

Beauty on the Walls
Graffiti and Street Art as a Social Movement

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Abstract

This thesis is an observation of contemporary graffiti and street art and how they unfold as a social movement in Dublin. It discusses Marxist theories of aesthetics and popular culture. It uses interviews with graffiti and street artists, activists, writers and teachers along with visual materials and a number of case studies to identify the internal tensions, the drive for doing the work and the meaning it holds for those involved in the movement. I have identified tensions between ideas around beauty and aesthetics, commercial forms of art and I have highlighted the movement as an attempt at direct action and a social platform for communication and self expression at grassroots level.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Human Creativity

My interest in people, their eccentricities and unique characteristics is what inspired this research. The marks made by graffiti and street artists symbolise a human drive to engage with space, it is a movement of its own. These marks are useful tactics and tools, especially for those of us engaged in or working in social movements. The world can be a hopeless place and people struggle along treacherous paths in order to make sense of their surroundings. This is about hope for those who otherwise feel lost. It is a means to rediscover paths that can nurture our creative human capacity and to explore how we interact and shape our own tools for communication.

For this M.A thesis, I have explored the dynamics of street art and graffiti and its radical origins which evolve to the point where it becomes commercialised. I have listened to and observed the thought processes of artists, graffiti writers and activists who all think and work in very specific ways in order to make a mark, to challenge or to leave something behind. This process has come about through a wish to explore how people can teach one another something, through their desire to find their own voices.

‘The graffiti represents part of a twilight zone of communications an outlet for often deeply felt but rarely articulated sentiments and attitudes’ (Ley & Cybriwsky, p492, 1974).

The origins of 20th century graffiti emerged as an undercurrent of society and became a cultural phenomenon amongst underprivileged, frustrated gangs of young people in New York and Philadelphia in the 1970s. These outspoken social actors vandalised trains and subway stations ‘the meeting point of the cultural worlds’ (Ley & Cybriwsky, p492, 1974). These marks did not go unnoticed. The signs were made to be read and interpreted in specific ways. Today, graffiti and street art as a popular movement floods the walls of cities and towns around the world as a variety of conflicting social signals and opinions, these signals are a way to share stories.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of graffiti and street art and to credit both as human expression and direct action. I highlight the differences between street art and graffiti but also acknowledge their equal significance as part of the movement. I explore cultural theories of the 20th century and aim to bring these reflections to my observations of graffiti and street art in grassroots action and as part of mainstream commercialisation and I also show the formalisation of street art and graffiti and conflicting definitions of beauty through the opinions of street artists and graffiti writers and their motivations for doing their work.

These aims highlight the various forms of graffiti and street art and how they have evolved. I see street art and graffiti as true social platforms but highlight my concern over the threat of art and other forms of direct action and expression being co-opted. I aim to inspire ideas for how we work in political and social movements in Ireland.

The objective here is to represent an aspect of society that goes unnoticed. Looking at and learning about street art and graffiti as a movement is a great opportunity for us as individuals and collectives to learn, so that we can fully grasp the possibility for alternative means of communication and defiance.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

Chapter Two of this research is an analysis of art and culture; as resistance, as commercial products and as formally created artworks. I discuss literature by Marxist theorists, the radical thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Herbert Marcuse along with ideas from British cultural studies theorists Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. I have chosen Hall and Williams for their contributions to radical cultural ideas in 1960s and 70s during a rising period of fascism when there was an emergence of radical resistance. I discuss literature by contemporary critical theorists Sharon Zukin and Mike Featherstone in order to explore how art and creative expressions unfold in the city and how these processes evolve into the gentrification of the city. Mike Featherstone challenges consumerism and looks at how advertising has established ideas about specific forms of beauty, and constructs a social desire

for perfection which he refers to as the ‘aesthetisation of life’. I explore the concept of everyday lived experience representing who we are and how we live. I have framed this against theories about beauty and aesthetics from art critics such as Jeannette Winterson and Edmund Burke Feldman, to highlight how vast and conflicting ideas about art and culture can be. I discuss how art creates an alternative means of renewal, a way to reflect the world and a way display signs and symbols for that allow socially engaged people to reclaim their voice.

Chapter Three of this research gives insight into the research process. It details how I conducted my research and how I gathered my data. I also speak about the blog I set up this year to host my findings and to make the research more accessible. I will use the blog as a space to continue writing in order to widen the scope of my ideas. I discuss the reasons why I began this research, my ontological stance and I contextualise my ideas by discussing my own values which will give the reader an understanding of the work involved and my own learning journey.

Chapters Four and Five share a number of images and the voices and stories of graffiti and street artists, teachers, writers and activists. Chapter Four explores the conflicting voices within the movement. Chapter Four discusses motivations, drive and agency from street artists based in Dublin. I discuss conflicting and values amongst the variety of voices. Chapter Five highlights perceptions and the boxes created by the gallery or by property owners and the ways of contesting space and reclaiming the streets through subversive territorial marks. I highlight this through a case study which further develops the analysis from Chapter Four and discusses the attempt at gentrification in Dublin City. The chapters highlight conflicting ideas around what is seen to be beautiful. These conversations reveal a common compulsion in people to create, to map out messages and signs for others to interpret.

1.4 Limitations of the research

Graffiti and street art are relatively new to Dublin. We are hastening along after movements that occurred as spontaneous reactions to political and social turmoil. Although Street art and graffiti here does comment on society, we have not experienced the movement to the same extent as other cities and there are potential differences arising from the art here compared to the art that has been part of the urban landscape in bigger cities. A lot of the street art that has come here is nothing new. It has used a template from other social and political struggles. There is nothing wrong with this, but when it comes to talking about street art and graffiti in Dublin the messages can appear as glossier versions of the street art in other countries and struggle to communicate the same agency. This research epitomises my concerns about the commodification of culture and art and how vulnerable the movement is to moving into co-opted territory. The voices that I have framed in the research highlight explore ideas about art and society. Despite this, I attempt to highlight a sense of hope and creativity that I believe is integral to how we should be working in social movements in Ireland. I have explored human nature and asked important questions about society and where we are now in relation to how we use art and media. I have looked at art from a writers' perspective and observed street art and graffiti and its potential as a strong, subversive form of media, this is where I feel there is potential for learning about our own capacity as social commentators.

Chapter 2: Theory

2.1 Introduction

The following chapter is an observation of cultural theories of the 20th century and an observation of art and culture as a tool for inspiring contemplated action as well as how it develops as an elitist phenomenon. I begin by looking at the formalisation of street art and graffiti, the concept of ‘artistic graffiti’ then looking at popular culture and art and the process of gentrification¹. I then critique how advertising strategies have attempted to gentrify parts of Dublin and used writer Sharon Zukin’s concepts from the 1980s to show how cities become gentrified. I have used her investigations along with British Sociologist Mike Featherstone’s ideas about mass culture to set the scene for a discussion about art and popular culture. This phenomenon has been analysed in depth by Sharon Zukin who paints the scene of gentrification. From here I discuss ideas about popular culture by Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse to highlight the concept of popular culture for its transformative qualities and theories by writers such as Stuart Hall, Paul Willis and Raymond Williams, theorists of the 1970s onwards, who allow us to consider the potential for change and the transformative nature of art and people.

Throughout the research I wish for the reader to be mindful of the differences between street art and graffiti. Street art is based on imagery and is quite often the appearance of what is traditionally formed in the gallery, taking shape outside. Graffiti is based in grassroots action, emerging from lower classes and their drive for expression for meaning and connections. These differences are important but also it is important to remember how in their truest form, they are both about connections between people. They symbolise creative action.

2.2 Origins and modern day graffiti

‘For as long as people have been able to write they have been writing on walls’ (Anon, 1995).
‘The word graffiti derives from the Greek *‘graphein’* or *‘to write’*. Graffiti was the term used

¹ The process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents. Retrieved at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentrification>

to describe wall inscriptions ‘figure drawings found on the walls of ancient sepulchers or ruins, such as the Roman catacombs and ancient cities, such as Pompeii... provide examples of everyday Latin, insults, magic and love declarations’ (Whitehead, 2004, p26). These declarations are not so different from the human expressions that are written on the walls in society today.

‘Today, there are quite a few different classifications that separate graffiti. There is the gang graffiti that street gangs use to mark their turf, graffiti that people write to express political views, and a new form of graffiti that has just emerged in the past twenty-five years. This new form is artistic graffiti. Artistic graffiti is a modern day offspring of traditional graffiti that has elevated itself from just scrawling words or phrases on a wall, to a complex artistic form of personal expression’ (Anon, 1995).

2.3 Graffiti as art

The concept of artistic graffiti leads me to a discussion about formal art and culture. In its evolution from etchings on a wall, there have been attempts to formalise the movement ‘The body of world graffiti up to 1970 displayed no stylistic evolution, nor did it have aesthetic intentions in general’ (Jacobson, 2001). Now we see how graffiti has evolved and is judged for its aesthetic appearance, considered for its style and form. A blog post from 2006 on thinkpictures.ie by Jeremiah McNichols who does graffiti himself, makes the argument that ‘true’ graffiti is graffiti that is reckless and illegal, while graffiti styles and techniques may be exportable to the gallery, the civic mural, and even the artist’s canvas, many writers would agree with my belief that true graffiti is illegal by definition’ (McNichols, 2006).

The fact that is illegal is what makes graffiti ‘art’ for radical actors who take part in the movement. But some believe that graffiti is artistic action because of the skill required to do it and how it is judged. This shows that street art and graffiti has developed aesthetic requirements just like any other art form. George C. Stowers, a student observing graffiti as an art form emphasises graffiti’s artistic merits. ‘Graffiti can also be analysed according to the elements of lines, color, and structures that are present in the work in order to produce a narrative about it. Another significant reason why graffiti art can be viewed as art is by

considering the producer's intention. Graffiti artists intend their work to be apprehended as art that can communicate feelings and ideas to the audience' (Stowers, 1997).

Contemporary cultural theorists John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas write about 'New aestheticism', which they believe has the potential to open up new ways of thinking about identity 'Aesthetic order gives us pleasure, mainly through the gratifying arrangement of shapes, colours and textures... it appeals to a sense of goodness or rightness within us' (Joughin, Malpas, 2003, p93).

A problem with aesthetic order and artistic graffiti is that it can separate the audience from the artist. American Professor and art critic Edmund Burke Feldman contests the concept of aesthetic requirements as becoming a parody of itself, he says 'The caricature of the aesthete, his standards is so high, that he doesn't like anything' (Burke Feldman, 2002, p470) Leon Trotsky echoes this sentiment when he says in his essay Class and Art 'The artists lived and still live in a bourgeois milieu' (Solomon, p195, 1979). Therefore, the construct of beauty favours the '*aesthete*' and creates a distance between art and those who aren't part of this '*bourgeois milieu*'.

In his article 'Past visions, future dreams', Mike Marqusee discusses the prehistoric paintings of the Cuevas de Covalanas in the Cantabrian region of Northern Spain. Despite being 20,000 years old, he speaks of how they contest the binary categories set out by art history and defy the establishment of aesthetic order 'There are works of greater complexity than the cave paintings, but they are not more beautiful; they are not 'better'... above all they confirm there is no progress in art'. He says he is wary of any definition of 'aesthetic' defining art as it narrows its potential to appeal to inspire ideas (Marqusee, 2014). Aesthetic order assigns a value to graffiti where it should be judged for its appearance only. Instead of using the streets as a way to appeal to aesthetic pleasures, those who do street art and graffiti still work with the intent and human drive reflective of graffiti's ancient origins.

Radical street art and graffiti capture a particular time and place and display how people wish to express themselves and tell stories about their lives. This displays a beauty in how people wish to give value to deeply felt emotions. Art will be always made in radical ways and in order to defy convention because humans will always display an urge to express themselves. Marqusee says 'there is something in art of any value that resists that status, breaks out of that

dimension... each work of art has a claim of its own that cannot be measured in terms of another and thus cannot be reduced to exchange value'. For Marqusee, art reveals an insight into how we live. Art critic Jeannette Winterson believes the formal features of art do not reflect the ordinary everyday features of life. 'Timeless, transcendent art is mystifying unless its transcendent qualities imbue the lives of people' (Winterson, 2002). Marqusee's cave drawings are timeless because they existed before the establishment of aesthetics and the formalisation of art, they reveal human lives.

Theodor Adorno emphasises timeless, transcendent work but reflective of Winterson's comments, this is only as long as the timelessness of the work is about people. Witkin says 'It was not skill or talent that mattered to him, but the interests it served and the uses to which it was put' (Witkin, p2, 2003) 'The spirit of those who create it, the intent, the creative energy rather than thinking about how it will be aesthetically perceived' (Hardy, 2006, p93). He sees the autonomous potential of art, as we have with radical graffiti, where small creative networks of people can establish their own autonomy within the exploitation of a cultural world. Similar to Adorno, Walter Benjamin, says authentic work is one that takes place for the people 'A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people' (Solomon, 1979, p547). 'Art reminds us of the possibilities we are persuaded to forget' (Winterson, 2002). Formal art creates aesthetic requirements and 'authentic' experiences. Virginia Woolf refers to aesthetics as a construct by western elitism (Woolf, 1890, p17) 'Art as aesthetic quality is that which has been so labelled by western cultural and class elites'. To see art as a 'uniquely different kind of work, with a unique, indeed transcendent product is a mistaken notion'. In his book *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse says that art without a degree of praxis (theory and action) is 'elitist and decadent' (Marcuse, 1978, p12). The arts institution sees art as having criteria to fill but art can only be '*authentic*' in the true sense, namely graffiti art, when it comes directly from people, these values are what gives the process such beauty.

2.4 Art and Popular Culture

The formalisation of art tends to reflect a 'high' element of society. It reflects preservation, rather than commercialisation. With graffiti and street art moving into the 1970s and 80s where it began to be judged for its aesthetic qualities, advertising companies seized their opportunity to use graffiti and street art and its popularity as a means to gentrify parts of the

city. Sharon Zukin quotes David Harvey when he says ‘The relation between culture and economy, between art and capital, has always been problematic’ (Zukin, 2010, p10). When there is an overlap between art and capital, there is the development of art functioning only for monetary gain and hence the development of ‘popular culture’. Stuart Hall has great problems with the term ‘popular culture’ he says. I have almost as many problems with ‘popular’ as I have with ‘culture’. When you put the two terms together the difficulties can be pretty horrendous’ (Storey, 1994, p455). Adorno judges the phenomenon of popular culture and its capacity for being reproduced for consumer culture with disdain. Adorno believed the rising bourgeoisie developed culture ‘the lower classes were denied the leisure necessary to develop culture, and that the higher social classes retained a monopoly over culture’.

Although Adorno paints a rather pessimistic picture, Robert Witkin who writes about Adorno says his criticisms of ‘*popular culture*’ were not because he was incapable of appreciating anything ‘*popular*’, it was more that he preferred the terms ‘*the culture industry*’ or ‘*mass culture*’ rather than ‘*popular*’, as ‘The latter terms carried a connotation of ‘*coming from the people*’ (Witkin, 2003, p2). Similarly, Hall was objecting to the term rather than popular culture itself. But Mike Featherstone says that theorists of the Frankfurt School tend to have high opinions about culture. He says ‘The theories of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and other critical theorists are no longer accorded great significance; their approach is often presented as an elitist critique of mass culture. They are generally regarded as looking down on the debased mass culture, having little sympathy for the integrity of the popular classes’ pleasures’. (Featherstone, 2007, Preface)

2.5 Authentic Experiences

Adorno refers to ‘Authentic’ art as coming directly from people and I wish to look at this idea in a contemporary context. The art academy establishes ‘good’ or ‘authentic’ art as having certain beautiful assets or qualities. Adorno says ‘Authentic artworks silently hail natural beauty’ (Leppert, 2002, p31) he refers to ‘*popular culture*’ as inauthentic ‘Culture is held to be a production of capitalist corporations’ and it is ‘*inauthentic*’ because its products have not been created by ‘*the people*’ their primary purpose is to be purchased, they require little work to consume and so they fail to enrich’ (Barker, 2008, p49). Authentic work is

established as something requiring beauty. Stuart Hall says, the question should not be about the ‘authenticity’ of the work as cultural forms have many unstable elements ‘nor is it in a position fixed once and forever’ (Storey, 1994, p462).

Sharon Zukin speaks about ‘authenticity’ coming directly from everyday, unaestheticised life and how capitalist structures exploit creative human intent, distorting authentic actions. The capitalist construct for ‘authenticity’ or ‘commercialised authenticity’ imbues value and quality, by streamlining ‘authenticity’ and establishing it as desirable it ‘becomes a tool of power’ (Zukin, 2010, p3) she refers to how ‘commercialised authenticity’ has taken on a different meaning that has little to do with origins and a lot to do with style’ (Zukin, 2010, p3). The origins of graffiti take place amongst ordinary, everyday people are taken and transformed by those with power to create this commercialised ‘*authentic experience*’ and established as a product and something to be consumed.

Graffiti and street art emerging as a popular form of resistance by graffiti and street artists is what makes the work authentic and beautiful. The crucial thing to remember in all of this is how the art is used, who is it for and what purposes it serves? This establishes the differences between genuine ‘authenticity’ of a work and ‘commercialised authenticity’

Zukin speaks of gentrified areas in New York, by commercial entities. Zukin says ‘I [too] have been dismayed by the way the city has morphed from a lumbering modern giant to a smooth sleek replica of its formal self... I don’t call my dismay nostalgia. I don’t miss the street crime of heroin trade or graffiti covered subway carts. I do miss the look and feel of neighbourhoods whose diversity was tangible’. (Zukin, 2010, x)

‘The tensions between origins and new beginnings produce the desire to preserve the ‘authentic city’ (Zukin, 2010, xi). This is part of the popular experience created by advertising strategies where ‘*nouveau grit*’ is created as a part of the city which alternative people are drawn to as an attempt to have ‘*real*’ experiences. ‘Today, the use of the word ‘gritty’ by the advertising and the media paints a connection between underground cultures, the culture and the creative energy... as a driver of the city’s growth’ (Zukin, 2010, xi).

She refers to Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard who say that through technology, imitation of novelty and the normal hype of consumer culture. 'Experience is increasingly seduced by appearances' (Zukin, p3 2010) A city is authentic if it can create the experience of origins and therefore 'Whether it is real or not, authenticity has incredible power'.

'In the area where hipsters and gentrifiers live there's a new cosmopolitan air, tolerant, hip, casual' (Zukin, 2010, p5). She notes this isn't necessarily a bad thing but it does serve as a gloss for what is really going on in society. Baudrillard says 'Aesthetic fascinations are everywhere, so a kind of unintentional parody hangs over everything' A gritty experience as a desired aesthetic for an area is a result of these advertising or gentrification tactics (Featherstone, 2007, p95). Advertising tactics convince us that these faux authentic experiences are desirable. Dublin has experienced a watered down version of this process of homogenisation and gentrification of the city, but nonetheless we see this idea being channelled where advertising tactics promote 'authenticity' as desired. Zukin says 'in modern times it may not be necessary for a group to be authentic; it may be enough to claim to see authenticity... it can be deliberately made up of bits and pieces of cultural references, artfully painted graffiti on a shop window, sawdust on the floor of a music bar, an address in a gritty but not too thoroughly crime-ridden part of town. These fictional qualities of authenticity are not 'real' but they have a real effect on our imagination of the city' (Zukin, 2010, p3).

To be seen to be authentic is something that happens in Dublin now. But the graffiti that unfolds in these truly '*gritty*' are the marks of frustration with society and represent true authentic oppression or struggle. The meaning behind these marks by graffiti is subverted and mass produced by advertisers and property developers. Zukin believes that advertising tactics create 'authentic experiences' that apply value or worthiness. As the meaning of the word 'authentic' is exploited, so are our perceptions about graffiti and this brings me to a discussion about how art becomes a product and what happens to graffiti and street art when exploited by commercialisation.

2.6 Commercialisation and advertising tactics in Dublin

When graffiti becomes part of the gentrification of the city, it is assigned the features of a commodity. It works within the criteria of having an exchange value and it is separated from

Amongst these creative expressions is a story about money and business. It reflects the gentrification of other western cities. There are a number of walls in Dublin where you will see this particular style of graffiti. Its appearance changes every couple of months, as new businesses buy the space on which to advertise, like a billboard. This graffiti is not vandalism, where writing has been scrawled on a shop front or on the side of a bus. The graffiti here is of a specific type, it is graffiti with monetary value and it has taken time and a number of discussions amongst business people, resulting in its appearance in this specific part of town, a strategic plan. These businesses are more than likely unconcerned with the people who live there, or the social problems of these areas. They care about making money. Rabbit Hole Productions [RHP] is one of the most established advertising companies in Dublin, it refers to its work as ‘Guerilla Advertising’ they refer to themselves as ‘blending the artistic with commercial’. RHP works with landlords and property owners, renting out spaces for advertising, subverting the traditional ‘billboard’ advertisement in order to appeal to popular, consumer culture. It has subverted the radical appearance of street art in the city in order to make money. One of the tabs on the company’s website brings you to the ‘Free Money’ section where it says ‘Make Money, get Rich’ and in a subheading ‘That’s a RHP promise’ a quote from a local business says:

‘RHP has transformed the once dreary façade of my property to a vibrant, charismatic and aesthetically pleasing canvas for exceptional artwork. Not only has this rejuvenated the building and its surrounding area it has also caused a decrease in loitering, littering, dumping and break-ins. We strongly recommend working with them’¹

–Vernon Steel, Dublin 2

‘We utilise vacant and unused space in order to optimise its promotional benefit to our clients. We transform the space from an area that wouldn’t be given a second thought... we will be more than happy to supply it and then take your money.’² –

Rabbit Hole Productions

Rabbit Hole Productions are culturally clued in advertising company. It prides itself on the ‘rejuvenation’ of areas around Dublin city. It claims to create aesthetically pleasing experiences. But this rejuvenation doesn’t actually serve the needs of the community. This

process of *'cleaning up an area'* subverts the radical elements of graffiti and street art and creates a stark contrast between *'visually pleasing experiences'* and the more pressing social problems of these areas. Sharon Zukin speaks about the process of gentrification in her book *'Loft Living'* these concepts are situated in New York at a time when the graffiti movement was gaining huge momentum, she says:

'Gentrification typically occurs when a higher class of people moves into a neighbourhood, make improvements to property that causes market prices to rise and so drives out the previous, lower class residents' (Zukin, 1989, p5).



Fig 2.2 'Maser' Street artist, decorating the windows of Brown Thomas, 2014

This is a similar line of thinking in theories by Mike Featherstone when he discusses the aesthetisation of life, where we see consumer products such as art, flooding the urban environment so the boundary between life and art becomes blurred.

'A life of aesthetic consumption and the need to form life into an aesthetically pleasing whole... central to consumer culture, life as art, a constant stream of endlessly pleasing encounters and experiences' and the assumption that 'Art can be anywhere and everything'.

No society has ever been saturated with signs and images like this one, where advertising is used and where it 'sets depthless blueprints for people to reproduce for monetary gain' (Featherstone, 2007, p112). While graffiti and street art emerges as an expression of human creativity, it is important to discuss how it takes shape as an attempt to gentrify parts of the City. This takes place on a small scale in Dublin where we see graffiti and street art commercially produced and reproduced for the gallery and in shop windows where it has been shrunk, reshaped and made into a pleasurable experience for those who wish to give it monetary value. Another example of this commodification is Fig 2.2 (Above left) is a shop

window in Brown Thomas Department store, the most expensive department store in Dublin. The appearance does not speak to any particular street art or graffiti style- rather it appears as a large, colourful installation even though this art has been done by a graffiti artist. This installation reflects the way art is subverted by advertising and commercial entities in order to appeal to the consumer and in order sell a concept. Here we see an example of how the highest elements of commercial life have very tactically taken what is popularly created [graffiti] and used it for commercial gain.

2.7 People and Transformations

Studies of cultural theory examine the exploitation of the lower classes by the bourgeoisie in order to reap the benefits of constructed forms of art and culture. A writer must create a space amongst the people' (Hall, 1997, p34). With other cultural theorists there is the idea that the lower classes in constant battle with this concept of 'containment' and that through this there is resistance. 'The bourgeoisie always shut out proletarian literature and art, however great their artistic merit' (Solomon, 1979, p252).

Sociologist, Sherri Cavan says 'In the rhetoric of the ruling class, graffiti symbolizes anarchy, its very presence an unquestioned threat to social order. Graffiti destroys the beauty of the environment and challenges the resolve of the authorities to maintain their aesthetic vision of what public space should look like'³

Stuart Hall too has a problem with culture and how it can be claimed by the 'rising bourgeoisie' but despite Hall's problems with the word 'popular' he also acknowledges that focusing only on 'containment' and 'resistance' we ignore the potential for 'reform' or 'transformations' (Storey, 1994, p455) He says 'Popular culture... is the ground on which the transformations are worked.' Cultural Theorist, Paul Willis also sees possibilities for an alternative to how art is judged, having developed the term '*grounded aesthetics*' 'produce an edge of meaning which not only reflects or repeats what exists, but transforms what exists' (Willis, 1990, p23) he refers to the process of meanings attributed to symbols and practices. He is unconcerned with principles of beauty, rather he sees '*grounded aesthetics*' as a

³ <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/greatgraffitiwars.html>

valuable concept and says 'to know the cultural world, our relationship to it and ultimately, to know ourselves' (Willis, 1990, p22).

Marxist Theorist Leon Trotsky says 'Art is created on the basis of a continual every day cultural inter relationship between a class and its artists' (Solomon, 1979, p195) instead of thinking of the artist as an individual with special skills or certain privilege, we see art making as something that happens in unextraordinary ways from day to day as a way for us to make sense of the world. John J Joughin says 'Art, whether it is classified as high, or popular, activates the sense that difference is, art is what touches upon the differences between us, that form the basis of community' (Joughin & Malpas, 2003, p93).

Despite the creative expressions made by the lower classes, Marxist Art Theorist Max Raphael argues against the potential for art to transform, he says 'If the artist, by his creative effort, rises above his time, he will nevertheless remain the social slave of the compulsions of his time, of the ideas of its ruling class' (Solomon, 1979, p224). Marcuse says 'art itself is transformed as part of the superstructure' but also how 'the writer has an obligation to articulate and express the interests and needs of the ascending class' 'only true progressive art is the art of the ascending class' (Marcuse, 1978, p14).

Benjamin mirrors Marcuse's ideas that art can transform, 'We must create great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts and thereby affecting invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in the very notion of art' (Solomon, 1979, p550).

When street art and graffiti remain subversive they unfold amongst people, Chris Barker says 'Art is one of the many ways in which people explore and think about the world outside... discover their own growing qualities and potentialities as human beings.' (Barker, 2008, p277) 'The strong imagination creates the event, the spirited occasion in which it becomes possible to inhabit a potentiality' (Joughin & Malpas, 2003, p30). Putting aside appearances and perception and instead thinking in terms of graffiti as a 'visual shout'. Street art and graffiti are part of transformative processes in society; they take place as a movement where it is accessible and free. It need not be preserved or privileged, it represents coming together in order to transform, to create sparks of change through ordinary experiences.

2.8 Symbolic Creativity

Paul Willis refers to the symbolic creativity of youth culture and sees the potential for working within the frame of popular culture as a form of resistance which serves a greater purpose than form or shape. The fact that art appears outside at all challenges us, when we see art outside instead of in the confines of the gallery, it immediately makes us ask questions. Raymond Williams says 'The signal of an art gallery is an especially obvious case. It is a place specialised and designated for looking at painting or drawing or sculpture as art. The signal is so established and conventional that it hardly has to be noticed. Indeed the gallery can be seen as if it were only a mere technical device for the objects to be displayed. Yet consider the difference when we see a drawing or a painting on an ordinary street or house wall. There is an immediate question as to why it is there' (Williams, 1981, p131).

These unexpected signals, in perfectly ordinary, everyday interactions with the city, are enough to set us asking questions. The origins of graffiti and street art provide a channel of uncensored communication, it unfolds quickly and freely, it provokes, it destroys; its qualities convey a sea change in how we think about our own creative potential. Paul Willis encourages writing away from an 'arts perspective' and also for that matter to write with an outlook that is 'anti-art or philistine'.

'To try to understand the dynamic precarious, virtual uses of symbols in common culture, not understanding the everyday through popular representation but understanding popular representation through and in the everyday.. To present and understand the creative and symbolic elements of everyday life' (Willis, 1990, p10). Similar to Willis, this research is not an observation of how art takes shape aesthetically or for its good or bad qualities, but for the way it takes shape in ordinary ways. Adorno is concerned with how popular culture manipulates, but Paul Willis says that by cultural analysis looking only at exploitation ignores the living qualities of everyday lived culture (Barker, 2008, p431). Consumers are not as passive as cultural theorists such as Adorno suggests. Willis says 'Audiences are not thought to be cultural dopes' (Barker, 2008, p430) they are active producers of meaning from within their own cultural contexts. Raymond Williams says that through this ordinary work, people can defy the culture of commodity and this tends to be ignored even when an 'extraordinary development and transformation are in progress'.

Just as multinationals and capitalist organisations have established a consumer culture, graffiti and street art can work within this commodified structure and against it. Willis says 'Imagination is not extra to daily life, something to be supplied from disembodied 'art' it is part of the necessariness of everyday symbolic and communicative work' (Willis, 1990, p10) Consumerism can be an active, not passive process.

Featherstone says 'Not all consumption needs to involve the consumption of material goods and not all fascination with new sensations and invention needs to be fed through the commodity market process' (Featherstone, 2009, p24). We can consume graffiti and street art and see them in their energies towards resistance. The arts institution insinuates that the taste for art is learned, and the formal features of this art result in the complete separation of it from real life 'Expressions and artifacts become inert things' (Storey, 1994, p524). Street art and graffiti is a facet of this symbolic creativity where artists work within their ordinary, lived experience and culture in order to do extraordinary things. It changes from inert to real life processes, real lived experiences and depictions of the human actions and interactions with their own environment. Raymond Williams said that culture is ordinary; it is the extraordinary in the ordinary which makes into culture a 'common culture'. (Willis, 1990, p2) Graffiti and street art brings life movement into spaces. It humanises the city and carves out new spaces to provoke reaction in others. 'The real survival of any art form is being pulled into everyday forms of informal symbolic work and meaning, as these forms reach out from their own vitality, from their own internal life, for relevant and usable symbolic material' (Willis, 1990, 149). 'Certain kinds of symbolic creativity in the expressive and communicative activity of disadvantaged groups exercise their uses and economies in precisely eluding and evading formal recognition' (Storey, 1994, p525) Street art and graffiti is spontaneous collective energy, throwing out crumbs of information and messages. 'Those who wish to find some meaning in their own lived experience, across a series of cultural contexts... actively produce sense, contemporary culture is not meaningless... the active creation of meaning by all people as cultural producers, having learned how to play with and interpret meaning' (Barker, 2008, p344). This symbolic work, is about understanding how we want to represent the world and understanding our own humanity 'Being human, means to be creative in the sense of remaking the world for ourselves as we make and find our own place and identity' (Willis, 1991, p11).

2.9 Representing the world on the walls

Stuart Hall talks about the signs and symbols that can represent our world and people, the walls are a great example of how people defy boundaries and use ordinary means of expression. Graffiti and street artists use the walls in order to create signs as playful tools to represent their ideas about life. ‘Taken from common language which enable us to translate our thoughts’ (Hall, 1997, p18) the marks of street art and graffiti represent how city dwellers reflect their thoughts and how they transform social norms and opinions. Through working within the frame of ordinary culture, graffiti and street art represent ‘conceptual maps and shared meanings’ (Hall, 1997, p18). These signs and representations reflect and depict many things, frustration, anger, creativity, a desire for change. These reflections are levers in which to propel our real actions. Street art and graffiti work within an already constructed world, a world with the rules and constraints of the arts academy; and it distorts these rules. Those who do graffiti or street art are not thinking about what is authentic, or valued, but what is pertinent, as a response to our own culture. Raymond Williams says ‘art is the development of social signals’ (Williams, 1981, p130).

Graffiti artists tend to think about art as a way to express the ‘ordinariness’ of our culture. Marxist Art Theorist Davyelor says ‘A work of art should be completely and directly accessible to all men without exception’ (Solomon, 1979, p246). The creation of symbolic maps and gestures on the walls is the establishment of their ideas. These maps are unfinished sketches, a process, and a continued means of defiance. ‘A system of ideas which is merely sketched in broad outline proves to be far more stimulating than a finished and symmetrical structure which leaves nothing to be added and offers no scope for the independent efforts of an active mind’ (Solomon, 1979, p154).

The movement is a process of representing the everyday, on the walls, it will happen wherever there are people, as they carve out a representation of how we live and how we can communicate. These small changes are constantly sketched out and unfinished. It can become vulnerable to being shaped as part of elitist discourses of ‘the other’ or even ‘the better’ and it can become mystified and separated from people, but subversive tactics rise alongside this commodification when it takes shape as a spontaneous action or a felt need to create. The person who does it constructs a social knowledge it shows us how people move and take

action. Marcuse says: 'Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.' (Marcuse, 1978, p32) 'Art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience' and can be revolutionary by breaking through the mystified social reality and opening the horizon of change.' (Marcuse, 1978, p9) Graffiti and street art act as signals that allow us to think about possibilities for change. It makes a mark that we can see and read as the potential to reclaim the streets.

Chapter 3

3.1 Introduction

My research revolves around graffiti and street art in Dublin because it is where I have spent the majority of my time while completing the study and it meant I could observe the art as it changed and was renewed. The point about graffiti is that it is ongoing. The case studies I have used from Dublin demonstrate that street art and graffiti are relatively new platforms for the city and this research makes sense of what the movement means for non commercial graffiti and street art producers. The research is an attempt to understand graffiti and street art on the ground as it grows in Dublin. The drive for this study is a desire to observe human creativity and to observe the motivations for creating art or subverting space as a way to challenge conformity and to provoke a response from others.

3.2 The Process of analysis: Making sense of qualitative data

Collecting my data through qualitative research meant being conscious of the criticisms of it. I don't wish to assert it as the best and only way to do research, but to highlight its usefulness for my research. Despite the perceived notion that qualitative data is 'done in a spirit of careless rapture, with no principled or disciplined thought whatsoever' (O'Leary, 2009, p10) I believe it to have benefitted my research hugely, but it was only beneficial by my being intuitive and understanding that structure must be there and to be mindful that too free a use of a qualitative approach will be reflected in the data. Coming to a point where I had collected the data and had to sit down with it and pick it apart was quite daunting. It is difficult to be in the middle of a process and to see how it will come together in one neat and compact shape, perfectly formed. In 'Making sense of Qualitative Data', Coffey and Atkinson say that we always begin by thinking 'I've collected all this data, now what should I do, others start from an equally problematic position of. I've collected all my data now, I'm going to analyse it and write it up.' But they say that both positions are problematic as you need to understand what is meant by analysis. For me sitting with my data and reading through it was at first very intimidating. Sitting down with the words and delving into how people shape their ideas or think them out was a difficult thing to do, yet a vital part of the process. A very interesting observation I made while collecting my data was that many of the interviewees had never spoken about why they were doing what they were doing, it was an eye opening experience

for them also. I enjoyed listening back over each interview and hearing words and sentences take shape and admiring how insightful these people are. It was a very humbling experience.

The information was very important to me and I found each conversation very enriching so I transcribed each interview over a period of about a month. Each interview was between twenty minutes and one hour and so it was quite a painstaking process, but it was worth it in order to get a flow of conversation that I could then pick apart at a later stage.

I initially printed off each conversation and read over each one highlighting interesting points and jotting down little notes in the side bar. Then reading over it the second time I started to note recurring themes or parts where people had a conflict of ideas. I drew out predominant themes such as motivations, mark making, beauty, the gallery and they evolved into smaller sub headings. These all started to come out of the text in chunks and I physically cut them out and stuck them together in order to shape colourful maps that I could read back over and think about and see how they would fit into the research.

I treated the data like little packets of information, stories that when strewn together became a larger one about humans, agency and creative action ‘Thinking about stories in our data can enable us to think creatively about the sorts of data we collect and how we interpret them’ (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p55). The best way for me to approach the research was to avoid sitting outside of the data looking in. It was important to dig out and interpret it fully in order to really understand its shape, to gain an understanding of why it is so useful and integral to my research. I didn’t want to just cut out information and stick it in various relevant places so that it made sense. I thought of the data as the core of my research, the colour that brought the research to life. ‘Coding are organising principles that are not set in stone-they are our own creations’ (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p32)

3.3 Methods: The interview process

In total fifteen people participated in the interview process. For my first interview, I used Skype to speak with a Melbourne based Art Teacher who documents street art and graffiti in Melbourne and around the world. She has also published a number of books on street art and graffiti. I treated this as a test interview as I was only formulating my ideas and I still didn't know what I wanted to learn. Although my questions were quite broad, there was a lot of focus on education. I tried to lead the conversation too much and focused too much on the questions instead of letting the participant speak more freely about her interests. At the same time it was a very insightful interview and prepared me for what to do in subsequent interviews and it led me to ideas about art, value and aesthetics which are now one of the main elements of this study.

Following my initial interview I spoke to a young female artist and activist based in Dublin. I then spoke to a group of historians and writers, one of whom is an activist and a tagger. Group interviews were very insightful as the interviewees were amongst friends and colleagues so they spoke naturally and more freely about their work. This was also the case when I interviewed four male members of a graffiti writing crew; all interviewees were Irish and their ages varied from 20-40. I spoke to three members of an international all female street art collective, between the ages of 25-35; most of the women from this collective are based in Dublin. I spoke to a male street artist based in Lurgan, near Belfast and to another younger female teacher based in Dublin, with a degree in Fine Art. I also used Skype a second time in order to speak to an Egyptian art academic who has documented the street art and graffiti of the Egyptian revolution. I had read about her work online and contacted her via twitter. She was very obliging in getting back to me and having Skype at our disposal, was incredibly useful, as it was when I spoke to the art teacher based in Melbourne. Despite this, I do think Skype is more limiting than a face to face conversation but it did broaden the scope in terms of the variety of voices which to my mind, made the research stronger and more worthy. I allowed the participants to lead the conversation and, to my mind this made for a very enriching conversation as the structure of the interview was more flexible.

My questions changed depending on the interviewee, some examples of the questions are as follows:

- Why do you do street art/like street art/record street art
- Do you think anyone can be an artist?
- Do you think there is beauty in all art?
- Do you think all graffiti or street art should have a social or political message
- What art do you give most value to?
- What do you think of commodified street art or graffiti

Each interview began with me asking about motivations for doing the work they do and questioning their ideas or feelings about street art and graffiti. I also asked them about art and beauty and what their interpretation of beauty was. I asked them if they saw street art or graffiti as being worthy or useful. Because the interviewees were coming from a range of backgrounds, some with direct experience of doing street art and graffiti and others without. My questions shifted depending on the person. I also allowed participants to lead the conversation. By just listening to them I believe this made them feel comfortable and speak honestly about their interactions and interpretations of street art and graffiti. Everybody was very open, no one was wary or distrustful. I have left out the identity of most of the graffiti writers apart from 'Rask' and some of the female street artists who were happy for me to use their tag name, as most of the work they do is semi-legal [public art initiatives or commissioned street art projects]. I found the process of searching out people to speak to really fulfilling, particularly because I was obligated to source the voices out of the mainstream gaze. It was a challenge but when I managed to get in touch with these people and develop a level of trust and with them I felt I had engaged with an important and fascinating element of society and a very open and diverse network of people. I felt they trusted in my ideas and where I was coming from and this made them more open and generous with their ideas and sharing their stories. Part of the research process has been to constantly assess where my ideas have come from and why and to highlight its relevance in order for it to unfold and take further shape after the thesis has been completed. Observing the radical and creative capacity of people has provoked a desire in me to continue the process of investigation and to look further into human agency, media and communications. O'Leary says 'If you don't know where you want to go you simply can't determine a path for getting there' (2009, p90).

3.4 Reflexive thinking

I do not wish for this research to provide answers and solutions, but more, to ask questions and to be the catalyst for further ideas and thoughts. I chose people purposefully, because I knew they would say something interesting or insightful that would add colour and life to the research. However, it was important to know that not everything would fit together nicely and that people were coming from different places and had conflicting ideas and opinions. These opinions were sometimes surprising and changed the direction of the research but I had to let that happen naturally and not force anything into a box. In Reflexive Methodology, Alvesson and Skoldberg say ‘serious attention is paid to the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements woven together in the process of knowledge development’ (2000, p5). I am constantly thinking about the research both consciously and subconsciously and for it to be really reflexive I have attempted to apply everyday experiences to the research. ‘Good research should be seen as a thinking person’s game. ‘It is a creative and strategic process that involved constantly assessing, reassessing and making decisions’ (2000, p5).

Engaging in the research and building a methodology will legitimate my insights around the world of art and activism. O’Leary says in her book ‘The Essential Guide to Doing your Research Project’ that methodologies ‘provide us, as researchers with legitimization for knowledge production’ (2009, p89). The methodology will validate my own work and allow me to come to terms with the reasoning behind my topic of study and to solidify my thought processes and how I see the world ‘To know who you are, you need to know who you are not’ (Featherstone, 2007, p95).

Given that it is such a visual process, I pushed myself to think creatively about how to represent my work. I have recorded a number of images throughout the research process in order to develop thinking around its purpose or its intent and will continue to do so. I find myself taking in every mark, scratch or tag on a wall and thinking about the story that might go behind each one and how to bring it into my work in some way.

3.5 Blog

In order to host these images I have created a blog on wordpress.com this blog also serves as a means to support and develop my ideas: niamhmongey.wordpress.com. It is a way to think aloud and a space to map out my thoughts and observations with a view to broadening my ideas. Setting up the blog is a path to think about the process outside of CEESA. The blog has been useful in order for me to think about this as a continued interrogation of new and radical media. It has provided me with a means of exploring the movement and to display it in a visual way. Over time it will develop into a space that I use in order to write and share other ideas about art, social movements and culture. I think it also makes the thesis more accessible and tangible, instead of being an academic document. This is important for me given that street art and graffiti is such an accessible medium. I was interested in creating a more accessible space for people to engage with my ideas, as the graffiti and street artists have done. I began working on the blog in April, therefore it is a relatively new project that I hope will develop and in time it will be a space to record new media and culture in general as an attempt at citizen journalism. I hope it will allow the thesis to move and to become more than just a body of knowledge.

3.6 Paradigms: Feminist and postmodern perspectives

Feminist writer, Ann Oakley says ‘Paradigms are sets of standards to which practitioners can always refer, habits, puzzle solving devices and ways of seeing. Paradigms bind people together in a shared commitment to their discipline... tell them what is important, legitimate and reasonable’ (Oakley, 2000, p24).

In order to produce valid knowledge that is well considered and balanced, the research has been stretched in conflicting and varied directions. I understand there to be a certain level of instability in meaning and in how we produce knowledge. ‘Words may carry many meanings, including the echoes and traces of other meanings, from other related worlds in other contexts’ (Barker, 2008, p18). The unfixed and transient shape of things and the nature of humans and their capacity to evoke change and to challenge and generate new thoughts and ideas, at the same time I think this ephemeral approach to research can stray from an observation of reality and can place the researcher in so unstable a territory as to weaken the research. To view the world as a process where people create change learned from others, works best in producing valid knowledge. To see the world as a place of certain structures

that can be challenged and where people draw out new discourses based on useful knowledge and materials that are already there for them. (Barker, 2008, p18) With this in mind and as I began reading I found I drifted quite naturally into thinking about the research through a post modern perspective but I was conscious of maintaining focus and not getting too deep into the intangible, unfixed quality that postmodern knowledge can be guilty of.

In *From here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism*, Barbara Creed refers to Owens who says it is a 'treacherous course between the two' (Storey, 1994, p369) but she argues that 'there is common ground shared by feminism and postmodernism'. Knowledge is sought for its own sake on the assumption that every small contribution will eventually lead to an advancement in the totality of knowledge' 'Feminism and postmodernism share common ground, both present a critique of forms of narrative and representation which place man as subject' (Storey, 1994, p370).

'Feminist researchers use just about any and all of the methods, in this concrete sense of the term that traditional, andocentric [dominated by male interests] researchers have used'. The difference for feminist researchers is to 'listen carefully' 'Only partial and distorted understandings of ourselves and the world around us can be produced in a culture which systematically silences and devalues the voices of women' (Harding, p2, 1987). Listening and looking carefully was one of my main objectives when conducting this research, without doing this I would not have felt it to be valid, this is why a feminist approach to my research was vital. Feminist and post modern approaches have much crossover which is why it was natural to apply the two to my way of thinking Ann B Ryan says 'Feminist post structuralism is not a unified, closed body of thought, nor does it claim to have all the answers' (Ryan, p31, 2001). I believe in the spirit of creativity in creating something new, by drawing from the past. Ann B Ryan refers to Holloway and how the individual and the social are different things 'On the one hand the individual enters freely into relations with the social world, and can just as easily change these relations, through individual agency. On the other hand in the structuralist way of seeing things the individual is determined by social forces, which must change before individual change is possible' (Ryan, p24, 2001).

‘Ideas come from our experience of our lives, from the past wisdom of others and from the movement for change. (Robowtham, p55, 2013) Creativity involves transformation by going beyond you. It is nurtured by the collective experience and knowledge of people now and in the past (Robowtham, p57, 2013).

3.7 Ideas about culture

I could not have written this thesis without critiquing theories about culture. I have read widely in order to establish how it relates to my research. What I have understood is the fluidity of culture. Just like postmodernism, it is subject to harsh critique. It is hard to give meaning to the word and to define with absolute precision. Paul Willis says ‘Culture is a strange capricious category. So many things are contained in the word’ (Barker, 2008, p21). No one can define it exactly or say what it really means. I have been conscious throughout this research of the privilege that comes with exploring the role of culture and I have been conscious of class and how my privilege as a researcher allows me to explore these ideas. In ‘Creativity and Class’ Trotsky says ‘The political struggle of a class hastens ahead on stilts while its artistic creativity hobbles along on crutches’ (Solomon, 1979, p194). For this reason I have also explored Marxist perspectives on art and culture in order to balance the research and to justify my aims. Adorno says ‘Every theory of art must be a critique of art, even radical art is a lie, Artworks draw credit from a praxis [theory and action] that has yet to begin’ (Jarvis, 2013, p116). With this critique in mind, I believe it is important for the research to be an active, thoughtful process and more than just theorising, which can be a weakness of postmodern perspectives. Mike Featherstone says ‘This is not to assume that postmodernism is merely a deliberate ‘artificial’ construct of disaffected intellectuals out to increase their own power potential, rather it is to raise questions about the production, transmission and dissemination of knowledge and culture’ (Featherstone, 2007, p2). This thesis has aimed to ask questions about the movement in order to develop new ideas.

Chapter 4: Initial findings

4.1 Mark making

*'Using their own peculiar methods,
Artists are always trying to tell us
something about our civilisation'*

–Edward Burke Feldman, 2002, p42

Despite many differences in politics, motivations and perceptions, I have seen a shared desire amongst street artists and graffiti writers to alter their surroundings. Their marks are expressions and a way of reclaiming the walls. The following chapters look at the reasons why people do graffiti or street art and how they shape their role as artists or commentators. The range of opinions and motivations are varied and often in conflict, but an observation I made from speaking to these people is that they see the world and work in particular and unique ways. The process is often learned by doing. There is an immediacy to how they work, a sense of agency in staking their claim and this is what motivates them, they see it as beautiful, as a process of people having their say *'verbal communication for me is a wee bit awkward and sometimes it's nice to make your mark, to leave something and to have your say'* (Male street artist, 2014). The phenomenon displays a creative urge in people, a sense of having a role to play. The active participation of people in their surroundings. It is action and interaction.



Fig 4.1 'Felon' tag near Merchants Quay, Dublin

4.2 Making a statement

A shared motivation amongst all these artists is their compulsion to make a statement. This is how these active people claim territory. I spoke to Rask, a member of a male graffiti crew in Dublin who said, 'It's every day for me, everyday something graf related goes on in my life, it's hard to put into words what it is, it consumes you I never stop thinking about it.' (Rask, 2014). For most, there is an express need to make their claim over a space, their writing is a means to make themselves heard, 'Rask' refers to his work as 'A selfish art form' or a form of 'brandalism'. He sees the process as something he does for himself and he sees his role as prank playing, as tampering with space, this is why he chooses the name Rask as his form of brandalism. 'There are a million reasons why someone chooses their name' A tag represents an alter ego. 'I chose 'Rask' because I like the idea of being a trouble maker, you know a rascal, stirring things up a bit' (Rask, 2014). Fig 4.1 (above) is a photo I took of a different tagger who refers to himself as 'Felon'. I did not interview this person, but the choice of name is interesting because having spoken with Rask and then seeing the tag by 'Felon' I saw a similarity in motivations for doing what they do. They choose their name or their 'brand' strategically as it says something about their work. By claiming this space the tag symbolises a challenge to conformity. The work is an individual expression, a performance or a desire to shout the loudest. They leave behind an imprint, something for others to find, leaving behind traces of themselves, which is then painted or pasted over, layer upon layer *'This art form can give you quite a loud voice, quite quickly'* (Male street artist, 2014).

4.3 Patterns and repetition

'Artists are good at creating patterns' (Arts activist, 2014). In London, there is a street artist who has painted over one hundred and fifty pieces of tiny art on old chewing gum that has been walked into the Millennium Bridge, this reflects the obsessive nature of street artists, going back again and again and in order to complete these marks, these tiny stories that mark out his claim, these allow him to express himself.



Fig. 4.2 Examples of 'chewing gum art' on the Millennium Bridge in London

'It's old chewing gum that has just been pressed in and I think he's continuing to do it but I think there is about one hundred and fifty or something, pieces of chewing gum that he has turned into tiny pieces of art' (Art Teacher, 2014).

Taggers, graffiti writers and street artists design repetitive patterns in

order to make marks and to create lines and shapes. The phenomenon of making repetitive shapes and marks on the walls came out in conversation with all of the artists. Repetition is something that they all have in common, their drive is so strong that their main objective is to make the gesture, to act and make their mark. These patterns are what form the shapes and colours that we see on the walls outside and hanging in the gallery. One of the artists who has formal training mentioned how she saw her art as mark making and although she doesn't do graffiti, her ideas about how to visually represent how she sees the world, reflect the ideas of the graffiti writer or a tagger.

'I like the repetitiveness of doing the same thing over and over, covering large spaces with the same thing, not really visually representing anything, more about mark making' (Art teacher, 2014).

'You dream about it, you taste it when you're having your dinner, you think about it constantly and you use all of that time to process those ideas' (Arts activist, 2014).

4.4 Obsessive markings: 'Evoke'



Fig 4.3 Images of tag 'Evoke' Upper Clanbrassil Street, Dublin

The photos Fig 4.3 display a series of tags by the graffiti artist 'Evoke'. These are just one sample of the huge volume of marks made by this person who has obsessively scrawled a tag all over Dublin city. These photos have been taken over a period of about a month but I continue to record any of the markings by this particular tagger which appear all over the city and stretch into the south suburbs. You can see how the style is similar but considered each

time and they appear in different colours and shapes. This person has considered aesthetics and space e.g. Fig 4.4 The tagger is constantly working out where the marks will fit, in order to challenge space. These tags appear to have been made quickly but the rationale for this is they allow the tagger to make as many marks as possible in a limited amount of time. This has taken huge consideration. This person wants others to notice their presence and has a specific intent which has driven them to obsessively walk the streets in order to leave traces of themselves behind.



Fig 4.4 Photos of 'Evoke', Strand Street Great, Dublin



Fig 4.5 above 'Evoke' other taggers interfering with the space. Brunswick Place, Dublin

4.5 Playful Ownership

'I think it's just about having a sense of ownership over the city, a tag seems to say, that's our wall now' (Activist/tagger)

The concept of playing with space is relevant to graffiti writers, street artists and conventional art makers. The typical 'artist' does not want to interrupt space. They work with it. They make marks that 'fit' and that will be pleasing to the eye. Graffiti artists think about space so they can disrupt it. Those who make stickers look around for places to put them, hidden away where they might never even be noticed; small, secret markings. Taggers scale buildings, or work at train stations climbing heights in order find the perfect spot. It's all an effort to communicate, in playful ways.

'They don't own anything concrete in the city so they have to make something, I don't think its noble or ignoble, it is what it is.' (Activist, 2014).

'Humans can be so playful' (Arts activist, 2014). Through creating these unique marks, they have a sense of ownership over the city, they defy conventional artistic behavior. They see the space as their canvas with which to be playful.

'You stand in front of the wall and you try to see your image there and you think, ok how am I guna do this, and you are ready to bring and put colour everywhere' (Female street artist, 2014).

4.6 Defiance and agency

While we can see examples of these obsessive and playful actions in Dublin we also see great agency emerging in countries that are driven to write on the walls, due to political or social upheaval. We see agency combined with this obsessional attitude towards the work.

'Intense experiences can be cathartic and great work can be produced from them' (Arts activist, 2014). The Egyptian revolution in 2011 brought to life the stories of people as they took the streets and walls for themselves, in order to defy convention. Graffiti became their new media, it represented the voices of the people as they subverted mass media and control and created their own response to social upheaval. This kind of motivation is indicative of a compulsion to communicate. This was mark making filled with agency and human desire

need to reach out, to confront and defy. This human agency shows how intense experiences reveal the inner complexities of people and how they can produce messages in creative defiance. 'Every small event, every personality that was arrested, you would automatically find a response to it on the walls. The walls were always the place where artists could express themselves and talk about the truths that were really happening and so that's why we call it a dynamic newspaper, because it's the truth, its where you go to find out what really happened' (Egyptian art academic, 2014)

'When it catches the Zeitgeist, like what people are feeling, it can be a really kind of powerful, visceral, thing that does make people stop and think' (Activist/tagger, 2014).

These moments, when people come together to catch something happening in the everyday to form their own commentary is when we see the humanity behind street art and graffiti, as people begin to interact with the walls. Intense experiences, such as the Egyptian Revolution are bold, loud marks, people finding their voice.

Besides these intense moments of strong collective creativity, there are also the unnoticed creative energies of people which show us what is happening in our day to day, the stories that we don't hear about as often.

'The immediate need to express or communicate something, an urge or an impetus, there is a real power because of that, because you perceive of this need and because people have a need to communicate something and that's what they go and do and it might resonate with things they have heard on the street' (Arts activist, 2014).

Concentrating on what lies on the surface is only part of the movement, beyond that surface we see these truth moments made by marks on the walls, we see another world beneath the more visible street art and graffiti of these loud and defiant moments that draw out public outcry and reaction. One example of this is an autonomous social collective in Dublin that has been working silently for a year or so. It is here, where activists and artists live together building a self-sustaining non-hierarchical community. The entire space has been filled from floor to ceiling with graffiti and street art. It represents creative action; a different kind of agency.

'We create beauty around us in order to oppose a system we don't believe in, a system that isn't working. Something that you see, and it's not in your face, it might say

something about your life, like I don't think it changes anyone's perspective on politics when you write a purely political message, but if you write something that maybe is a bit more subtle, then maybe it would have some effect. The messages might not be really strong but, in my art the woman that I put in my paintings is a woman called Eriu and she represents all that is beautiful in Ireland, instead of how things really are. I want to make something beautiful instead of people going out and writing fuck the system and that on the walls, that's just full of hatred. I want to make something beautiful to express how I feel. This is our revolution' (Made, 2014).

'I think there are really cool local art movements. It's something new. We are all together and you think in a way you haven't thought before (Female street artist, 2014).

'Symbolically, it feeds the opinions of people around you; it does have a lot of power' (Graffiti blogger, 2014).



This space in Dublin is just one example of the agency felt by graffiti and street artists, how they use street art and graffiti as a means to challenge what happens in the everyday and in order to represent their anger and frustration with the way things are and to help others see that there is an alternative way of living and working.

4.6 Art in autonomous space, Dublin

Graffiti and street art represent a different way of communicating and generating ideas. Noam

Chomsky said human beings have an innate desire to create ‘A fundamental element of human nature is the need for creative work... A decent society should maximize the possibilities for this fundamental human characteristic’ (Chomsky, 1971). Through their motivations, street artists and graffiti writers place themselves in the middle of things. They open up a chance to communicate, to generate thoughts and to display their own passions and values, we might underestimate its effect but this human intent can go incredibly far. This is where we see beauty coming out, a beauty in people which allows us to see our own potential for change. The success of this creativity is the intention, if there is a human quality to the message, if it affects those who see it, this makes the work a beautiful process, it defies the caricature of the godlike artist, it shows creativity coming out amongst ordinary people ‘*I suppose it makes you recognise your own humanity*’ (Arts activist, 2014).

4.7 Skills, networks and alternative ways of learning:

4.7.1 Crews: Graffiti vs. Street art

The concept of skill is very important for people in different ways. For some of the people I spoke to, getting better at their work, or being accepted by others is something that pushes people on. For others it is about nurturing their own specific desire to make a mark, for their skill to be recognised is encouragement for them to keep on going. Ability and creativity appear as two different things, creativity can be nurtured and this can allow people to develop skills, but having innate ability appears to draw a line between those who can and those who cannot.

According to the arts institution, to be able to do art, you must acquire certain skills, you must be innately creative. Generally, we don’t think of scrawled lettering or stencils as conveying any real skill. For subversive graffiti and street art, skills are a very important aspect of graffiti culture. Graffiti crews respect those who have methodically and obsessively learned how to write on the streets. There is a certain skill in learning how to create shapes and abstract lettering and compulsively reshaping the alphabet. This skill develops over time and those who follow the movement, are expected to patiently and cleverly observe the hierarchy that exists within their culture. They look out for where they can and cannot practise their tag, they watch out for tags from a more experienced graffiti writer and they work the (graffiti)

circuit in the hope that they will be noticed. For them, learning these skills is a necessary process that develops through signals rather than verbal communication.

'Let's say a kid who doesn't have a fucking clue goes down and busts out a piece on top of someone that's you know, higher up, you have to have a way of working, that kid has to learn that circuit. You're a tie [beginner] until told otherwise, don't call us we'll call you, basically when we see that you're good enough. It's a skill set that develops over a long time there is a rite of passage to what we do' (Graffiti artist #2, 2014).

Building these skills is a process of nurturing young taggers who express a true desire to be part of the movement *'He schooled me'* (Graffiti artist, #3). Graffiti artists believe that a true commitment to the process is enough to build on those skills, again this reflects their obsessive way of working as referred to earlier in the chapter. Graffiti writers believe in going out and doing rather than following any structure. This practical way of learning by doing is what they give most value to. A young tagger will be noticed if she works obsessively and passionately, if she is committed and if she places her tag strategically and respectfully so she won't disrupt the hierarchy of the scene. By doing this the more experienced crew members will notice and begin to nurture this younger, less experienced tagger. This will happen by inviting the younger person to join them in their work. These skills are developed because of a compulsion to learn and to make a mark, not by learning through an institution, but for their own desire to create patterns and images in order to be part of the movement.

'It's everyone doing it for themselves. Get your own thing done and that's where you get your respect. I think the most important thing is no matter what you're doing be it graf, stencil, you need to have soul' (Graffiti artist #2, 2014).

Despite this integrity to and commitment to learning and nurturing the younger taggers, the hierarchical element to how they work could be seen as a negative way of working. Despite skill sharing, there is still the process where a younger tagger is made to feel like an outsider until told they can come in. The process of learning and getting to a place where people will begin to respect you is an exclusionary and challenging one. This learning experience may not always be a positive experience for some.

I spoke to an all female street art crew about how they value the process of skill sharing as it allows them to learn more, through doing. They value the support and encouragement they get from working together *'it's a real supportive encouraging atmosphere for us all'* (Novice, 2014). The difference between the all female crew and the all male graffiti crew is that they ask people with little or no experience to take part. *'That's where I got the tag 'Novice' from, it's so new for me, I love it, it's so accessible'* (Novice, 2014)

'We are all together and you think in a way you haven't thought before, you are always learning, you never stop' (Female street artist, 2014)

The specific street artists I spoke to seem to be more inclusive and less hierarchical and their work appears to be a chance to enrich themselves and others rather than showing any signs of exclusivity. They speak about their culture as a network, a sharing experience, an open and inclusive one. *'It brings people together, like minded individuals, we stick together and we all have a common interest'* (Novice, 2014). This may be based on gender, this particular female crew seemed to have a more tolerant attitude and are less concerned by group dynamics and rules.

'You grow up learning the bits and pieces and you can't expect somebody from the outside world to understand, it makes sense to us, because this is our culture' (Graffiti artist #2, 2014).

4.7.2 Structured ways of learning

'I think I just got skills that I had never had before and I suppose just a sense of getting better at something pushes me on' (Art teacher, 2014).

For some of the artists, skills are built through more traditional, structured ways of learning. They believe in learning the rules of art. *'Not everyone can be an artist. I think being an artist is about having an eye, making decisions'* (Art teacher, 2014). There is the belief that without ability and structure, it is possible to fail, which establishes art as a very exclusionary process and isolates those who might feel they do not have this ability. *'There is a certain criteria needed, not everyone can make something beautiful, you can fail'* (Art teacher, 2014). In

contrast to the previous voice, one of the artists with formal training believes in nurturing creativity rather than giving value only to a person's ability *'I would think everyone has artistic potential and innate creativity'* (Arts activist, 2014). There is a sharp contrast between the person who is nurtured through passion and dedication the person who believes there is only a certain amount of nurturing and learning that can occur and that unless you have certain skills, you will fail.

4.7.3 Pushing Boundaries vs. Aesthetics

In discussions about art, it was interesting how often the artists spoke about what they valued most. Those who work outdoors believe in action and shaping their own identity. What I have attempted to show is how beauty for graffiti writers and street artists means more than just aesthetics or appearance. For formally trained artists, ideas about beauty came from learning about aesthetics. For some of the radical artists pushing boundaries was what gave value to their work, this is their form of direct action. The more daring the street art, the more value they give to it.

'people became kind of sensitised to it and they became used to it and it wasn't really doing its job anymore then the artists would go back and make something more shocking and so you have this continuous dialogue' (Egyptian arts academic, 2014).

Although most of the graffiti artists think about pushing boundaries, one of the art teachers I spoke to values graffiti and street art as an educational tool, but she teaches through looking at aesthetics which contrasts with the values of graffiti and street artists. She did not value those who push boundaries if it meant that it sacrificed the appearance of the art. She refers to street artists 'Banksy' and his desire to push boundaries and says.

'I think he was trying to push the boundaries to the extent where it was very difficult to call it valid, not valid, very difficult to call it 'good art' (Australian art teacher, 2014).

For people like this art teacher, despite being fascinated by the movement, her feelings convey academic teachings. Those who aren't directly engaged with graffiti writing culture see tagging as lazy and destructive. They don't understand the immense value and beauty it holds for the tagger and the dedication it requires, they don't see it as a process of learning.

There is also a conflict of values between graffiti and street artists. The immediacy of graffiti is not given credit by street artists. Graffiti artists are adamant that they do the work for themselves only, to get noticed within their networks but those outside of that are irrelevant. In contrast, street artists, particularly those who are asked to paint outdoors for community initiatives such as Thomas Street, the work they do is known 'semi-legal' street art. This is not about pushing boundaries, it is about bring art outside, and they tend to consider space more than graffiti writers and how it will fit in with the scene. They think about how others will view their art and whether they it will be appreciated and seen to be adding value.

'when you're there, at a wall and there are people passing, it kind of changes, you're focusing on getting it right and doing the best possible piece of art' (Male street artist, 2014).

Both of the voices here are making value judgements. Graffiti artists value work that serves no one but themselves and work that pushes boundaries. Street artists like that people appreciate their art. These are evidentially quite different and we see that there are competing sets of values. For the various people coming from different places, their values are divisive and this highlights the internal tensions that exist in the movement.

'I don't want to say that one is more important than the other because that one quick stencil that someone has done just to serve a purpose, has also served its purpose' (Egyptian art academic-2014).

Graffiti artists value those who try to interrupt and contest space and to make a direct claim over it. They aren't working for anyone apart from those within their own culture who have direct experience of doing graffiti.

'It's just people being more accepting when it's an image, more appealing then like, a tag or whatever, we look at the lettering, the structure and the flow of shapes' (Graffiti artist #4, 2014).

Perception creates a tension between those who do graffiti writing and those who do stencil work because of the variety of opinions and values and the different ways we perceive signs and symbols. Some who do legal work were not impressed by illegal tagging and did not value it or appreciate it for its skill *'I hate these scribbles in random places, it looks crap, it's not art, I genuinely don't like idle tagging'* (Novice, 2014).

'It's perception, it's all perception, it comes down to what you're communicating, people don't understand why we do what we do, but if you're going to worry about what people think, you wouldn't have done it in the first place' (Graffiti artist #2, 2014).

'I'm trying not to make a value judgement between graffiti and a sculpture I just wish the graffiti wasn't on the sculpture, but I know that the graffiti wants to interrupt the sculpture and wants to interrupt the conformity and the convention' (Arts activist, 2014).

'But on the flip side of that, graffiti writers don't value a lot of stencil work, they see it is lazy and contrived and too easy. They see it as a way for people to get noticed rather than putting in the time and effort required to 'come up' in the graffiti scene 'It's very easy for people to launch themselves on the scene, whereas graf, it's a skill set that develops over a long, long time' (Rask, 2014).

In reality this is an underestimation of the work required for some stencils and in making some stickers. In some cases, the cutting is quick and easy, but the fact that someone goes out afterwards and sprays the stencil repeatedly and strategically, this gives it value. Similarly a sticker, in a lot of cases designing and producing a sticker can take a considerable amount of time and effort. Even the less complex designs are still important as the person who has made the sticker then goes out and places the sticker tactically and cleverly. It all means something to the person who has made it, but we see the variety and conflict of values coming out.

'We're not against them, we just don't like a lot of it... it's just, it's too easy for people to jump into it without any background whatsoever and pretend that they're something straight away with very little background or knowledge of the history culture of anything to do with it' (Rask, 2014).

'It's not for me to say our thing isn't their thing and I'm not being disrespectful' 'they've a different set of beliefs and they don't play by the rules that we do' (Graffiti artist #3, 2014)



Fig 4.7 'Rip Off' Silhouette Street art

4.8 'Rip off'

Based on the feelings that graffiti artists have about stencil artists, it was interesting to note a piece of stencil art in Dublin on College Street Fig 4.7 (left). This image is of a child holding a balloon and reflects the 'silhouette' [shadow effect commonly used in stencil street art] stencil work of well known street artists Banksy' (right) and 'Blek le Rat' (middle).

The stencil has been interrupted by a tagger who has written 'Rip off' indicating that the piece is inauthentic. In Chapter Two I referred authenticity as a question about what is true or real in art. A probable reason for this 'Rip off' comment is because artists like Banksy and Blek le Rat have been hugely commodified by popular culture and this commodification has led to ideas about preservation, just like the gallery. Again, this comes down to values and perception of what should take place on the street. But from conversations with street artists generally, the streets are a free for all, where people can design anything they wish for the space, that of itself is an authentic part of the movement.

Preservation does not exist in the same way, even if well known artists' work is replicated. Despite this taggers sentiment, it does not tie in to the transient nature of street art and the way it is renewed and replicated, the tagger should not be outraged as the value of street art

and graffiti is that it is there to be copied and reproduced and altered, this is what makes it beautiful.



Fig 4.8 'KAGE' Paste up on Parkgate Street, Dublin

4.9 'KAGE' 'Not doing any work at all'

The Graffiti crew also criticised paste ups (posters that have been glued onto walls and billboards similar to advertisements) and stickers. However, through my observations, and through speaking to some of the other artists, there is still something to be said for the paste ups. In Dublin there is a paste up called KAGE. It has appeared

all over the quays of the city and near Heuston Station. One afternoon, I took a number of photos of the posters on Parkgate Street and the next day I saw they had been scraped away and painted over, presumably by Dublin City Council. Despite this, when I was next in the area, I saw the person had pasted the images again. Graffiti writers do not see this process as having any real value.

'You got guys that are literally not doing any work at all, they're just pasting stuff'
(Graffiti artist, #2014).

But seeing these paste ups all over the city, requires incredible dedication and the fact that the posters were removed and then within a few days the person had pasted them up again reflects that same defiant attitude that graffiti writers have. Despite graffiti artists thinking that paste ups require no skill, there was incredible thought and dedication behind this work.

'For me they are a comment on society today. Pollution, politics, materialism and everything in between. But I try to peel back the glossy front that is advertised in shop

fronts, TV screens, and posters. I try to give an honest depiction of the true nature of these things, that influence our lives and society as a whole. Often times my posters are from the point of view of the people or systems that are detrimental to the world today, showing their disregard and amusement. Other times they are a depiction of people's sadness, and frustration. Sometimes they are neither. But this is only my opinion; your interpretation is just as valid as my own' (KAGE, 2014)

This shows that despite its appearance the movement of art outdoors comes from a place where an individual has a desire to communicate visually. This all adds to the vibrancy of the movement.

'It all goes into the big picture you have to have your tags and your stickers and your paste ups because they all bring a lovely variety a depth of colour or a message' (Male street artist, 2014).

This shows some of the street artists having a more open, tolerant attitude and an appreciation of different forms of art that takes place outdoors, whereas graffiti artists have very specific rules and values that they maintain. They have perceptions about skill and their work and they stick to them. The word 'value' means something different for people from different learning experiences and backgrounds. To see graffiti purely for its aesthetic value distances the interaction between the reader and the art. An aesthetic experience can communicate something incredibly emotive for someone, but for someone else, it can leave them feeling very removed or isolated. For the academic who has studied formal art guidelines they may feel at a loss when looking at graffiti as it does not follow the academic aesthetic rules and regulations. For the graffiti writer who has learnt through their networks and through following their own regulations and traditions, they may feel restricted by the art gallery. The artists make a judgement call based on their own values and their ideals and values do come into conflict. Art that happens outdoors represents an act. It is the process that holds immense value for the person who put it there. Unlike the gallery, where art hangs in different rooms and works to complement the space where art is hung side by side, in order to create a pleasing experience for the viewer, the conflicting and challenging appearance of outdoor art, by people with very different values gives beauty, richness and ideas in conflict. The fact that they work to challenge one another adds to a whole culture, a mix of opinions and beliefs and they appear that way on the streets.

Chapter 5: Case study

5.1 Preservation

In June 2014 a restored Monet Painting ‘Argenteuil Basin with a Single Sailboat’ was unveiled in the National Gallery. It had been destroyed in 2012 by a member of the public who had stumbled and fallen against it, leaving a large rip in the canvas. This painting is valued at about €10 million and took over a year to restore, (Griffin, July 2014).

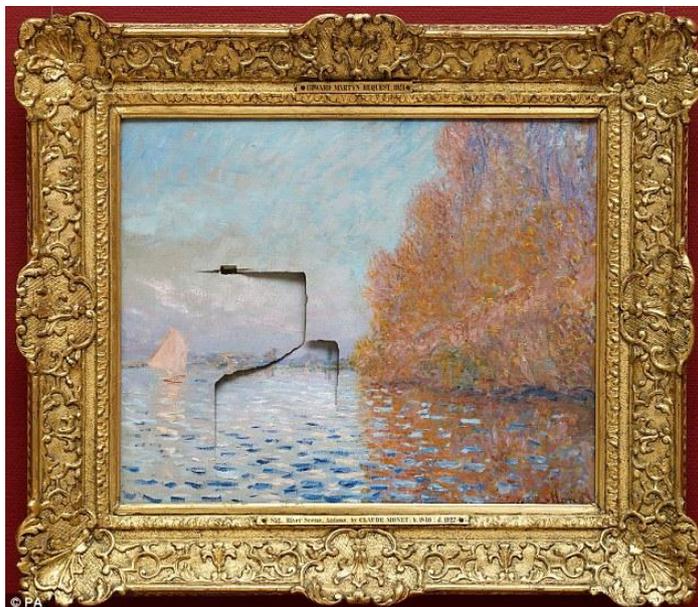


Fig 5.1 Painting destroyed in 2012

This is an example of elite ideas about art, which I referred to in Chapter 2 and the idea of preserving art that is ‘worthy’. The graffiti and street art movement works in subversive ways against this preservation. People who graffiti and street art prefer the dynamics of their culture where they make art that isn’t meant to last. They like that their art gets painted over and made into something new. Street art and graffiti pushes people to think about art outside of the boxes established by the gallery.

‘Yeah I like that whole aspect of it, that things change and can get pasted over’ (Male Street Artist, 2014).

Everyone I spoke to, formally trained or otherwise, prefer that people can play with and interact with their work.

‘I don’t like clean spaces, I like the idea of working on something that might have come from somewhere else’ (Art teacher, 2014).

The idea of preservation doesn’t exist in street art or graffiti culture, they don’t want for the work to be precious, they want for it to be a living, breathing part of the city which changes

constantly. They like that their art won't last and they understand its disposability and how this disposability contests structure.

'It's more accessible, you know in a gallery it's in isolation, white walls, it's very... precious. It's really immediate, you just start and all of a sudden it's done and there is no chipping away at it, no going back to it. I think my one in the Bernard Shaw [Bar in Dublin] was gone the next day, nobody cares because that's the way it is' (Novice, 2014).

The reason why we have this lack of care for preservation is because those who act in it see it as an unfinished process; they see it as adding to the walls in layers in order to bring richness to the movement. They like the idea that anyone can add to the walls. I mentioned previously how graffiti and street artists are obsessive. They think in patterns, they see things visually. Adding layer upon layer that then gets painted over adds to their visual experience and this allows for them to find their voice.

'There were some attempts to preserve the walls and it was immediately criticised by the artists who felt it was completely against what it means to build upon the layers of the walls.' (Egyptian arts academic, 2014).

For most, they do the work for themselves, they come and go and move on in order to add colour to another part of the city. It embodies the true dynamics of a movement, it is a very visceral thing, and it represents people as they stake their claim on the walls.

'If you put a sticker on a pole you walk past it later that day it's covered up, you walk past it again a few days later, there are two or three others on top of each other, that's like a living breathing kind of ongoing interaction between different people in Dublin' (Activist/tagger, 2014).

This immediacy and the movement of the art represents the way we consume information now, the disposable quality of the work reflects a renewal and regeneration of ideas. They like the process of sketching out new thoughts and adding bits and pieces and other images in order to have their say. Instead of preserving old archaic ideas, the artists are more excited

about the possibilities of newness, looking out for new information and new messages and signs in order to create meaning for themselves and others.

5.2 Making it fit



'People say it's ugly and disgusting, because it has been done by a guy with a spray can, but what if people were in the gallery, drinking wine and eating cheese and talking shit about it?' There are no closing times, no opening times, you can do whatever you want with it, and there is no red tape, no barrier. You can go up and touch it, all those cool things that make it more free and real.' (Male street artist, 2014)

Fig 5.2 Street art by 'Smug' Nicholas Street, Limerick

The above quote refers to street art on Nicholas Street in Limerick created by Street Artist 'Smug'. The public were outraged by its appearance and an article in the Limerick Voice online in 2013 makes claims about 'Locals disturbed by subject of graffiti' (Admin, 2013). This street art was done with the same objectives as the Thomas Street Regeneration Programme, in Dublin, something I will speak about later in the chapter. There is a quote in the article where residents refer to the street art as 'disgusting' as we see the character's eyeball sitting on top of the ice cream cone, its initial function was to 'create a fresh injection of life into the area'. It is interesting to think that people find this '*disgusting*', perhaps because of the subject matter and the fact that it takes place outdoors. 'Smug' the creator of this piece of art actually has fine art training, and this raises a question about whether the shocking appearance of this outdoor piece would have been as ill received, if it has been on display in a gallery, with some abstract explanation of why the figure appears this way. This is where we start to see art that begins outdoors being critiqued as though it should fit inside

the walls of the gallery. While most of the artists oppose the concept of space, where they are controlled and regulated. Formally trained artists still think of the gallery when they make their art outdoors. They consider the space, even if they see it as movable. They still design their image to fit in with its surroundings. In general those with formal training felt this way, despite the fact that they spoke more passionately than anyone else about their displeasure with conformity and the dynamics of the gallery. Perhaps this is due to more exposure to the gallery than untrained taggers. They still work in particular ways that reflect the institution and in ways they have just converted the outdoors into a gallery.

'It's public work it's public space you have to have a consciousness over who lives there. I think you have to, if you're coming into an area that people live and people work, you need to be sort of always thinking who is going to see it, for me you can't be going in doing offensive stuff political stuff' (Male street artist, 2014).

'You end up getting so bogged down and you go and sit down to do something but invariably it ends up being something to do with school, you end up changing it in order to fit' (Art teacher, 2014).

The structure of the academy still pushes artists to think about space and rules in terms of boundaries and boxes, even if they are frustrated with those rules. They still bring some of the rules into their work. Some however, see the academy as enforcing rules that they couldn't respond to and hence, they develop their own ideas and rules.

'I couldn't really function within the system, a lot of the lecturers were telling me my art was wrong and like, there was this art bursting to get out and they were saying to do it this way, in this little box, and there were no boxes. I guess what it was to please someone else, and I don't want to be doing art to please anyone. There has to be something else' (Made, 2014).

Graffiti and street art is not designed for the gallery, it is renewable, it is there to be played with and reshaped. It shapes stories about people, even if we don't realise it. If you begin to pay note to the colour that we see around us, you see how they form patterns. This tradition

that the artists refer to, applies to people and lived experience, stories shared over years. People, through acts of defiance, carving out stories in order to understand themselves better, subvert the precious format of the gallery with new, playful and peculiar methods, the movement moves and works away from the mainstream, away from the gallery.

'You go into a gallery and it's too abstract, you know, and I just don't get it. In the city, you have a lot of people who are creative and you have the tools and you can work together the whole city is your canvas' (Female street artist, 2014).

Graffiti and Street art has the potential to encourage us to think outside of the boxes, imposed by the gallery *'To think differently about space and to allow people to acknowledge their own artistic abilities and potential'* (Arts activist, 2014). The walls are a meaningful tool of expression, and this is beautiful for those who are part of the movement. It will be interesting to see how it evolves. We may see street art and graffiti in boxes designed only for the gallery but I have observed that whatever unfolds, the people who wish to be truly subversive will always be so, and will find other radical ways to make art and to express themselves.

'You go into a gallery and it's too abstract, you know, and I just don't get it. The galleries, I guess will be full of street art, and then we'll do something else' (Female street artist, 2014).

5.3 Thomas Street Regeneration

In 2013, Thomas Street was 'cleaned up'. This was the initiative of Fáilte Ireland and the Office of Public Works to entice tourists to areas such as Thomas Street which have fallen into disrepair. Evolve Urban Art, was commissioned by the project and 'Thomas Street Fest' was held in the summer of 2013. About fifteen pieces were commissioned for the project, to bring public art outdoors as a way to 'reinvigorate'. It paid freelance street artists to paint the walls in the area 'provide visitors to the capital with an enhanced experience by establishing an integrated tour of the city's cultural and heritage sites. Fáilte Ireland believe that the trail will bring more tourists to the attractions and businesses along the route' (Layde, 2013)

"In a simple way it's positive nice pieces of art on the street for people to experience, whether people on the street, locals, or tourists" (Barry, July 2013).

The rationale for this was to promote the area as a tourist attraction and to 'add to' a historic working class part of the city. What purpose did it serve, what was its value? In Chapter Two I spoke about the gentrification of areas and the issue of 'cleaning up the streets' adding colour and 'making the space better' or more visually appealing, a problem with this is that it may not serve the needs of the community there. If we think about street art adding use value to an area, it is because it speaks to and represents the people who see it each day, it comes to life in order to communicate through the walls.

'The plan also recognizes the need for restoration work to be carried out on Thomas Street. The street which is the commercial, social and cultural hub of the Liberties has gradually begun to show signs of urban decay over the years. The Dublin project commits to having transformed the street by 2020' (Layde, 2013).

The concept was to establish the area as an aesthetic experience. When interviewing street artists and activists, this conversation came up without my knowing anything about the regeneration project, I was immediately intrigued by the conflict of interest coming out amongst the various people I spoke to. Making the urban space a visual spectacle is something that causes controversy because it is vulnerable to misrepresenting the people who work and live there. While some people saw the process as not reflecting the lived experience in the area, others saw themselves as people who brought their skills and knowledge to an area in order to create aesthetic experiences there to give local businesses in the area a chance, but they did not feel the need to consult or work with the people in the area, because they did not see a connection between doing street art in the area and whether it represented those living in the area.

' *These planners just kind of thought, Thomas Street is a dilapidated area, it's not being maintained by landlords who had no intention to rent or lease them out. I was talking to a guy who was doing this because I was interested in how he planned to involve the residents and the traders of Thomas Street and I didn't see a lot of evidence of that. I find that really problematic and this guy, he made a comment that was like; well people don't get involved because they're very apathetic. I liked the colour and the vibrancy of them, I even like the images, but I couldn't see any benefit to them, I don't see any benefit to adding that colour; if there isn't some consultation or participation with the people that are going to be using that space all the time'* (Arts activist, 2014).

'I did the Thomas Street regeneration, the community wasn't involved in any of the deciding of anything, but it was for the benefit of the community and we were just a small part of it, the regeneration was happening anyway over the last few years, the idea was giving small businesses an opportunity to keep going, but the area was in bits' (Novice, 2014).



Fig 5.3 Street art Thomas Street, Dublin

Figure 5.3 is an example of this rejuvenation, the image doesn't appear to reflect any particular message in particular, rather it functions as a large, colourful installation, it appears to function purely as an aesthetic experience, however if you look closely at it, it appears that other taggers have interfered with the work, making marks over the space. This again represents the defiant attitude associated with graffiti artists and the concept of interrupting and painting over the images.

'They had a couple of programmes going last year where they went to different points that are like semi legal spots where people go and put up huge art pieces and I think that's making the city more beautiful and vibrant, like it does have a lot of merit, making something look nice, but there is a danger of it becoming a plaster over a very big problem so and if an artist chooses to do that then you become complicit, like not fixing the problem, just putting this little plaster over it to say look at this nice, beautiful painting you know' (Activist/tagger, 2014)

While some of the artists saw no purpose to working closely with members of the community in order to make these aesthetically pleasing experiences, others really consider how their

‘skills’ might be exploited and used in an attempt to gentrify areas. Ultimately, there are three kinds of artists, those who work as street artists as part of a mainstream culture, those who wish to create art in consultations with others, as a more participative process and the obsessive taggers who subvert the work. It reflects a difference in notions about art and elitist opinions held against seeing art as a process between people.

‘I had a lot of guilt about how I might have implicated myself in gentrification of areas, the artists don’t cause gentrification. Gentrification happens when the artists bring something of value to that area and I do think there is constant exploitation’ (Arts activist, 2014).

When walking around Thomas Street I found some of the graffiti art there quite aggressive and challenging. One wall in particular depicted a series of huge images and over these images, a tagger had painted a layer over these images and written:

‘Oh soul, thou maketh no statement at all, portray thine loneliness on a wall’



Fig 5.4 Taggers interacting with Thomas Street

What I see in this is an individual, living in the area, who engaged with the images and saw no merit to its appearance, ‘*thou maketh no statement at all*’. These images generated a reaction by someone who wished to challenge the original piece to play with it, interrogate it.

We see a number of spontaneous responses emerging from the more vacuous versions of street art and individuals playing with the walls and communicating with one other. We can see the various voices emerging. The first tag has constructed a faux Elizabethan English to convey an emotion, and then under this, someone has written ‘*Ya fucking vandal*’. Both actions are vandalism, both have disturbed the space. It is important to recognise how despite the subversive nature of the tag using old fashioned

language, which we would associate with an institution or an academy, is being used as a way to destroy other work. What began as a public initiative to bring art to the streets became a symbolic fight over the space between two taggers. This all adds to the picture and layers of colour in conflict with one another.

This demonstrates that amidst the exploitation and the gentrification of cities, we also see the creative, argumentative marks that represent the movement for its truth. It is where we observe the voices of those who care enough to make these marks of defiance.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 A celebration of street art

The previous chapters provide us with a new way to think about beauty. The most evident theme emerging from the research is artistic actions emerging as subversive tactics, and the role of art, such as graffiti and street art in ‘subverting the dominant consciousness’ (Marcuse, 1978, ix). Artistic actions which take shape in public challenge the gallery, advertisers and commercialisation. They also challenge one another by communicating and coming into conflict via the walls. It creates a sense of freedom which can translate into other media and contexts; it has the potential to shape a new discourse.

This study has attempted to situate graffiti and street art as progression and as a social movement to open our eyes to its strong potential as a subversive message maker. I have explored the radical and commercialised aspects of art and culture and through this have attempted to highlight that regardless of its appearance, this form of art begins as something directly related to the human drive for change and creativity.

6.2 Ambiguity of the movement

The work is not only a celebration of the radical forms of street art and graffiti because writing about the movement is also about acknowledging its ambiguities and the various ideas and opinions that occur within it. I have established a drive in people to do the work at grassroots level (without intervention or cooption by formal art guidelines or advertisers), in Chapters Two and Five I have emphasised the ambiguities of the movement given that it is coming from many conflicting strands of society. The phenomenon cannot be mapped out or analysed easily because we see so many versions of it. I have shown how it emerges as a form of protest and a desire to create a social platform. At the same time, I acknowledge the aesthetic requirements that form artistic graffiti. I discuss the clear propensity for the movement to take shape in commercialised forms, and its use by businesses and property developers in the process of gentrification. Ultimately the movement is part of an ambiguous culture, with many different facets that happen alongside one another.

6.3 Internal tensions

Chapter Four highlights the strong internal tensions and biases between the various groups taking part in the movement, specifically around skill and learning. There are at times sharply conflicting views between what constitutes beauty and different definitions of good practice. Those with formal education maintain that street art and graffiti should fulfil certain aesthetic requirements. Those who had developed skills outside of the academy believed in doing the art for themselves, and therefore disregarded any rules around aesthetics. There were also those who chose to take their formal training outdoors and play with space, this was due to the artists feeling resentment towards the confines of the gallery and wishing to challenge its restrictive nature.

The differences of opinion and conflicts between genders were an issue that also arose. While male graffiti groups were reliant on the hierarchical structure of their work, female street artists were very inclusive and more open to learning and sharing experiences.

These conflicts are evident and unavoidable, but they are what give such a richness to the whole process and it is where we see diversity and differences emerging.

6.4 Reflections

Graffiti even in its most radical or political appearances will not be the soul drive for change, but the people who make these marks have the motivation and drive to do so. Making marks on the walls challenge the acceptance of people as passive creatures. We are led to believe that we exist in order to consume. Graffiti and street art highlight powerful, symbolic ways to produce information; it is transformative, it is ongoing. Art holds important meaning for people. It can be a highly expressive, emotive tool and it can work in extremely important and positive ways. My research has explored the ways that people make art and how they generally think in different ways, they think obsessively, they like repetition of marks, shapes, colours. They see the world and practice their work in particular ways, this is what makes the process beautiful, as what we end up with is a variety of voices, etching out ideas, overlapping and challenging and coming into conflict with it.

6.5 Mapping out new ideas

This study has been the catalyst for further explorations of the dynamics of sub cultures and how socially engaged people behave. From here, I plan to develop my thought process around street art and graffiti and creative forms of communication more generally. I will observe the movement as it unfolds in various ways in Dublin and I will paint a picture of the movement as I have observed it for other people. I am currently developing plans for a walking tour of Dublin, where I will highlight the stories behind the thousands of marks all over the city, opening other people's eyes so they begin to think more about to ideas around space, property and people in a different way. I want to encourage the idea of how movements come from people evolving out of the everyday. I will display the marks that go unnoticed and challenge the concept of authenticity and beauty to think about people and how they use art. I hope this will encourage other activists who feel hopeless in times where we are unsure of how we can change things. I believe that beauty comes out of struggle; we see it through our efforts to reach out to one another, to challenge the notion of beauty and to show it through the words on the walls.

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