banksy himself became the target of graffiti tagging, as other artists began to use his billboards as sites of transgression (Fig. 3).

Another interesting example of the stencil artist as activist is Montreal street artist Roadsworth. Roadsworth, now identified as Peter Gibson, began his stencilled street graffiti projects in 2001. Inspired and motivated by the events of 9/11, he began to use the city space of Montreal as a canvas for his activist art, which carried a message about the problem of North American dependence on oil. In particular, he mobilized the symbol of the bicycle as a commentary on poor city planning of road and walkways that excluded bike users and instead encouraged driving and gasoline consumption. His art branched out to include other environmental themes including our cultural dependence on electricity and the lack of wildlife within the built spaces of the city. For example, he often turns pedestrian walkways into large footprints, parking lot lines into flowers, traffic lines into electrical cords and fishing lines, and crosswalks into images of electrical switches (Fig. 4).¹⁹

His environmentally conscious graffiti integrates environmental symbols into official city signage and street markings. The goal is to play with the aesthetic style of street markings, but to disrupt the uniformity of them by inserting elements to alter their shape, appearance, and ultimately their meaning. For three years, Roadsworth remained anonymous, until he was caught and arrested in 2004 by Montreal police while completing one of his roadway stencils. City officials charged him with numerous counts of mischief and more than \$200,000 dollars in fines.²⁰

What is remarkable about Roadsworth's arrest is that the Montreal citizenry became a significant figure in his case, lobbying the municipal government to drop the charges against him. In Alan Kohl's documentary film *Roadsworth: Crossing the Line*, a city official recounts to the film maker that this is the first time in Montreal's history that the public spoke out in support of an artist who was arrested for defacing public property. In the end, the charges against him were dropped, and although Gibson was required to do some community service, following this service he was

hired by the city and commissioned to produce some official graffiti projects.²¹

The most striking element of Roadsworth's case is the way in which the telling of his story, both in the documentary and in the media stories surrounding his legal proceedings, revolve around the ideas of "the official" and "the unofficial." Because Gibson alters not just any public space but the important public space of the road, which must be guarded in order to be kept safe, public debates surrounding his work appear to fall back upon the framework of "art versus vandalism." Ultimately, it would appear that the public sees artistic and political merit in his work because they played a role in securing his acquittal, as recounted in Kohl's documentary.

In the cases of Banksy and Roadsworth, the boundaries between *seen* and *unseen* become blurred because the general public marks them out as artists who are recognizable: a judgment of public value has been made in relation to the art and the artist. This process of assigning value is significant because it suggests a popular interest in stencil graffiti. This could reflect a number of things: the trendiness of graffiti art, or perhaps a renewed debate about the role of the artist in society. What I am most interested in, however, is the more implicit concern embedded in these examples about the use of space, particularly local space (both public and private) designed for public use. Judgments of value like those already made in relation to Banksy and Roadsworth by their audiences are based not only on the aesthetic value of their work, but also on the particular ways in which their work functions as a local reflection on larger social and cultural problems or issues. This relationship has been examined by Latin American Studies scholar Chandra Morrison who theorizes that "stencils reflect the intersected realities of global connections within a local context."²² Further, as Cedar Lewisohn argues in *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* (2008), graffiti is a code constructed out of a global universal language which is also, at other times, reflective of local concerns. While Lewisohn argues that boundaries have been erected by graffiti practitioners between "global-style graffiti", and "local-style street art", he also concedes that the two styles are currently "cross-fertilizing".²³ Stencil graffiti artists then, are not simply symbolic reflections of local issues and concerns, but they also serve as symbols for us of broader cultural notions of resist-

ance and change in relation to socio-political issues.

Stencil graffiti in particular has been marked out by its practitioners and by its observers (including writers, researchers, and theorists) as an artistic practice firmly rooted in the notion of community. It is significant that in his explanation of stencil graffiti, graffiti artist and archivist Russell Howze labels this community a “stencil nation,” which is also the title of his book. *Stencil Nation* traces out the history of stencil graffiti, from its origins in the nineteen-seventies up to the present, arguing that it is now a unique twenty-first-century art form, and offering the reader a collection of photographs of stencil work to underline his claims. Specifically, Howze seeks to outline for the reader the ways in which stencil graffiti functions as a form of political discourse, which has yet to be fully documented. Here, graffiti is characterized as an “informal document of citizenship,” which links the artist to the wider community through the act of “think[ing] up an idea, put[ting] it on a piece of paper or plastic, cut[ting] it out and paint[ing] it somewhere.”²⁴ Stencil graffiti, he argues, is simply another way to practice citizenship for those who are seeking an alternative to mainstream urban culture.

Further extending this argument about graffiti as a form of political discourse, Guido Indij argues that stencil graffiti derives its political potential from the fact that it is not an art form but a *technique*.²⁵ He explains that graffiti is a tool used to communicate particular messages that by virtue of its strategic placement in publicly accessible spaces is specifically directed at pedestrian-citizens. For Indij, this means that stencil graffiti is inherently political: it is designed and implemented to forge a relationship between the artist and the citizen over the concern of space and how it is used. He notes that marketers and museums have taken advantage of this relationship to communicate their own messages, but this does not mean that stencil graffiti is no longer useful. And he argues that although it may no longer be novel, stencil graffiti still retains its transformative power in its original use; Indij cites the example of his home country of Argentina, where stencil graffiti remains an important form of popular political discourse.²⁶

It strikes me that what Indij is saying here about context is particularly important in relation to stencil graffiti. Context matters in order to derive meaning from a particular work. For example, consider the incorporation of stencil graffiti by marketers. There is now something called “reverse graffiti,” a practice of creating temporary graffiti by removing dirt from a surface and leaving a clean trace behind.²⁷ Because reverse graffiti does not technically deface an object (as it does not use paint or ink), it has been picked up by marketers as a way to borrow from the “cool factor” of graffiti by mimicking its aesthetic and thus drawing attention to an event or brand. It has also been labelled an environmentally-friendly practice, which no doubt contributes to its current popularity.²⁸

Like stencil graffiti, reverse graffiti (or “street branding” as it has come to be called in its co-opted commercialized form) engages the pedestrian to notice, read and decode the message which appears on the wall or ground. But unlike stencil graffiti, which should not disclose the source of the message (or the identity of the artist), reverse graffiti created by marketers also challenges the pedestrian to discern the source of the message. Hints about the source of the message are often encoded in the placement of the message. Manco argues that placement is “crucial for the [stencil] artist to be able to communicate symbolically, politically and artistically to an audience.”²⁹ A desired space is one where passers-by notice the artwork, but also where the work itself is preserved for as long as possible. This is why, according to Manco, commercial stencils applied to sidewalks, such as those popularized recently on the streets of New York, are immediately identifiable as commercial graffiti: they are designed to disappear quickly underfoot in order to avoid charges of vandalism. Here, context makes all the difference in the decoding of the stencilled message and its meaning, as marketers encourage the pedestrian to make a connection between the stencil and the brand, company, or event being advertised. For some pedestrian-citizens this challenge might be met with interest and humour, and for others with annoyance or indifference.

This issue of context also matters in relation to Roadsworth because it plays a significant role in the shaping of public perception about the value of his artwork.



Fig. 5.

IMAGE SOURCE:

<http://roadsworth.com/main/index.php>

?x=browse&pagenum=21&category=3

Mediated accounts of his work, including Kohl's documentary and popular press pieces, depict his anonymous work as publically supported for its artistic value, but his narrative is still told within a particular binary framework. A 2006 alternative-press article by Laura Bourdreau reflects this position when she constructs Roadsworth as a lone solitary figure of moral ambiguity (or perhaps of moral fortitude) existing within the "grey area between graffiti and vandalism."³⁰ Alternatively, in a *Globe & Mail* article in 2007, Roadsworth has been clearly transformed into a graffiti artist celebrity whose "high-profile arrest electrified his artistic career."³¹ This is a significant shift in framing: from ambiguous figure on the boundary between "legal" and "illegal," to a working artist firmly positioned as legitimate cultural producer commissioned to complete work for the City of Montreal, *Cirque du Soleil*, and the *Tour du France* (Fig. 5).³² The transformative potential of his work is not questioned in the article, but rather re-affirmed as much as possible, given Roadsworth's newly stated desire to "bridge the gap between the street and the gallery."³³ Context matters here, but it is interchangeable between street and gallery because Roadsworth's artwork is identifiably his own aesthetic "style," regardless of location.

Context is also important in relation to Banksy's billboards, and also concerns the audience perception of authenticity, but the public reacts to his movement between street and gallery in a different way. In 2008, he outsourced three large scale stencil graffiti pieces to a "hand-paint advertising company" called Colossal Media in support of a private show.³⁴ Concern over this act of outsourcing popped up on blogs and message boards. The purpose was the promotion of his own art-show, but it wasn't obvious to his audience that these pieces were legal and thus promotional art rather than graffiti.³⁵ While Banksy himself created the images and provided the sketches, Colossal Media ultimately sourced the locations, rented the space from the owners of the buildings, and recreated Banksy's graffiti with their staff.³⁶ Fans and admirers were dismayed. How could Banksy do this? Had he "sold out" to industry? Could this work still be considered Banksy's art when it was executed by others, in broad daylight, on display on a legally leased wall? It is precisely the fact that Banksy had been marked out as an authentic political voice that initiated the

criticism of his choice to use officially rented space to promote his own art work. Fans and admirers identified a mismatch between the image that Banksy projected, of a rebellious rule breaker and social critic, and that of an established artist participating in institutionalized practices. In the end, however, these concerns, although significant, do not seem to deter fans and admirers from appreciating the work of both artists, and their stencil graffiti continues to be understood as tied to popular notions of the political.

Chandra Morrison suggests that stencil graffiti performs a number of functions, all of which contribute to its political significance. She points out that it is “a means to pay homage, to promote, to stimulate reflection, to make commentary, to critique international affairs, or to reference completely local situations.”³⁷ Stencil graffiti is well positioned to act as a form of political commentary visible in our urban environments. But more broadly, it is also well positioned to draw attention to the myriad of conflicted relationships occupied by the figure of the graffiti artist who sits at their intersection; here I am thinking about the relationship between seen and unseen, space and place, local and global, and quiet and loud. The graffiti artist functions as a symbol of the tensions of what public space is and what it should be. But the stencil graffiti artist reminds us even more poignantly that the debate over the use of public space is more nuanced and multi-layered. It is not just what public space is or what it should be that is up for debate, but more specifically how we go about using it, moving through it, occupying it, and presenting ourselves within it. This complicated relationship we have constructed between graffiti artists, notions of public space, and our own roles as urban citizens, is reflected in Russel Howze’s observations that the artists of the stencil nation “work quietly yet speak loudly from the dark urban landscapes.”³⁸ It seems to me that they speak loudly of some common or popular vision of politics that we communicate to each other through the visual, and that unites us as members of larger community, both local and global.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Tristan Manco, *Stencil Graffiti*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 13.
- 2 Ibid., 12.
- 3 Ibid., 146.
- 4 Ibid., 7.
- 5 Ibid., 7-11.
- 6 Kurt Iveson, *Publics and The City*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 112, emphasis in original.
- 7 Guido Indij, *1000 Stencil: Argentina graffiti*, (Buenos Aires: La Marca Editora, 2007), 228.
- 8 Compare this for example with "yarn bombing", a popular form of art activism in which the knitter-activist must produce a knit object before depositing it in a public space. Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain offer a detailed explanation of both the philosophy and technique of yarn bombing in *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti* (2009).

- 9 For an historical explanation of the political dimensions of stencil graffiti as a communication tool, see the introduction to Tristan Manco's *Stencil Graffiti* (2002), pages 7-15.
- 10 Chandra Morrison, "Re: Stencil A Quotidian absurdity," in *1000 Stencil: Argentina Graffiti*, by Guido Indij, 232-236, (Buenos Aires: La Marca Editora, 2007), 232.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 233-4.
- 12 Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, there remains much to be said about the fact that these two graffiti artists are male, suggesting a need to examine the gender divide that exists in relation to graffiti subculture generally, and more specifically in relation to the celebrity figure of the male stencil graffiti artist. I thank the audience members of the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association Conference (Boston, November 2009) for pointing out this omission to me.
- 13 Manco, 76-8.
- 14 Julie Bloom, "Banksy hits New Orleans," *New York Times*, (August 29, 2008), 3.
- 15 Banksy, 13.
- 16 Paul Majendie, "Anonymity Rules, OK!," *Montreal Gazette*, (May 2, 2008), A16.
- 17 Joshua Knelman, "Graffiti goes six-figure legit," *Globe and Mail*, (August 4, 2007), R1.
- 18 "Banksy rat mural takes bite out of Big Apple," *Western Morning News*, (October 15, 2008), 17.
- 19 Bernard Perusse, "Who Owns Public Space?," *Montreal Gazette*, (November 18, 2008), D6.
- 20 Reid Cooper, "When the stencil hits the road," *Globe and Mail*, (January 6, 2005), R3.
- 21 Brett Bundale, "Roadsworth returns [with a permit]," *Montreal Gazette*, (May 31, 2007), A3.
- 22 Morrison, 233.

- 23 Cedar Lewisohn, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution*, (New York: Abrams, 2008), 63.
- 24 Russel Howze, *Stencil Nation: graffiti, community, and art*, (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2008), 8.
- 25 Indij, 228.
- 26 Indij, 230-1.
- 27 Matthew Chung, "The reverse graffiti dilemma," *Toronto Star*, (October 15, 2006), D3.
- 28 Julie Kilpatrick, "Leaving a message underfoot," *Montreal Gazette*, (August 11, 2008), A3.
- 29 Manco, 11.
- 30 Laura Boudreau, "A Divided Highway." *Spacing* (2006): <http://spacing.ca/art-roadsworth.htm>.
- 31 Knelman, R1.
- 32 Knelman, R1.
- 33 Knelman, R1.
- 34 Colossal Media, "Banksy," <http://colossalmedia.com/case-studies/banksy>.
- 35 Some examples of this type of commentary on Banksy's New York murals come from art blogs and related message boards such as SuperTouchArt.com, and ArtObserved.com.
- 36 Colossal Media.
- 37 Morrison, 233.
- 38 Howze, 8.