London's Urban Landscape
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Published by University College London

Tilley, Christopher.
London's Urban Landscape: Another Way of Telling.
University College London, 2019.

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From pollution to purity: The transformation of graffiti and street art in London (2005–17)

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Author’s field notes, 14 March 2017

I’ve changed, but the city has changed too. This is clear. Indisputable.

I’ve become exhausted of the image. Of its reduction and contamination. I’ve become exhausted of having to explain that this is not that, that not this.

Yet it’s clearly not just me. The city, my home, has transformed too. Of course it always does, it was ever thus etc., etc. And I wouldn’t simply say ‘beyond recognition’, as the fact is that it’s all too recognisable. It’s just shifted in subtle but often deleterious ways. It’s reshaped in an often invisible yet injurious manner. Yet these sometimes indiscernible, sometimes incontrovertible transformations are all too visible, clarified within the images the city churns out, the images it enforces, it affords. They become all too clear in the way the image is treated, in the way it is produced and consumed, circulated and erased.

Walking through parts of the city today, I must admit I get a slightly queasy, uneasy feeling in my stomach. It’s horrid to say that, and I feel somewhat like an old man shouting at the clouds (shouting at the chemtrails), yet it’s impossible to deny. Things just feel… well, surreal, insincere. Of course, it’s hard to escape this in Shoreditch, where I now sit (drinking a flat white of course… if you can’t beat them!), to deny the incredible way that things have changed here over the last 10 (not to say 20 or 30) years. But it’s happening in Camden town too. It’s happening in Brixton. It’s even happening in Croydon!
Here the image becomes part of the requisite backdrop, the mise en scène. Here it becomes complicit. It becomes part of rather than apart; it becomes the disordered order.

‘Yeah it was smoked mutton. It tasted... old.’ (Shoreditch, 2016)

A white Porsche speeds by, revving its engine as it heads up the street. The soft-top is down and some insipid (and thus even more offensive) electronic musak leaks out, dying away as the vehicle takes a corner. I continue walking down the street. Once the petrol fumes dissipate, the aroma of fine coffee beans and even ‘finer perfumery’ comes into play. It fills the air up until I reach a group of rubbish sacks awaiting collection. I dodge them, sliding off the pavement and into the road as a snaking line of tourists filters past. 20? 25 of them, perhaps? All wielding cameras and backpacks, all following a pied piper of a tour guide as he narrates a post-modern story. It’s Jack the Ripper intertwined with Banksy. A grisly combination. I listen for a while, before noting my indifference.

I wander on, past the non-stop corporate chains. J Crew. APC and Nudie. Club Monaco and Versus Versace (I am genuinely stunned). I wander past the Pure Gym and the purebred pooches. Past the pavement cafes with their PR brunches. Past a plethora of eager Ubers and a street-style Sunday magazine fashion advertorial. Past the
hipsters on fixies (stereotype, I know, but true!) and the sneaker boutiques. Past the AstroTurf-ed sun deck (sponsored by broadband provider EE) with large- (in fact, mammoth-) screen TV. Past the sun deck with the deckchairs and the people all sitting facing the screen. Almost comical but... but really not.

The images are everywhere. Huge murals and small tags. Stickers and posters. Wild-style pieces and monochrome stencils. Yet the absolute omnipresence of them is just a bit odd. Not some work, but ALL the work. Not here and there, but everywhere. As if there is an invisible marker, a hidden eruv from where the images begin. On the left prohibited. On the right, expected... Here thou shall paint. There thou shalt not. Its ubiquity points, of course, to its acceptability. Not only in the more legal manifestation of the image, the corporate street art, the neo-muralism, the sanitised, institutionalised mural as trophy art (which features on pretty much every street), but so too in the work that is passively avowed, the graffiti that exists in such a strangely agreeable way. The admissible dissidence. The sanctioned sedition.

The prevalence also seems to allude to their all-too-easy status. A lack of true commitment? A lack of true risk? Artists are thus here, right now, openly painting in the bright light of the day. Painting openly. During lunchtime! Painting what is, what must be actively desired. Bestowing the site with its ‘individuality’ (in contrast to the city’s other shopping districts). Providing it with its ‘raw urban cool’
Fig. 10.3 The images everywhere: tags, stickers, and admissible dissidence. Note the small red sticker placed over the nose of the pasted-up ‘one love’ kid. Kitsch resistance. Source: author
(thanks to Tripadvisor for that). The perfect decorative backdrop. For fashion shoots (‘yes! that’s sexy! hold that’), for the mass of amateur photographers (perhaps I saw 15 or 20 each hour), for the constant walking tours pounding the pavements (and blocking the traffic in amusing ways). The images saturating the area were thus being consumed by a quite distinct group. Of tourists, for the most part. Of shoppers, for the other. And they were being produced, so it seemed, pretty much for that group. Produced to be Instagrammed. Produced for the ‘likes’. Produced with website links so as to ensure the smooth delivery from the physical to the digital. Produced for what seemed like instrumental reasons, reasons other than in and of themselves. As a friend said to me earlier that same day, ‘If you’re working there, you’re just being lazy.’

There are old works mixing with new, little or no sign of erasure. The familiar cycle of production–circulation–destruction replaced with a more static temporality. Even with the apparent griminess, everything thus feels more or less official. Like it was here to stay. Like it was fit for purpose, showing, revealing how the space works. That it was the space marked out for ‘creativity’. That it was the space marked out for painting. That it was the space marked out for rebellion. Of course, there are conversations happening too. There are graffiti artists painting on top of street artists, implicitly and explicitly disagreeing with their vision. The nature of the graffiti artist’s body so discernible in their human-sized pieces (you can see the flow of their arm, the height of their body at full stretch) working over the mechanically assisted street art, the cherry picker, scaffold assisted, three-storey-high murals (those works that cannot exist but for technological/institutional abetment). For the most part though, and on both sides of the aesthetic coin, the work is pretty traditional. The most basic, cut-it-by-numbers of stencils. The most kitschy, trite of imagery. The most radiant, colourful of murals – the pleasant, acquiescent modality of street art. But so too the most conventional of graffiti styles. Those functioning within the framework of that which has always been produced and that which always will be. Within the ‘subway art’ paradigm, wild-style as the utmost edge of the possible (graffiti as utter orthodoxy). The images are thus entirely what are to be expected. And this, it feels, is key. Both the street art and the graffiti visible here are almost quaint in their flawlessness. In their status as perfectly imagined. Graffiti as archetype. Street art as stereotype. Not the plethora of different forms and styles, different approaches and methodologies. But a very restricted palette, an edgy form of Sunday painting.
It feels bad to be so critical. And, I must admit, I am very conscious of that fact. More to the point, could I not have said all this 10 years ago? Was it really all so different then? Is it me or it that has changed? I am very aware of the waves that Shoreditch has gone through. The initial post-industrial ingress in the 80s; the influx of the YBAs in the 90s; the inundation of hipsters in the 2000s; the invasion of property developers of today. Yet my own forays into Shoreditch started over 20 years ago now (it scares me to say that). They started in the mid-90s (1995 to be precise) when I first stepped into Hoxton Square to go to the legendary Blue Note. Entering another universe (spatially and sonically). Entering into what then seemed like a different world, a type of London I had never encountered. I thus saw the developments first hand; I am not and I was not unaware of the changes that were taking place. Yet what seemed, at the time of my research in 2005, as a place that for all its faults still contained some possibility, a place in which things still seemed undefined, today just feels so entirely set. Maybe it’s the high-rises that have made the big difference, the physical, architectural transformation, the knocking down and building up that has begun to occur. The new squares with their twee names. The creative place-making creating the perfect non-places (the same-same unique). The luxury flats and extravagant boutiques. Maybe it’s that everything now seems so thoroughly cleansed of

Fig. 10.4 Graffiti as archetype/street art as stereotype: a street art mural ‘dogged’ by a series of silver and black ‘throw-ups’. Source: author
difference. That it's now purely about profit. Now just about accumulation... Argh, there I go again! As I sit here, I battle with it. Is it me or it that has truly changed! I know things are different, but really?

Yet the way the images work, what they do, how they function, this does not lie. For all my angst, this is the incontrovertible truth. The differing ways they are utilised, allowed. The ways they worked then and the ways they work now. What was once a practice containing an urge towards insurgency now seems today to have settled for the comfort of the consensual. What once seemed to contain an implicit and explicit critique of the city, now seems to merely uphold and sustain it. Of course, I see very clearly that this may simply sound like a classic (and perhaps boring) story of avant-garde to passé, a story of the life and death of every once-radical art practice. And I do not claim that this is for everything, that this is for all aspects of the image. It’s the authorised practice, the desired image. I have always thought that the images a city enables can act as barometers for the changing nature of its landscape, indicators of its possibilities. And the transformations these images have gone through can hence be something of importance not merely for those interested in its status as art, but rather for those interested in the life of the city itself. It’s changing, they’re changing. We change, it changes. But what does this really tell us? What does it reveal?

Fig. 10.5 From avant-garde to passé: street art as the ultimate in kitsch. Source: author
In diametric opposition

In the summer of 2005, as part of my thesis for an MA in Material and Visual Culture at University College London, I conducted a small ethno-graphic project investigating graffiti and street art in the capital. Latterly published as *An Ethnography of Iconoclash* (Schacter 2008), the article explored the production, consumption, circulation and erasure of these illicit artefacts, the cycle of ‘fascination, repulsion, destruction, atonement’ (Latour et al. 2002:15) generated by these highly efficacious, highly problematic images. Working with London-based graffiti artists and graffiti erasers, with pro-graffiti supporters and anti-graffiti authorities, *An Ethnography of Iconoclash* attempted to surpass the traditional focus on subcultures and gangs, on criminality and masculinity that studies of graffiti then (as now) so often elicited, and to focus, instead, on the specific material qualities, the particular performative features that these images incorporated.

As may not be entirely surprising, the research I undertook entirely transformed my understanding of this image world. What had initially appeared to me as a decorative disarray (albeit a strangely alluring one) came to be appreciated as a complex aesthetic language with a very
rational order: the frenzy of the insurgent hieroglyphics came to not only be materially disentangled, but recognised as a practice containing a very clear correspondence to traditional calligraphy (only location and legality, in fact, distinguishing them). What had initially seemed like a deeply anti-social act (even if a strangely seductive one) came to be comprehended as an act of the highest civility: the practice was not only a deeply communitarian one, the direct opposite of the habitual trope of the lone, disaffected, graffiti-spraying vandal, but equally contained an utter fidelity, a total commitment to the city. Yet more than solely transforming my understanding of the image, *An Ethnography of Iconoclash* came also to entirely reconstruct my comprehension of the contemporary city – my comprehension of London, the city of my birth. What had formerly appeared as an environment saturated with restrictions and constraints, came to reveal itself as one in which possibilities were endless – as if through a worm hole (or a looking glass), the space of the city seemed to radically expand, its backstage secrets wrenched open, its hidden depths forcibly revealed. What had previously seemed to be a domain regulated by those with the financial or political capital to dominate it suddenly became one in which ‘their’ space could be hijacked, ‘their’ communicative tools commandeered; it became a site in which one’s inter-subjective reach could be radically expanded, in which restrictive media forms could be re-appropriated, a critical publicity generated through force of will alone.

Yet as can be noted, I hope, from the introductory field-note section to this essay, in the years since I undertook this original research, from then in 2005 to now in 2017, much had changed. In fact, I would argue that in almost every manner, from production to consumption, circulation to destruction, street art and graffiti in London today functions in an entirely divergent manner to the independent public art of just over a decade ago. While in 2005 street art was quite clearly a post-graffiti practice, a form whose practitioners were grounded in the ethical and conceptual prerequisites of graffiti, by a set of procedural and technical qualities that were a clear extension of and yet implicitly emergent from this antecedent form, by 2015 street art had metamorphosed into something radically other, into a clearly capitalised, institutionalised ‘Street Art’, a form set in diametric opposition to its progenitor. As I have explored in depth (in Schacter 2017), the early street artists’ explicit desire for a more open, inclusive visuality, a more integrative aesthetic approach, set alongside their trenchant independence and tactical understanding of urban space, produced a form of art that was contagiously, intentionally accessible (in both visual and physical terms) – a
quite compelling, irresistible visual trap. Yet the perfect mix of seemingly oppositional qualities they created (both innovative and approachable, both loaded and yet legible) not only made street art irresistible to a now huge constituency of potential viewers, but equally so to the (ever-ready) forces of capital. While the mere witnessing of graffiti was a profound hazard and thus something impossible for the market to co-opt or contain, the potent combination of accessibility and subversivity that street art contained sidestepped the feeling of dread that graffiti implied while retaining the innovative thrill it comprised. It felt edgy yet was perfectly safe. It felt rebellious while being entirely secure. Unlike graffiti, then, these images could be securely appropriated (by the advertising industry, the art industry, the media). They could be appropriated in order to entice people to consume almost anything, anything that was (illusorily) related to these symbols of the new. They could be utilised to sell products as diverse as soft drinks and cars. They could be used to sell the notion of a bohemian cool, perfect for the emergent creative enclaves that cities such as London were desperate to develop. Advertising companies would thus not only follow artists (as real-estate agents were previously known to do) – agencies putting up hoardings and adverts in previously utilised graffiti sites, piggy-backing the artists’ site-specific knowledge and eye for space – but they would often directly employ artists to activate their campaigns with street-art-friendly designs. Moreover, the active deployment of street art became a cheap way to give a shop, a restaurant, even an entire district the aroma of cool, the veneer of creativity that the burgeoning Creative City discourse of Richard Florida (2004) proposed. While London had by no means been a key global destination for graffiti then, nor been particularly renowned for innovations within the emerging post-graffiti discourse, it came to play a pivotal role in this transformation, in the movement from the diffuseness of street art to the specificity of its capitalised successor. It had a vast amount of accessible capital as well as an already ingrained status as a global media and advertisement centre. It had the violent brawn of capital and the resourceful, canny brain of the culture industry. It had, it’s hard to ignore, Banksy and the media-savvy stunts that he cleverly deployed. And while Barcelona and Berlin can thus be seen to have provided the space for stylistic and aesthetic innovations, New York providing origins and Paris heritage, by 2008 London had become the new-found commercial hub, the industrial capital of global street art.
Active solicitation and passive affirmation

Coming from the top-down perspective of city authorities, the first clear change we can see today is a quite obvious alteration: an inversion of public policy. What was once absolutely illicit has now become set in a curiously liminal position, a position in which council authorities have become arbiters of taste, in which judicial authorities are now providing aesthetic rather than purely legal judgements. While in 2005 the terminological distinctions between graffiti and street art were thus still somewhat fluid (as can be seen in the interchangeable usages of the term in my original article of 2008), today there is a clearly defined separation. Not only has street art become capitalised and delimited, moving from a term denoting a multitude of techniques to one denoting just a few – that being colourful, often kitschy, stencils and large-scale murals (as I discuss in Schacter 2014a) – but it has equally come to act as a corrective, a solution to the always and already negative status of graffiti. Graffiti will always be a dirty word, ingrained as it is with over 20 years of hegemonic castigation, but ‘street art’ (now officially demarcated and fixed) has now come to act in direct contradistinction to this contaminant; it is the ‘acceptable’, the ‘likeable’, the societally tolerable revolutionary image, the term preventing the cognitive dissonance and ‘logical’ impossibility of ‘good’ graffiti. As such, whereas graffiti is for the most part appreciated purely as dirt, the classic matter out of place that necessitates isolation and removal before contaminating its surroundings (Douglas 1966), street art has become, quite contrarily, a substance set perfectly in its place. Its ability to hold implicit and explicit value (able to be torn off the street and sent directly to auction, able to call forth tourists through the creation of a ‘subcultural cool’), its ability to be contained within the normative frameworks of contemporary art (to be art rather than non-art, to work within the sphere of the market, the sphere of the instrumental), its ability to be contained within the normative frameworks of contemporary city (to be appropriately framed and correctly ordered, to work with and not against), has led to a state in which its apparent subversion is hegemonically avowed and restrained, in which it provides the necessary subversion the city requires, the necessary subversion not only contained but both established and enabled by the power it appears to threaten (Greenblatt 2004[1995]). It has led to a state in which street art functions to provide a service, a benefit to its surroundings, in which it works to establish a distinct order not disorder for the city.

This move from pollution to purity has been enabled through a dual system of acceptance, through what I term active solicitation and
passive affirmation. The former process, active solicitation, functions in a quite straightforward manner. This is street art as a sanctioned form of contemporary ‘urban’ muralism, street art as a licensed public art. This is street art as a practice overtly commissioned and actively engaged by local councils, by arts funding bodies, galleries, private businesses, advertising and design agencies. This is street art as a quick method to an innovative, subversive ‘look’, as a (relatively) cheap form of urban renewal, a ‘creative city’ art. Shoreditch, of course, is full of this actively solicited ‘street art’, this neo-muralism – huge colourful displays on every other street, pointing towards an idea of innovation while being firmly stuck in the plop-art mud. But many other parts of London are becoming more and more suffused with it too. Simply follow the path of ‘regeneration’, to Camden Town and Brixton, to Croydon and Bethnal Green. If you paint it, they will come (or so the creative city mantra goes). Yet the latter process, street art’s passive affirmation, occurs through a more subtle technique, a more understated mode of authorisation. This is acceptance through inaction, endorsement through acquiescence. This is a form of approval that emerges through the suspension of removal, the blurring of legitimation. Whereas all aspects of independent public art were previously ripe for removal, any unsanctioned image disavowed, today street art has become a semi-legal practice (if not completely so). In the London Borough of Hackney, for example, an area which has clearly benefited (in economic terms) from the presence of street art (from the tourism it engenders, the gentrification it enables, the creativity it implies), the local council in fact now explicitly separates its handling of graffiti and street art. As outlined in the recent graffiti policy document (anon 2016), the council ‘recognises’ that:

… some public opinion on what constitutes graffiti has changed and that some ‘Graffiti’ is now considered to be ‘Street art’ and that some members of the community now consider that ‘Street Art’ actually makes a positive contribution to the urban environment. In recognition of this the Council accepts that properly authorised and appropriate street art may be recognised and supported subject to appropriate permissions being sought and granted and subject to that art not being a detriment to local environmental quality [sic].

Wrap your head around that one. If authorised and appropriate, it may be recognised and supported. If positive, it is street art, if detrimental, graffiti. Let’s not even step into the question of what defines propriety, of what a positive contribution truly is. Yet, what’s more, we also learn that
what was previously considered graffiti can transform into street art, if, that is, it is not harmful to ‘environmental quality’, not inimical to the ‘enjoyment of the location by users’ (anon 2016). Not only is the question of which ‘users’ neatly sidestepped (and that’s ignoring the profoundly unsettling use of the term itself: once ‘citizens’, now ‘users’), a privileged ‘community’ implicitly declared, but so too a semantic hierarchy is made crystal clear. Graffiti can never be allowed, it is always a danger. Yet street art contains the ever-present possibility of utility, of value, the ever-present possibility of admission by a community of like-minded citizens. The city thus passively marks out the good from the bad through choosing what not to mark out, choosing what not to remove. It passively separates the functional from the (literally) irredeemable through an archetypal process of bowdlerisation, an excision of what is (at the time) considered the ‘improper’, the ‘offensive’, yet an effacement that serves only to weaken that which remains. The process of erasure that was so intrinsic to street art, so key to its life cycle, thus occurs through a radically different mode of attribution today: street art is saved, graffiti erased. Street art protected, graffiti redacted.

Circulation to stasis

Today, street art images in particular work in a fundamentally different manner to previously adjudged. While they formerly functioned through constant circulation, through a constant cycle of production, consumption and destruction, which led to an ever-increasing cascade of images, today these objects can no longer flow in the same manner. The ‘iconoclash’ they were set within, the con/destructive clash which led to the inevitable creation of ‘new images, fresh icons, rejuvenated mediators’ (Latour et al. 2002:16–17), which inevitably led to the increasing cycle of practice, has today halted, the cycle abated, circulation suspended. The strange hesitation of the iconoclash has been replaced by a bland acceptance, the feeling of uncertainty by certitude: these objects cause no harm (they are legible, legal, suffused with no dirt). They function correctly (to indicate innovation, to indicate ‘cool’). They legitimise the city (the permissive subversion upholding the norm). They are thus reclaimed, or rather reprieved, from the systematic erasure they were previously subject to, given amnesty while graffiti is, for the most part, condemned. The continual escalation of images, the cycle of defacement and refacement so key to the iconoclash, is thus stymied through street art’s adherence to the normative codes of public space. And the concomitant
power that destruction brings, the proliferation it encourages, the ‘gesture of reverence’ that it reveals (Gamboni 2002:88) is impoverished by these images’ ‘success’. Destruction alludes to the power of graffiti, insinuates its efficacy. Destruction enables the production of ever more works, enables the ceaseless cycle of incompleteness to proceed. Acceptance shows that these artefacts create no heat, that they glide all too smoothly. The latent ephemerality of the graffiti and street art image is thus replaced by the new-found monumentality of street art, the monumentality that functions as a ‘representation of an affirmation of the actually existing order of things’, the monumentality that contains no critique but which reinforces the ‘seemingly unchangeable status quo’ (Buchloh 2003:123). The ephemerality that was part of the very process of street art and graffiti, a temporality completely at odds with the practices of the contemporary art world, at odds with its traditions of maintenance and conservation, is thus traded for the brute materialism of the monument, the amnesic oppression of our bronze men on horseback, the static stability of the permanent. The power of the ephemeral to generate disappearance from sight but not from memory (Young 1992) is replaced by the finitude of the living art object, its status as completely effortlessly forgetful. The power of destruction to enable us to in fact remember (Kuchler 2001) is replaced by the digital apprehension of all, by the indifference and neglect that the preservation of the infinite allows. The work of (street) art in the age of technological reproducibility thus creates an enormously extended reach yet a concomitant diminishment of its efficacy.

Yet while this solicitation and affirmation, this stasis and monumentality remain so key for street art, in Shoreditch, as we saw earlier, this reversal of temporality has begun to pervade the graffiti regime as well. Graffiti may not be actively solicited, but it is passively affirmed; it may not be directly co-opted, but it is not removed. It pervades the site; it is, as we have seen, everywhere. This presents us with a conundrum. In particular, as corresponding quite perfectly with the increasing acceptability of street art, we have seen a radical increase in the punishment for graffiti in the UK. In London in particular, artists have continued to receive ever-harsher custodial sentences in an escalating cycle of injudiciousness, a cycle in which the financial implication of damage caused (which has increased over 20-fold since trains have become privatised) has led directly to increasing jail time: two to three years, in category A prisons, for placing pigment on a surface, being today not uncommon. So what is, in fact, actually happening? How can these two realities simultaneously exist? Well, it would seem to me that the only explanation
can be that Shoreditch is not real. Perhaps this sounds ridiculous, but I feel it may actually be true. It is not what it seems, it is not what it portends. It doesn’t do what it says on the tin; it is, it seems, a myth. The only explanation is that Shoreditch is Shoreditch-land, a theme park, a recreational simulacrum, a corporate spectacle. And as we know, down the rabbit hole weird things can happen. Through the looking-glass, even graffiti becomes acceptable, even graffiti, the arch pollutant, can come to be something that an area can actively desire. Here, graffiti bestows an idea of rebelliousness, an idea of urbanity (in both senses) that helps to increase footfall, increase profits. Here it adds to the frisson. Here it adds to the very notion of ‘real’. Yet what it lacks, however, is what is in fact key to the practice of graffiti itself. What it lacks is the heightened performance, the ritual doing of graffiti. It forms an image of graffiti with no sticky residue, an image with no depth.

The movement to art

While the new-found semi-permanence and semi-legality of these images still contains the distributed personhood and agency of their makers (Gell 1998) – albeit one now mixed with other mediators, such as the city council’s removal teams or the works’ commissioning bodies – the performative power they once contained, the visceral, visible remnant of their formation, becomes dulled by their processual ease. The all-too-comfortable exercise of construction generated by the increasing acceptability of street art (and of graffiti in Shoreditch only), the absence of the innate danger and risk so intrinsic to the traditional graffiti and street art image (the fact that dedication is visually revealed through the consistent endangerment of liberty), has turned street art into a purely representative rather than mediatic image. It places total focus on the secondary artefact rather than the primary, the processual performance, on final product over anterior act. The ritual charge of the unsanctioned image, the marked, heightened, framed modality of practice (Bauman 1992), the ritual charge emergent from their status as ‘not just something material but [as] a performance’, as ‘not so much a static object’ but a ‘dynamic set of relations’ (Elsner 2007:43), hence dissipates with its reduction to image alone. Street art becomes purely about beauty, aesthetics, surface. It becomes purely about art historical issues such as ‘style and form’, such as ‘mimesis and aesthetics’, rather than more complex and immersive ‘ritual concerns’ (Elsner 2007:29). The corporeal illicitness so present to graffiti, the works’ ability to visually
transmit the tension and euphoria encountered by the artist to spectators who latterly share this experience, is no longer generated once their performative genesis is entirely equivalent to the safe, stable, sedate nature of studio practice. The radical difference between fine art and graffiti art is hence subdued, the status of graffiti as performance art, as an action, as \textit{happening}, exchanged for its status as image alone. As ‘mediators of activity’ rather than basic vehicles of meaning (Tilley 1999:265), these works simply no longer carry the intensity, the pressure, the fervour, the commitment so crucial to the graffiti and street art; they no longer carry the performative aspect of spectatorship, the interactive process between image and viewer. Street art is now \textit{just} that image on the wall (the heads without the hunting), no longer a residue of a heightened ritual action, no longer containing the aura of its intensely heightened performance. It is a cult object turned into an art object, an ‘instrument of magic’ reduced to a ‘work of art’ (Benjamin and Arendt 1999: 218).

This movement towards art, towards its equally auratic and economic values, towards its modalities of conservation and permanence, also begins to hint towards the larger museological turn that street art has now become set within. It is not simply that these artefacts have come to move from street to museum, however, the fact that street art has become an equally oxymoronic and omnipresent part of the private sphere, but rather that street art has further engendered the transplantation of the museum to the street itself, the modalities of correct practice, the rituals intrinsic to the museum (Duncan 1995), relocated to the exterior realm of the public sphere. Here, the mode of the image’s consumption radically changes. The transformation of street art into art, into pure image, something no longer tactile but instead abstracted, no longer sacred but profane, no longer ephemeral but perpetual, has thus caused the treatment and apprehension of these artefacts to become couched within the formal values of the museological realm, that of connoisseurship and conservation, of validation and theatricality. Official guided tours, for example, are thus today a habitual part of the street art ecology (available throughout London, although centring on Shoreditch), tours that serve to generate a curatorial authority and narrative fixity so coherent with the traditions of the museum yet so at odds to that of graffiti culture. Active restoration and protection is now a common practice (from the famous works of Banksy trapped within plexiglass to the local conservationist collectives such as the UK Reactivation Team actively maintaining and refurbishing street art works), methodologies upholding the conventions of stasis and
preservation so present within the museological tradition and so conflicting with its illicit counterpart. Works are now publicly commissioned and professionally installed (using teams of volunteers and heavy plant equipment), even artificially illuminated in a manner normally only seen within the institutional realm (as can be seen in a recent large-scale mural by the popularly acclaimed artist Stik, again in Shoreditch, lit up each evening by enormous floodlights). The street hence becomes a space of preservation rather than participation, dispassionate contemplation over bodily engagement. It becomes a place of exhibition rather than encounter, of things observed but not felt. As such, and just like the objects incorporated within the classical museum, these artworks lose the unrestrained vivacity they once contained. They are complete (rather than always in the process of completion). They are not liable to the changes and dangers of a life truly lived. These images come to function as ethnographic objects devoid of all their previous cultural implications, detached from their use value, severed from their life worlds. They become only half living (if not dead), abstracted, neutered, tamed.

While the oft-described connection between the museum and mausoleum first made by Adorno (1955) can today be seen to have been somewhat disrupted through the more reflexive status of the contemporary institution – the museum as a space of respite from the mass media, the museum as the site that carries all history within it and thus enables the production of the new (Groys 2010) – the museification of the street remains held within the most traditional, most conservative of Enlightenment-era approaches. This is the museum, in Agamben’s terms (2007), as a space in which ‘what was once – but is no longer – felt as true and decisive has moved’ (Agamben 2007:84), the ‘museum’ as that symptomatic space (any space in fact, including that of an ‘entire city’) that presents the ‘exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing’ (Agamben 2007: 84). The trope of street art enabling the largest museum in the world thus, in fact, becomes a profound danger. The city as museum it creates serves merely to heritagise this space, to cleave it from everyday life. It becomes a site of the tourist gaze not of critical interrogation. It becomes a site of the selfie, the selfie with the requisite edgy urban backdrop. It becomes a site in which street art is specifically produced for this mode of consumption – in which site specificity is abandoned, in which embedding one’s work within the intricacies of space is instead superseded by the desire for virality, by hashtags and likes, by a street art produced explicitly to be circulated on a smartphone. The city, like the museum, is hence turned into a site of visitation rather than habitation, a city to be seen but not touched.
And the increasing heritagisation of street art (Merrill 2015) thus goes hand in hand with the increasing heritagisation of the city, the spectacularisation of street art and the spectacularisation of the metropolis, the aestheticisation of street art and the aestheticisation of the street, working together to unite sites through a modality of display and extravaganza, through a base reduction of space and place. Shoreditch, our offender in chief, thus becomes ever more sanitised and Disneyfied, more real than the original (Baudrillard 1994). It becomes a site ensuring that only ‘safe and selected images will be preserved’, a site ‘based on superficialities’, based on the ‘desire to consume the spectacle’ (Walsh 2002:139). It becomes a site in which street art functions through ‘flooding the senses’, through creating a ‘sensory distraction’, street art as ‘phantasmagoria’ (Buck-Morss 1992:22). And it provides the perfect exemplar of what Cameron and Coafee term gentrification’s third wave (Cameron and Coafee 2005), gentrification not solely as the creation of an artistic milieu for the ‘production of art’ (the ‘first wave’), not solely as the ‘commodification […] of this artistic milieu’ (the ‘second wave’), but rather that of an ‘explicit public-policy engagement’ that focuses on the ‘public consumption of art’ (Cameron and Coafee 2005:46), an explicit public policy of active solicitation and passive acceptance. Street art becomes entirely dependent on the mode of the tourist city and the needs of the creative city, dependent on a cultural policy in which the arts are employed to mainline a notion of authenticity into a site. Street art becomes the affected authenticity, the feigned fantasy that the tourist experience requires. Artificially stimulated to provide the veneer of edginess, the charade of rebellion, the affectation of innovation that the creative and tourist cities so desire, street art creates a sanitised heritage, a literal facade, a distant relative (by marriage) of its graffiti ancestors.

Conclusion

At the start of this paper, I wanted to reflect back on the changes that have occurred within this image world over the last decade, to see what has changed since I wrote An Ethnography of Iconoclash back in 2005. I wanted to see how these objects worked now compared with how they worked then, to see how their mode of production, consumption, circulation and destruction measured up today, to see what, if anything, had shifted. As we can now see, it doesn’t make for pretty reading. Street art’s journey into capitalisation, into today’s authorised, canonised Street Art, has left it in a truly sorry state. What was once still an idealistic,
experimental practice, a practice working very much within the radical purview of graffiti, had by 2015 become fully detached from its forebear. And what emerged was a form that embraced the ‘attractive’ over the interrogative, the superficially beautiful over the difficult yet critical. What had once thus implicitly and explicitly critiqued the commercialisation of the public sphere was now part and parcel of its very commercialisation. Capitalised street art simply failed to integrate within its site (rather coming to either dominate it through the maximalist modality of neo-muralism or to use the city as a medium towards an end of digitisation); capitalised street art failed to follow its non-instrumental urge (rather, acting strategically); capitalised street art failed to contain its independent values (yet problematically acting as if autonomous); capitalised street art failed to act consensually (and rather embraced the mendaciousness of the kitsch or the ‘cool’). The various ways that these images were produced, consumed, circulated and destroyed has, as we have seen, thus radically altered. Much of today’s street art is produced without risk, without commitment, produced so as to be circulated online, not experienced in person. It is consumed within the modality of the tourist city, consumed in the thinnest, most reductive of ways. It is monumentalised, protected. It is on life support rather than being allowed to let nature take its course. What has come to dominate is thus an aesthetic devoid of its prior ethic, an image devoid of its content. Street art imitated post-graffiti while turning it into a purely decorative facade. It was its sanctioned, uncommitted, commercial other.

Graffiti is still present and is still, for the most part, other. It still functions to work against, antagonistically, agonistically. Outside the bubble of Shoreditch it still retains its explosive edge, its urgency. Yet so much of it has now moved even further inward, attempting to evade the surveillance city, attempting to evade the self-surveillance of social media. So much of it has got even more intransigent, the need to produce ever faster, ever harder, increasingly intensified. It always seems, I feel, that a city gets the graffiti it deserves. The city creates its graffiti as much as its graffiti creates it. The explosive colours and extravagance of Barcelona. The death-defying pixação of São Paolo. The vivid muralism of Valparaíso and the hyper-innovation of Paris. The hardcore graffiti and conservative street art of London: its condensed, unsparing, brutal graf (in which it is speed and damage, urgency and insanity that act as formal measurements of distinction), its twee, tacky, tawdry street art (in which success is measured through Instagram likes and social media appearances, commercial licences and gallery purchases). Of course, I recognise it is hyperbolic to define such a black-and-white cleavage.
Still antagonistic: standing out amidst a wealth of other tags, OKER and OFSKE remain proudly antagonistic. OKER’s tag is in the centre of the top doorway. OFSKE’s moves downwards from the middle section. Both appear to have been using the same writing implement (same colour, same width). We can thus surmise they wrote these at the same time. Source: author
Of course there are exceptions. Of course things are more complicated than I suggest. But the feeling that it engenders is just so radically dispiriting. That this is what this most vivacious of practices has become. Stable, fixed, clear. Consensual, safe, profitable. What used to excite me were the constant changes, the looseness and ebullience, the irreducible difference that they displayed. The fact you never knew how long a work would survive, the fact that you knew it had been produced through such a charged event. The fact that it was so outside of what was seen as ‘rational’ – a waste of time, a waste of effort, a waste of paint. The feeling that seized you when seeing some works was just unforgettable. A work by the artist Goldpeg, for example, a work up on the highest part of the highest building in the very centre of London’s King’s Cross. A work that forced you to imagine her crawling up drainpipes, clambering over ledges. A work that forced you to imagine her standing there in absolute plain sight (!), reaching up to her maximum extent, stretching out to her maximum reach while she painted her iconic design. How did she get there? How did she do it? How did she achieve such magic? Perhaps she had waited a few seconds when finished, admiring the view from the most perfect of crow’s nests, from the most privileged of views... or perhaps she left without even looking back. It’s the performance, stupid! Seeing that piece was so much more than witnessing an image. It was witnessing an entire complex of actions, a whole lifetime of thoughts. It was witnessing a practice outside the norms of the city, outside the

Fig. 10.8  Still other: again, OKER and OFSKE make their presence felt. OKER is here written as OK (with a face depicted in the O). OFSKE is written as OE (also with a smiley face in the O). Source: author
norms of art. It was witnessing an image that would shine and disappear, resonating long after it had vanished from sight. And the monumental and domineering murals that stand in their place? These are static images, only skin deep. These are adverts not actions. They are just art. The merest of mere ornament.

This is depressing, I know, I'm sorry. But much of the street art in London today is just another failed public art (in terms of an art for the public good). It is plop art for the noughties, site-specific art that is entirely un-site-specific. And where does this take us? A good question. As publicly owned private spaces (POPS) come to multiply in London, as they so perniciously present us with these false commons, many of the images in question let them glide past to easily. They don't critique them, but allow them. And they must in themselves be questioned and critiqued. This too is happening of course, there are other voices, there are other strategies. I have presented a very worst-case scenario, a very negative tale. But if Shoreditch can tell us anything, it can provide a warning for the future. All of London will end up like this if we sit back and let it. It will become an island of Disneyland within an ocean of exploitation. It will become a city as fantasy, a city without public, a city without commons.

**Methodological note**

This chapter is based on information garnered from approximately 15 years of research within the field of independent public art, data emerging from my work in scholarly, curatorial and professional capacities. This has included over 22 months of multi-sited field work with a group of street and graffiti artists as part of my doctoral studies (and a continuing partnership with the numerous collaborators that emerged out of this engagement), the authorship of several articles, essays and books on different aspects of this aesthetic field (see Schacter 2013 and 2014b, among others) as well as the curation of a number of international exhibitions exploring both the conceptual ideas and creative evolutions that unfold from these equally material and cultural practices. Having spent the last 15 years deeply immersed within the territory of this aesthetic arena then, acting as both witness to and often unwitting participant in the huge developments and transformations this field has undergone, I take a wide view in this chapter in order to explore how the theories proposed in my first research project from 2005, published as *An Ethnography of Iconoclash* in 2008, stand today. The chapter is thus based on hundreds if not thousands of conversations
over the last 10 years with individuals from all possible sectors of this art milieu – from artists and activists to gallerists and dealers, from council authorities to anti-graffiti vigilantes, from supporters to erasers of these potent material forms.

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