

Contemporary Street Art and the Art Market

Introduction

Street art, known in some quarters as [graffiti](#), experienced a proliferation in recent decades with the [rise of alternative and multicultural social and political movements](#) in the 1960s and a growing interest among [socially conscious artists](#) to increase public accessibility to art. The method [goes back millennia](#), but we can trace its most immediate origins, perhaps, to the [New Deal](#) murals created in the 1930 and 1940s by artists employed in the [Federal Art Project](#) commissioned by the [Works Progress Administration](#). The tradition continued in the 1960s and early 1970s, when communities of marginalized citizens, inspired by the [Black Arts Movement](#), rallied to create public murals, such as the [Chicago "Wall of Respect,"](#) produced by hundreds of African-Americans on Chicago's beleaguered [South Side](#), using art as an instrument of collective self-empowerment and as part of a larger movement for social justice. Street art has a long history of drawing art out of the exclusive and cloistered realm of [high-brow culture](#) and into arenas where more people can participate in its creation, appreciation, and social and political ramifications. It is not surprising, of course, that what garners widespread attention is going to be susceptible to commercial exploitation. In tandem with its rise in the public profile, street art icons and symbols have been pursued and [snatched up by various sectors of the advertising and retail world](#). At the same time, street artists have become desired entities in the aforementioned high-brow art world, their art appearing in galleries around the world, as well as in the most exclusive and profitable auction houses such as [Sotheby's](#) and [Christie's](#). The art has also [begun in recent years to enter museums](#) – a phenomenon which has helped to raise its level of prestige and status as a respectable art form and which, consequently, has infused it with more economic value on the art market in which Sotheby's and Christie's are such major players.

Public Art from the New Deal to the Black Arts Movement

In 1935, [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) established the Works Progress Administration (WPA) "to help provide economic relief" from the [Great Depression](#), according to the [WPA Murals web site](#). Inspired by [Mexican muralists'](#) "revitalization of the [Italian Renaissance](#) fresco style" in the 1920s and 1930s, the intention was to harness "the creativity of the new art movements" to create jobs for more Americans. This endeavor, executed by the Federal Art Project, resulted in "5,000 jobs for artists and [...] over 225,000 works of art for the American people."



WPA Mural

Click [here](#) to view a video about the making of WPA murals.

Click [here](#) to view a video about "WPA Art In Need of Rescue."

Disaffected minorities in the 1960s picked up on the [idea of using art to promote social justice](#). During the [Black Arts Movement](#) of the 1960s, which witnessed a flurry of art production by African-American artists, predominantly-black communities in economically-destitute areas convened in [grassroots](#) movements to create public murals in acts of "[guerrilla art](#)" designed to challenge conventional ideas about ownership and rights. Chicago's "[Wall of Respect](#)," sponsored by the [Organization of Black American Culture \(OBAC\)](#), spawned a movement across the country to create [similar murals](#). The "Wall of Respect" was produced in 1969 by hundreds of black citizens and featured a spread of African-American heroes. The collective, communal process of creating the mural infused the [South Side](#) community with a sense of morale and empowerment at the same time that it promoted political activism on behalf of [civil rights](#). The art-making process amounted to a [reclamation of black identity and culture](#), both through the content produced -- a mural of black heroes -- and through the collective nature of the act, a process that connected those involved with their historical cultural value for community. And the physical act, as well, represented a reclamation, a taking-back of private property for collective use. It was also, as graffiti tends to be, an act of defiance, a "defacing" of property for a greater good, for "the people's sake," (<http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:hOgUMO2gWBsJ:www.saic.edu/~ljunki/mightyblackwall>).

doc+art+for+the+people's+sake+public+murals+black+arts+movement&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEEShJPVQFZjb23mPs_qQMRZay2CCOWG6xg5dwCml4N1kFC67Abri5MZ9ANDyQ7FHTtz6dXhX_LAqHv9eCfRxZwh8gPsJ3gUSJ089oOwx9LNvIAarocssqF26jfh1_2nhU9RvMpD8f&sig=AHIEtbQmtBaTpNG_IUgyHppX01alyrDsbQ) a conversion of that property into something more beautiful. Although the public works of the 1930s and 1940s under the New Deal were commissioned by the government and thus far from illegal, the principles undergirding their production were similar to those that fueled the creation of [Black Arts Movement murals](#): the use of art to transform people's lives in a highly public manner.



"Wall of Respect," Chicago, 1969: "[Art for people's sake](#)"

Click [here](#) to view a video called "Ghost of the Walls," produced in homage to the murals created during the Black Arts Movement.

Click [here](#) or more information on black arts.

Street Art, the 1970s and Beyond

Behind the rising popularity in recent decades of street art as an effective method for artists, and as a target for galleries, dealers, and collectors are artists such as [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) and [Keith Haring](#), who were at the "forefront" of the street art movement ([Michael Carter](#), *The Studio in the Street/The Street in the Studio*). They made celebrated, successful transitions to the established gallery scene, becoming icons seemingly overnight and, tragically, vanishing just as quickly. The fleeting quality of their lives mirrors that of street art itself, and it is precisely the ephemera of the craft that continues to draw artists. [Explains street artist Roger Gastman](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*: "I'd say 99 percent of the work [in a [book](#) he has compiled of graffiti art] is not there anymore, but there will always be new work. In a way, that's part of the art."

Basquiat



Basquiat

Basquiat, a black artist from a working-class family, began what became a successful career sketching images around [New York City](#) in the late 1970s under the tag name "SAMO." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SAMO%20_Graffiti) In his early drawings, he "transformed his own observations" about life around him "into pithy text messages inscribed on the edifices of the urban environment," according to his [biographer](#), [Fred Hoffman](#). This method "became the basis for his early artistic output," characterized by an effort to "distill" an idea, passion, observation, or perception "down to its core." In 1979, he began to sell "hand-painted" [T-shirts](#) and [postcards](#), according to the [Brooklyn Museum's chronology of his life](#).



Basquiat's "Unquiet Mind"

"Combining elements from the [African Diaspora](#) with his own symbology," Basquiat developed "his own unique artistic style," continues the Brooklyn Museum's chronologist. Basquiat's form and "pictorial strategy," writes Hoffman, reflect concerns with "dualities" – the personal and social/political, the spiritual and the concrete, life and death, change and stasis, as well as "wealth versus poverty, integration versus [segregation](#), and [inner versus outer experience](#)." The themes of Basquiat's works are fitting for the medium of [public art](#). He works out his inner dialogs in a public format, effectively bridging the divide between the internal and the external, and bringing others into the conversation in his head. Street art provided him with a medium for integration in form, and the content of his art, some of which exposes the fallacies of racial segregation, for instance, supported the artistic strategy. Basquiat's form paralleled the medium he employed in yet another way: His "practice of crossing out words and images," which indicated his "[refusal] to be identified with the limiting, transitory nature of his own life experience" (Hoffman), emulated the fleeting quality of street art itself, a theme that continues to this day to captivate the artists who practice it.



Basquiat's famous "Per Capita"

Basquiat was, writes the Brooklyn Museum's chronologist, "avid and spontaneous" in his "picture-making, painting on canvas, paper, and [found objects like refrigerators](#), books, and other" items. Basquiat's work demonstrated the ways in which street art could merge form and content to generate public discussion and influence the way people think about the world. His work has achieved significant success in the art world. His art goes for "[seven- and eight-figure prices](#)" in [galleries in Asia, Canada, Europe, and the United States](#) and at powerful auction houses such as [Sotheby's](#) and [Christie's](#). It is also featured in [important museums worldwide](#), from New York to California, Europe to Japan, Africa to Germany, Texas to Maui, from the [Musée D'Art Moderne de la Ville](#) in Paris and the [Fondation Beyeler](#) in Basel to the [Brooklyn Museum](#) and Los Angeles's [MoCA](#). His studio and gallery exhibitions did not alter the nature of his work: "SAMO-like scrawlings reemerged in Basquiat's studio works, many of which were executed on found surfaces and thus continued to emanate a strong street art energy and immediacy" ([Carter](#)).

More by Basquiat, typical of his iconographic style:





Click [here](#) to listen to a [National Public Radio](#) story on Basquiat.

Click [here](#) to watch an interview with Basquiat.

Click [here](#) to view Basquiat's exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum.

Click [here](#) to view Basquiat's exhibitions at the [Whitney](#) in New York City.

Click [here](#) for links to Basquiat's world-wide exhibitions.

Haring



Keith Haring

The 1980s proved a boom-time for street art:

"Attracted by the wild-style energy, outlaw glamour, and public accessibility of the graffiti underground, many formally trained young artists in the early 1980s were inspired to work outside the rarified studio-gallery continuum, experimenting and 'tagging' alongside the graffitiists on subway station platforms and urban wall space" ([Carter](#)).

Elements of the stunted but fruitful career of Keith Haring, who [died of AIDS](#) in 1990, shed light on many of the issues and questions that can be raised by the relationship between street art and the art market. Haring devoted much of his life to "public works," many of which "carried social messages," according to the [biography](#) on his web site. After dropping out of commercial art school because he wanted to create art "for the people" (Haring, "[Art in Transit](#)"), he moved to New York City and began to draw "in white chalk on blank paper panels throughout the subway station," according to the biography on his web site. He created hundreds of these "public drawings," soon referred to as the "[subway drawings](#)" and consisting of "rapid rhythmic lines," between 1980 and 1985, and came to be known as the "subway artist." By 1989 Haring had "achieved international recognition and participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions," writes the web site biographer, but he continued to be concerned first and foremost with exposing broad ranges of people to art. Haring wrote:

"I became aware of the vast differences in people's responses to the [subway] work. Different people saw different things in the drawings. [...] All kinds of people would stop and look at the huge drawing and many people were eager to comment on their feelings toward it. This was the first time I realized how many people could enjoy art if they were given the chance. These were not the people I saw in the museums or in the galleries but a cross-section of humanity that cut across all boundaries" (Haring, "Art in Transit").

Examples of Haring's chalk drawings:



It was this experience that propelled Haring to open the [Pop Shop](#) in 1986. A retail store located in New York City's [SoHo District](#), the Pop Shop sold "[T-shirts](#), [toys](#), [posters](#), [buttons](#), [magnets](#)," and other paraphernalia "bearing [Haring's] images." Haring looked upon his shop as "an extension of his work" and his philosophy: it was "intended to allow people greater access to his work, which was now readily available on products at a low cost," explains his web site biographer. It was a place where "not only collectors could come, but also kids from the [Bronx](#)" ([Jade Dellinger](#), "[Art and Commerce](#)"). The Pop Shop was [subject to criticism](#) from those in the art world who questioned whether it represented a turn toward the [commercialization of art](#). But in that respect it was hardly different from high-end galleries and auctions – except for the demographical constitution of the population it catered to. Haring maintained that the aesthetic quality of his work was not compromised with the opening of the Pop Shop, noting that "[it] was less about 'purity' and much more an issue of integrity" – and the intention behind the Pop Shop fell comfortably in line with his sense of integrity.

Of course, Haring did participate in the aforementioned high-end domain of the art world and its market. His art was and is available for extravagant prices in the [most exclusive art galleries and auction houses](#). As Michael Gross of the [New York Times](#) noted, "Mr. Haring used to offer his art free on subway walls. Now he sells it for five-figure sums" (quoted in Dellinger). Indeed, the subway art was what made him famous and gained him critical acclaim: they were "murals-in-motion to the [cognoscenti](#)," writes Carter. But Haring continued in his conviction that all of his actions, and his resulting success in the art market, fulfilled only his objective of reaching as wide an audience as possible. He made a video for [MTV](#), created [vodka ads](#), designed [anti-drug](#) and [AIDS -awareness](#) campaigns, and sold his art in multiple galleries. Again, he encountered charges of "selling out": "Graffiti [...has] grown from hobby to business. Graffiti paintings are being sold in SoHo art galleries for up to \$10,000 each. [...] Haring, who once did subway graffiti, has [had major exhibitions around the world](#), and is critically acclaimed," [reports Mandelit Del Barco of National Public Radio](#). But the more successful Haring became, he maintained, the more people would be exposed to his art. The art market and commitment to social justice are not necessarily mutually exclusive but are, at times, according to theories of the "democratization of culture" ([Marcia Tucker](#) in Dellinger, "Art and Commerce"), interdependent. Haring "understood his role in merging" art and commerce as "a combination of Inc. and ink" (Dellinger, "Art and Commerce").



Haring's "Statue of Liberty"

Click [here](#) for an interview with Haring.

Click [here](#) to view Haring at the Whitney.

Click [here](#) and [here](#) for lists of Haring's museum collections.

Click [here](#) to view a slide show of Keith Haring's art work.

Street Art Today

Basquiat and Haring established a tradition of street art that many young artists sought to emulate. Writes Carter, "In their wake, somewhat younger artists, edgy and ambitious, saw the streets as their studio, especially in the East Village." They "took painterly cues from" Basquiat and Haring. These artists include the likes of [Barry McGee](#), [Swoon](#), [Blek Le Rat](#), [D*Face](#), [Judith Supine](#), [Elbowtoe](#), [Stickman](#), [Retna](#), [War Boutique](#), [Kenichi \(Ken\) Hiratsuka](#), [Brian Gormley](#), [Scot Borofsky](#), [Shepard Fairey](#), [Faile](#), [Blu](#), the [Os Gemeos](#) brothers, [JR](#), [Mark Jenkins](#), [Nunca](#), [Sweet Toof](#) and [Cyclops](#), [Mau Mau](#), [Sickboy](#), [Sixeart](#), [Roa](#), [Futura](#), [Neckface](#), and [Roger Gastman](#). Collectively they have by now gained the street art genre something close to [mainstream acceptance](#).



By Barry McGee

Click [here](#) to read about the means (both alternative and conventional) by which Barry McGee has climbed the market.



By the Os Gemeos brothers

Click [here](#) to read an interview with the Os Gemeos.



By Shepard Fairey

Click [here](#) to read about Shepard Fairey's work and [empire](#), in particular his [Obama](#) art.

Click [here](#) to read an interview with Fairey.

Click [here](#) to view Fairey's exhibitions.



Blu's tag logo



Art by Blu

Click [here](#) to view more works by Blu.



By Elbowtoe

Click [here](#) to watch Elbowtoe at work.

Click [here](#) to view more art by Elbowtoe.



By Faile

Click [here](#) to watch an interview with Faile.



By Scot Borofsky



By Brian Gormley

Click [here](#) for a video about Gormley's career.



By JR

Click [here](#) for more art by JR.



By Nunca

Click [here](#) for two videos of Nunca.



By Roa

Click [here](#) to view more of Roa's work.

Click [here](#) to see a video of Roa in New York City.



By Sixeart

Click [here](#) to view more of Sixeart's canvases.

You will notice that among the artists listed above, only two of them – Swoon and Judith Supine -- are women. Women have had a difficult time finding their voice in the world of graffiti and street art. The struggle dates back to the origins of contemporary graffiti art, which arose in subcultures, including [hip hop](#), [punk](#), and gang-related enclaves that were not friendly to women. Individual female graffiti artists, such as [Eva 62](#) and [Lady Pink](#) asserted their presence in the 1970s and 1980s, but the phenomenon has yet to catch on. Lady Pink encountered significant sexism in the masculine-identified, male-dominated circles she ran with, including Keith Haring's. She found that there was often "[more interest in her body](#)" than with "[what she could do with a spray can](#)." Even so, she persisted, and eventually "became a [cult figure](#) in both the graffiti movement and the closely-linked hip-hop subculture."



By Lady Pink

Click [here](#) to view more work by Lady Pink.

Art by Judith Supine:





Click [here](#) to view videos showcasing Swoon's work.

Those women have "made it" resent being defined by their gender; they view themselves as artists, not "female taggers." Swoon, who found in the graffiti genre a means to assert her "[independence] from the ideologies of institutional art," chose an alias with "no feminine connotations" precisely for this reason. But with her emerging prominence in the art world, she was recognized as female, and the resulting "attention [...] left her feeling alienated and objectified. [...] I never want to make anything that could be pigeonholed as 'women's work.' I'm way too interested in the human experience," she [explains](#).

Art by Swoon:



[Nicholas Ganz](#), a photographer who has chronicled the world of street art, compiled a book called [Graffiti Women](#). He [contends](#) that the "movement is actually not [as] male dominated as people think." The problem is that women in graffiti aren't garnering the sort of recognition that male graffiti artists have received. It is true: While women street artists such as [Lady Fever](#) (who has fashioned her artistic identity after Lady Pink) and [Girls On Top](#), a female graffiti artist collaborative, have shown their work in multiple exhibitions, they are harder to find. Perhaps the media is just not paying enough attention.

Click [here](#) to see a video of women graffiti artists speaking about their art.

Click [here](#) for more information about and art by Swoon.

Click [here](#) to watch an interview with Swoon.

The most notorious among today's emerging street artist is an anonymous tagger who travels around the world creating images under the secret identity "[Banksy](#)." He is the "man to credit for bringing street art into established gallery spaces," contend Akbar and Valley in [The Independent](#). "A few years ago he was sneaking his work into galleries such as the [Louvre](#) and [Tate Britain](#). Now Tate Modern is selling his book in its gift shop. His works go for hundreds of thousands of pounds and he was recently featured in a retrospective exhibition alongside [Andy Warhol](#). He, more than anyone else, has legitimized the genre and spawned a new generation of young imitators." Banksy has also produced an Oscar-nominated Documentary, "[Exit Through the Gift Shop](#)," and "in 2008, Sotheby's sold a painting by another artist which Banksy has defaced," [reports the Wall Street Journal](#).

Controversial works by Banksy:



Click [here](#) to listen to [National Public Radio's](#) review of Banksy's documentary.

Graffiti Enters Museums and Galleries

The most recent development in street art is its [entry into museums](#). Participation in museum exhibition confers a certain respect and prestige upon works of art that suggest an enhancement of status as recognized, quality work. The appearance of works by little-known as well as already-established artists in exhibitions such as "[Street Art](#)" at the [Tate Modern](#) in London in 2008 and "[Art in the Street](#)" at the [Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles \(MoCA\)](#), which has already drawn thousands of viewers since its opening on June 13, 2011, underscores the rising prominence of graffiti as an accepted form of art.

Even as graffiti art enters the world of museums and galleries, a phenomenon which suggests a growing acceptance of the method as a respectable art form, controversy ensues about whether it is a crime or a work of art. As Akbar and Vallety [reported](#) in *The Independent* in 2008, "a group of London graffiti artists were jailed" while their work was simultaneously being "championed" by a gallery down the street, as well as one in New York City. "Police call it graffiti, the artists call it street art," explained one artist in the article. Another artist observed the "huge irony in the juxtaposition of the two events."

Three years later, the debate continues. The opening of the MoCA exhibition "Art in the Streets," which runs through August 8, has spawned both a flurry of graffiti art in the area and a concomitant crackdown by law enforcement, reports the [Wall Street Journal](#). Retna, an artist whose work is featured in the exhibit and who calls himself a "graffiti writer" and mural artist – specifically *not* a "street artist" – told me in a phone interview on Wednesday, points out that the "negative press" generated by the entry of street and graffiti art into museums and galleries, much of it the result of the reality that the "art" is also a *crime*, suggests that we can't look to this development as undiluted evidence that street art has entered the arena of respectability. True, Retna concedes, he and other graffiti writers have achieved success in establishments within the art market and the art world – he shows in galleries and museums in Hong Kong (<http://vladimirrestoinroiffeld.com/7thman-magazine-must-see-retna-the-hallelujah-world-tour-/>), [Miami](#), [New York City](#), [London](#), and [Los Angeles](#). But "for every ten new supporters, we still gain new people against it. Publicity goes both ways."

Click [here](#) to watch a video review of the Los Angeles MoCA's "Art in the Streets."

Click [here](#) for a tour of works appearing in the MoCA exhibit.

Retna does not appear entirely disposed to resent the negative press, however. After all, he points out, "graffiti art got its start as a form of rebellion, defiance. Maybe in a more beautiful way – we weren't going around breaking windows, and we wanted to beautify the environment – but the performance of it was illegal, and political in that we were going against powerful structures" of society and cultural norms. Even as street art gains credibility in mainstream venues, then, the artists themselves remain steadfast in their assumption of an "outsider," anti-establishment status. Street artist Gastman [corroborates](#) Retna's position on graffiti art and its relationship with crime: "You have to commit vandalism to be a graffiti artist," he tells the *Wall Street Journal*. "You sort of have to put in the work to be regarded."

I very much enjoyed speaking with Retna, and I don't doubt his values. I don't believe that there is an ulterior motive behind his desire to maintain a non-conformist image; I don't believe that it is just another marketing ploy in the vein of [Bourdieu's](#) theory of symbolic capital. After all, Retna does not deny that he and his peers "like acceptance in the elite art world." They like it not only because they have to "survive," he explains, but also because mainstream success "opens up the audience pool" so that the artists can "reach more people." This motivation places Retna firmly in the tradition of Keith Haring, whose Pop Shop and other democratizing efforts exposed a broader cross-section of society to contemporary art.

Examples of Retna's work:





Click [here](#) to view a series of Retna's museum and gallery exhibitions throughout the world.

Click [here](#) for an interview with Retna by [Clear Magazine](#).

Retna [participates](#) in a panel discussion on the power of street art.

Click [here](#) for a Flickr tour of Nunca at the Tate Modern in London.

Click [here](#) for a tour of Judith Supine's exhibition at [Hobbs Gallery](#) in Boston.

Click [here](#) to read about Scot Borofsky at the [Brattleboro Museum](#) in Vermont.

Click [here](#) for a [Wall Street Journal](#) interview with Sixeart on the ramifications for graffiti of its move into the museum world.

Click [here](#) for a BBC tour of a Banksy show at [Bristol Museum](#).

Some commentators criticize the movement of street art into museums, galleries, and other venues of "high culture" as a passing "fad." "Today's absurd prices of *'the people's art'* and *'this breakthrough means of authentic expression'* and *'commentary on popular culture with an investment value'* will all come crashing down" (italics in original), [contends Matt Gleason](#) of [The Daily Beast](#). But these critics overlook the rich history of street art when they dismiss it as little more than a fashion statement. True, it may only recently be achieving international acclaim and market success in elite domains, but street art has proven, despite its own claim to and reverence for its transitory nature, a lasting aesthetic form. Individual works may disappear, but new ones replace them. And the phenomenon does not appear to be going away any time soon.

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