

Kilroy Was Here

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Reviled or celebrated, graffiti is ubiquitous in even the least-urban environments. With roots in the wall-scrawled slogans of ancient Greece, it is a physical yet ephemeral expression of the personality of a neighborhood. It allows us to see a colorful trail of inhabitants' interactions with public spaces. Graffiti (or street art, or urban art) has been displayed in (and arguably corrupted by) art exhibitions, influenced fashion and

pop culture, and generated revenue for municipalities and the paint-removal industry alike. Of course, it's largely illegal. But it's everywhere, and we are grateful. Perhaps we are drawn to the element of danger that feeds street art, and the rebellion implicit in its enjoyment (probably the same reasons we loved the Fonz!).

Even a casual interest leads to a baseline awareness of global

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celebrity street artists: Blek le Rat, Andre, Shepard Fairey, Invader, and Banksy, to name a few. People can quickly begin to identify their work, or (more likely) work inspired by them, almost immediately, almost anywhere. And thus can begin a lifelong addiction to the stuff. For the two of us, it wasn't until we set out to write this piece together that we fully understood how much of a shared interest this was.

For us, an awareness of some of the aforementioned global folks spawned a fascination with the art form first on a local scale. Many neighborhoods spawn their own homegrown urban-art celebrities; we are fortunate that San Francisco's Mission District is a treasure trove. It celebrates graffiti as an essentially indigenous art form. It's a place where individual artists thrive, and groups like Precita Eyes preserve history and commission new murals, championing local culture and driving civic renewal.

We're regularly exposed to their work and follow the shifting patterns in the visual landscape, not to mention the

discussions about public space in our local media. But what happens when we move away from the native context? Our understanding at the local level provides a springboard for comparison and analysis.

We find ourselves considering the street art of one city, or neighborhood, or corner as a whole, compared with what we know from other cities, neighborhoods, and corners. What elements make them visually distinct? What might these observations say about the culture or history of the location? How does one graffito fit into the larger context of surrounding graffiti? We can channel our inner visual anthropologist, uncovering signs not only of the times but also of the place.

Looking closer at the visual inundation, what do we see? Common in the Mission are grandiose public-art-scale stories that make an impact from blocks away, as well as small, intricate, intimate pieces that can be appreciated only from inches away. A peek around a corner near London's Brick Lane reveals framed abstract cartoon figures with cheeky captions,

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and murals evocative of commercial art or advertising. The language is contained and bounded, provocative within surprisingly consistent constraints. In Toronto, Canada, faces are more formalized, compositions sprawling and plane-breaking. Faces are masks; caricatured, portrait-like, sometimes accompanied by loopy text. Overall, graffiti there has more of a gallery feel, employing conventions of the fine arts. These impressions reflect the identities of the cities that wear them.

Sometimes graffiti is not so coy. It can reveal its purpose aggressively. The streets can become a forum for current affairs, grass-roots punditry: ur-propaganda. At its best this provokes investigation, prompts education, possibly even nudges action. In New York City, we see posters calling for Ai Wei Wei to be freed (done); in Florence they cry “Free Assange” (as of this writing, not yet). Palin-as-nun appears throughout San Francisco. In Brooklyn, the face of disgraced local politician Anthony Weiner appears on a large poster with “Where’s my wiener?” scrawled angrily across it. Elsewhere in New

York City, we saw the home of legendary photographer Jay Maisel postered with one of his images bearing the caption “All Art Is Theft.” [see the full story at <http://hyperallergic.com/28169/millionaire-extorts-poor-artist/>].

While neither the visual patterns nor the visual protestations are definitive summaries of anything as complex as a local or national culture, they do raise questions: Why did “Free Assange” hit Florence but not New York? What in their visual expression signals characteristics that distinguish the personalities or passions of Britoners (or Londoners) over the Canadians? We can’t begin to answer those questions, but we can begin to muse about the possibilities—an extremely satisfying stimulation to take away from these observations.

So that’s place. Another key factor, of course, is the passage of time. Artists place their work more or less deliberately, but it is subject to the vagaries of the environment (weather, wear-and-tear, and especially the piling-on of other street artists). Sometimes the effect

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seems random, like a supersized round of Exquisite Corpse, but sometimes there's a discourse, as a core layer is being commented on or defiled. This dynamism and tension and meta-commentary that occurs when street art is "street-arted" upon can be thrilling to decode. We can only marvel at the large and complex Shepard Fairey poster in Brooklyn that humbly sports a tiny sticker reading only "STREET ART." In London in 2007, Steve took a picture of a Kilroy (known locally as Mr. Chad) at the end of Fleur de Lis Street. In 2011, never having seen that picture, Julie returned from a trip to London with a photo of the same intersection. It was a challenge for us to identify these pictures as being of the same piece at the same intersection: In the intervening four years, stickers had almost totally obscured the name of the street (actually, that's a gross assumption on our part; perhaps there had been many cycles of stickers and sticker -removal in those four years). For folks like us, this during-and-after noticing is pure delight. It touches our inner collector selves as we document like-things scattered around a city.

This whole business has altogether changed our experiences as tourists. Street art shifts our outlook, focusing us more on the immediate and the local. This means we sometimes have a very different set of experiences from others, even our companions. We are now tourists with a purpose. This isn't a substitution for the more typical things you might look at—your bridges or cathedrals—it's an enhancement, an additional layer. As teammates and collaborators, we have been slightly bemused and pleased to discover this similar obsession (sharing Florence and London pictures from our separate trips; our strolling New York together after wrapping up an enormous consulting project). The fact is that this stuff feeds us. It's a world hidden in plain sight. But looking closely at the non-obvious is of course what we do in our user research work.

The site-specific nature of graffiti transforms a walk down the street into a stroll through a living collage. The gift of street art (because of its choice of canvases) is that we can engage with it at any

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number of levels. We can guess at motivations or identify cultural threads and patterns or just enjoy the pure aesthetic effect. The Oscar-nominated Exit Through the Gift Shop provoked us to dwell on recursive questions about what is art, and who corrupts who when street meets art, although Steve had already encountered Mr. Brainwash on a wall in Chelsea, advertising (of course) an art sale.

So, with Mr. Brainwash and Exit Through the Gift Shop, at last we come to questions of the blatantly commercial. Can anything about any of this be harnessed for commercial purposes? What is the business opportunity, as we are so well trained to look for one? Outside of brands that truly, authentically live out on the streets (skateboards? custom kicks?), very little indeed. As we've incorporated this everyday art into our own practice of noticing, we see attempts to co-opt these guerrilla forms and they come off as pitifully inauthentic. Even Mr. Brainwash struck Steve as curiously inauthentic when first encountered. It isn't easy to convey the raw expression

while embedding a marketing message or transactional call-to-action. Although these images, or images like them, make their way into advertising and products, something pure is ultimately diluted. On the other hand, it is quite easy for artists to subvert standard marketing tropes to comment on our consumption-focused lifestyle and culture. Take the mock campaign for "Eviar" bottled air seen in Manhattan. It skewers society's need to have water sold to us, as insurance of its potability and non-poisonousness, due to our own sullyng of natural resources. Why not air? Soon enough, the artist suggests. However, when marketers of the latest Rambo movie attempted a "street -art" campaign to contemporize a moribund franchise, it provoked nothing but eye-rolling.

Street art offers urgency, vitality, and humanity. Although it exists as environmental marginalia, it needn't be marginalized. As Shephard Fairey (and Andre the Giant) wisely counsel: OBEY.

About the authors

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a bite-sized firm that helps clients to discover and act on new insights about themselves and their customers. In the past 15 years, Portigal has interviewed hundreds of people, including families eating breakfast, hotel maintenance staff, architects, rock musicians, home-automation enthusiasts, credit-default swap traders, and radiologists. His work has informed the development of mobile devices, medical information systems, music gear, wine packaging, financial services, corporate intranets, videoconferencing systems, and iPod accessories. He writes regularly on topics from interaction design to pop culture for interactions, Core77, Ambidextrous, Johnny Holland and the Portigal Consulting blog, All This ChittahChattah. He is an avid photographer who has a Museum of Foreign Groceries in his home.

Julie Norvaisas is a consultant with Portigal Consulting. Over the past decade Julie has uncovered insights from farmers, Little League players, nurses, pharmacists, and NASCAR fans. Her work has informed the development of hand tools, over-the-counter pharmaceuticals, telecom services, sporting equipment and medical devices. Julie has lectured on the application of qualitative methods to product development and strategic innovation at the University of Wisconsin, Korea University and the Institute of Design. She has a Bachelor's degree in Art History from the University of Wisconsin where her studies focused on shifts between realism and abstraction.

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