



Disobey the Giant

The post-graffiti art movement

Art that can't be bought or sold—created with passion and commitment only to be destroyed—covers the cities of the world. It's called post-graffiti, urban art or street art, but no matter what it's named, this form of creative (anonymous, illegal) expression is a labor of love for artists—and professional graphic designers.

During the May 1968 Paris uprising, students penned a slogan: *Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible!* Refusing to accept marginalization by the de Gaulle administration, students scrawled this graffiti defiantly across the walls of the city, bringing the government to a virtual standstill. In solidarity, renowned painter Joan Miró, living under the thumb of fascism, joined in creating the graffiti-like painting *May 1968* in his studio, in his beloved Spain where one could be executed just for speaking the wrong language. *Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible!*: Challenge the status quo.

Post-graffiti is ultimately a declaration of self-determination, and each expression is, in itself, a manifesto: *Deal with me. I am here!* To make this statement real, artists create spontaneously, under the cloak of night, on desolate streets in decaying parts of town, ears poised for the sound of sirens.

Whenever I travel to a new city, graffiti is my magnet: Drawn to a painting on a wall or a stencil on a lamp post, I connect with each image, often finding this human expression more lyrical than the predictable landscape. *Deal with me. I am here!* For me, a city without a healthy offering of street art lacks something. Jake Dobkin, street art maven and force behind streetsy.com says, "There's something very hopeful about street

art. It manifests the life of the city. It can be wiped away, but it always comes back. A lot of street artists are political; they don't like Bush or the war. They are responding to the world. Interestingly, societies that are very high on the authoritarian

index see more graffiti than societies in the middle.

Iran, for instance, is said to have some graffiti, as well as Baghdad. When you really clamp down on freedom of expression, that energy has to pop out somewhere."

New York has long been a mecca for urban artists, who gravitate to the underdeveloped parts of town notably the East Village and Chinatown in Manhattan, Williamsburg in Brooklyn. They wheat paste or stencil or paint their art on an empty wall or next to (but not over) other artists' work.



11 Spring: The exterior wall contains the work of several artists including Jace (middle) and Faile (top). The group of three figures on the left are Matt Siren and Phallic Mammary, Bast posters and an SEMZ tag are in the lower right.

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In the late 1970s, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring emerged as street artists in New York City. Basquiat was a high-school dropout and Haring attended the School of Visual Arts, but was expelled for using the interior of an SVA building as a canvas for graffiti in a project with Basquiat. Their work stood out amidst the raw graffiti that was, in those days, like wallpaper in the subways, on bombed out buildings and racketball courts. Graffiti became a symbol of a downtrodden, bankrupt New York. Both Basquiat and Haring soared past anonymity to international celebrity—into the top galleries and museums—only to crash and burn. Basquiat died of a heroin overdose at 28, Haring of AIDS at 32. Considering their short lives, their legacies are huge, particularly for street art and for reinvigorating the perennial query: What is art?

design issues

Museums and galleries worldwide are filled with rarefied works we acclaim or disdain, created by very polished talent. We call that art. Yet, in the early 1900s, Jean Dubuffet discovered the unsophisticated, unselfconscious art of the institutionally insane. He named it *art brute* (or raw art), a term that was later broadened to “self-taught,” and now is commonly called “outsider art.” And Miró called graffiti “art with a capital A,” because it was free and anonymous.

After a recent trip to Barcelona, where a friend and I wandered the narrow cobblestone alleys in search of brilliantly colored street art, I arrived back in New York just in time to hear that a seven-story building called 11 Spring had been reclaimed by international street artists and transformed into a fantasyland. Jet-lagged but jazzed I rushed over to Spring and Bowery. As I tried to enter, I was blocked by a very weary Wooster Collective representative who showed me the now five-and-a-half-hours-long line that stretched for two blocks—unprecedented for an art show of any kind. This was the last day of the two-day show. I realized, quite painfully, that I, along with thousands of others, was missing out on one of the most unique art experiences of the decade. Peering through the building’s open doors, I saw the work of Judith Supine, D*Face, Momo, Swoon, Faille, JR and Shepard Fairey being viewed to sounds, emanating from boom boxes brought by spectators and tuned to a special frequency, of a DJ piping music into this gutted wonderland.

A few weeks later, Sara and Marc Schiller, their Weimaraner, Hudson, and I sat in the Schiller’s toney East Village co-op. They told me excitedly how they came to discover and fall in love with street art. Clearly of one mind on the subject, they finished each other’s sentences.

Both had been interested in the arts in general, folk art and blues in specific. They saw the powerful connections these art forms made for people. Street art was exploding around the city and they photographed each expression as they roamed their lower East Side neighborhood. In 2001, their computer was crashing from the thousands of images they’d collected so they uploaded them onto the Internet. When they saw them as a group, they realized their power. They e-mailed friends, many of whom were creative directors, and ultimately drew tens of thousands of people to their new site. This was the beginning of the Wooster Collective.

The Schillers started a dialogue about street art on woostercollective.com, drawing to the site many of the artists whom they now realized were the most committed. While Sara and



All these artists work in paper. Left: Judith Supine (11 Spring, interior); Middle: Momo and Zosen (on a wall in Soho), who painted over ads on this wall in the wee hours; as they put up their work, up rolls the poster mafia wondering where their posters went. This installation stayed up for five days (four more than they had hoped for). Right: Gorilla (11 Spring, interior).

Marc are not artists—they have corporate jobs—they were in a good position to help the movement gain a voice. So they created a salon in their loft and helped connect many of the artists.

Sara and Marc’s love is infectious: They touched hands as they talked gleefully about putting together the exhibit at 11 Spring and about the fabled history of the building. A man named John Simpson had lived in the building for twenty years. No one ever saw him. Maybe he was an inventor, maybe a set designer. He must have lived in raw space, maybe with just a sink and a hot plate. No one seems to know for sure. Adding to the mystique, he would light candles in each of the building’s many windows each night. “One day, legend has it, he walked down the street with a cart and a check for four million dollars and moved to Paris,” Marc says. He had sold the building.

The otherwise dreary building came to life as street artists started to cover it with wheat pasted images, paint and photographs. The more the Schillers wrote about the building, the more artists came to 11 Spring. Then it sold again, soon to become luxury co-ops.

Caroline Cummings, one of the new owners, with a PhD in art, realized that this collage of street art should not go unheralded. The Schillers convinced her to let the artists do their thing, before the renovation began. They had seven weeks. To consummate the transformation of 11 Spring, artists arrived from all over the world (some sponsored by Cummings), brush and wheat paste in hand, including graphic designer and illustrator Shepard Fairey, who runs Studio Number One in Los Angeles.

“Shepard’s the Godfather of the movement,” Marc says. “‘Obey Giant’ is all over the world.” Unlike most street artists, Fairey, 36, uses his real name. He’s been arrested thirteen times in seventeen years. Caught in the act. But, he adds, “When you’re having fun, you’re not paralyzed.” Fairey recalls his art student days at Rhode Island School of Design when he’d pin his work up on the wall to be critiqued. “People in the art world can be brutal. You develop a thick skin. Street art’s anonymous



Left: Almost all of Shepard Fairey's posters in New York City have been splashed including his cop poster 'I'm Gonna Kick Your Ass' shown here with the Splasher's convoluted manifesto pasted over it. Right: Banksy's wheat pasted *Trompe l'oeil* anti-graffiti removal parody.

anyhow. I don't sign it. And I don't care if anyone hates it." He adds, "You don't need resources to create street art. You just do it. That's empowering."

But Fairey and others have become targets, especially in New York where the Serial Splasher and the Premature Ejaculator roam the city with buckets of paint obliterating ("splashing") artists' works. During the writing of this article, the Splasher has destroyed four more iconic Fairey works in New York City. Why? Seemingly oblivious to the notion that he himself is creating art, the Splasher has adopted an inscrutable Nietzschean manifesto: "Art: the Excrement of Action...The passion for design is a creative passion. We are all capable of manifesting our desires directly. Free of representation and commodification. We will continue manifesting ours by euthanizing your bourgeois fad." The manifesto is a typed and pasted (with glass flakes to foil those tempted to correct the violation) next to the work that has just been mutilated. It's unclear if the Serial Splasher has ever been arrested.

Just last week I flew into JFK and saw a tiny Obey Giant sticker on a garbage can in the terminal, looked like it had been there for years; Vintage Shepard Fairey I thought as I smiled to myself. JFK is one place the Serial Splasher will never hit.

Work by the brilliant British artist Banksy was splashed recently in Williamsburg, much to the dismay of the large street art community. The splashing was quickly covered with art, which was again splashed and again re-covered. And so it goes. Splashing is not the only action taken against street artists, many of whom have Web sites and receive hate mail. Banksy, perhaps the most secretive of all the street artists (he would not be interviewed for this article), posts the hate mail he receives on his Web site, without comment at the recommendation of his solicitor. (Knowing Banksy's snappy dark humor, he could have written them himself.)

To: banksy@banksy.co.uk
Subject: *Your work*

You are a sick man. In fact, you [sic] not a 'man' at all. Not even half a man. While most of your artisan peers are at the forefront of advancing civilization and saving it from suffering, you represent those who would not only hold back civilization but evolution of our species too. If I believed in a God I would pray to him tonight for you [sic] and your family's destruction.

On his site, Banksy tells all visitors exactly how he makes his brand of street art and provides many of his images as free downloads. He can well afford to give it all away: Brad Pitt recently bought half a million dollars worth of Banksy's art. Banksy certainly keeps his solicitor busy!

The more committed street artists (who, by the way, seem to be mostly white, 30-something, middle-class men) want to make their art their lives. Some succeed more than others in giving up their day jobs. Banksy and Fairey have clearly made it. The British artist D*Face, who is a graphic designer, illustrator and jack-of-all-trades, is eking out a comfortable living as well. When asked his real name, he assures me, "I'm D*Face. My dad's Dad*Face. My wife's C*Face." When asked his age he's cagey, "I'm somewhere between 20 and 40."

D*Face arrived at 11 Spring to add his art to the exhibit fresh from sculpting an English gentleman's drawing room out of ice in the Ice Hotel in the Arctic Circle. When he reflects on how far he's come he adds, "The only one stopping you is you." But D*Face knows that police can stop you too. "In London there are cameras everywhere. If you're caught, the police caution you to stop. They don't arrest you unless you persist. Manhattan is very risky. You can get beaten up. Brooklyn is slightly more relaxed, you might get a little pushed around, but you'll get busted, no doubt."

Fairey says, "[Mayor] Guiliani pushed to get graffiti removed, but street art doesn't look like hoodlum art." Graffiti is often tagging and can be a way of marking a gang's territory, whereas street art, while often provocative, is neither hostile nor threatening. Nonetheless, there is an unfortunate blending of the two in the minds of the police.

But you can outsmart the authorities. Momo spelled his name across the width of Manhattan, up and down blocks across the East Village in one long dribble of pink paint, ending up in the East River. Totally legal. He commemorated the act in a video. He makes collages out of cut colored paper that he wheat pastes illegally, and also on construction fences (temporary surfaces are more acceptable to the law) safely nestled alongside commercial ads usually posted in multiples. He adds, ironically, that, "Doing something commercial is more acceptable than art. The cops don't know the difference between your work and the iPod ads anyway." And there's a good reason: Designers are influenced by street art, especially when they're trying to appeal to an audience that's young and hip.

Blocks away from 11 Spring is the site of the annual Outsider Art Fair, an event that validates the commodification of raw art. A simple lead pencil drawing on newsprint created by a now deceased outsider artist from the backwoods of Alabama may fetch \$20,000. What will happen to street art? Will the best



11 Spring (interior): The face of Andre the Giant is Shepard Fairey's iconic image for Obey Giant and is throughout Fairey's mural above.

of the artists leave the streets behind? As New York City (not to mention Barcelona, Shanghai and Amsterdam) becomes a place where wheat paste and paint cannot exist, will there be room for street art? D*Face says, "It's more about thinking than about the street. The work on the street is about questioning what we are being force-fed. Think about what you are in relation to society. It has a confrontational quality." Sara Schiller says, "By using LEDs, lasers, impermanent materials, artists will find a way."

Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible! Freedom. CA

- Banksy** www.banksy.co.uk/shop
- D*Face** www.dface.co.uk
- Jake Dobkin** www.streetsy.com
- Momo** www.momoshowpalace.com
- Faile** www.faile.net
- Shepard Fairey** www.obeygiant.com
- Wooster Collective** www.woostercollective.com



11 Spring (interior): D*face's grinning guerilla skeleton. 11 Spring (exterior): French photographer JR's photos are of young migrant males from the suburban Muslim ghetto where rioters protested the French government in 2005. Around JR's images is the work of Faile, a collective in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.



Banksy's wheat pasted *Trompe l'oeil* scene of a boy about to fry a girl jumping rope was obliterated by the Splasher (Williamsburg, Brooklyn).

