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“ART SHOULD COMFORT THE DISTURBED AND DISTURB THE
COMFORTABLE.” EXAMINING TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AESTHETICS THROUGH
BANKSY’S SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

By

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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English Literature

"Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable:"
Examining Twenty-First Century Aesthetics via Banksy's Socially Engaged Art

Chairperson: Dr. Kathleen Kane

Taking Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization as its starting point, this paper considers two twenty-first century aesthetic shifts resulting from the conditions of post-Fordist capitalism: the appearance of socially engaged art practices as delineated by Nato Thompson in *Living as Form* and the prevalence of what Sianne Ngai refers to as "minor aesthetic categories" within those practices. This project explores the political efficacy and theoretical possibilities of socially engaged art practices--practices which necessarily utilize minor aesthetic categories due to their ubiquity--through close examination of the graffiti artist Banksy's exhibit, *Better Out Than In*. Graffiti is associated with the destruction of private property and urban decay and is not typically classified as art. However, the immense popularity of the graffiti artist Banksy indicates that popular culture believes otherwise. Thus, Banksy serves as an interesting case study for analyzing socially engaged art practices in the twenty-first century. While not prescriptive, the paper strives to simply identify the ways Banksy utilizes minor aesthetic categories to engage in social practice art—art that tries to reconfigure the traditional relationship between the work and the viewer--in order to identify the aesthetic realities of the twenty-first century and the changing role of the twenty-first century artist.

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Introduction
The Role of Defamiliarization and Minor Aesthetic Categories in Twenty-First Century Socially Engaged Art

Art does not reproduce what we see; rather, it makes us see.
-Paul Klee

This introduction begins with the formalist notion of defamiliarization because it lays the groundwork for the themes of aesthetic judgment, the relationship between artist and viewer, and the aesthetic categories we use to talk about art that are the circulating concerns of this project. In the pages that follow, I attempt to update Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization so that it reflects the aesthetic conditions of twenty-first century late capitalism. Then I delineate Nato Thompson's articulation of social practice art in *Living as Form*, a book I utilize throughout the paper to bind together theorists who frequently do not agree, yet are collectively working to define the practice. Next, I summarize Ngai's brilliant work on minor aesthetic categories and finally, I explain how Banksy--a graffiti artist--is also a socially engaged artist. This thesis seeks to understand the ways in which social practice art attempts to reconfigure the traditional relationship between the work of art and the viewer, with a particular focus on the utilization of the minor aesthetic categories of the cute, the zany, and the interesting within the practice. Ultimately, this project explores the political efficacy and theoretical possibilities of socially engaged art practices through close examination of Banksy's New York exhibit, *Better Out Than In*. These new ways of understanding, articulating, and producing art are still emerging and this analysis does not offer any definitive solutions. Rather, this thesis is an engagement with the possibilities of art and labor, art and commodity, art and life, and artist and viewer.

In his essay "Art as Technique," Viktor Shklovsky says that "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*"

(emphasis in original 741). The ‘sensation of life’ is lost through the everyday habituation of objects. The work of the artist, then, is to work to render the invisible visible again. Shklovsky argues that, “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*” (emphasis in original 741). The artist’s methodology defamiliarizes objects in order to make the perceiver linger with them and to spend time engaging them. For Shklovsky, however, the object is not important, so it can just as easily be a rendering of environmental destruction or a still life of a bowl of fruit, as long as it is made in a way that defamiliarizes the object. Which brings one to the question of just *how* a rendered object, once familiar and now made strange, can be insignificant? Or, rather, *can* the defamiliarized object ever truly be insignificant? Can one encounter, for example, the “artfulness” of the urinal in Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* without wrestling with the societal notions of cleanliness, sexuality, gender, and privacy that surround the urinal? The idea that the object depicted is irrelevant underscores how the aesthetic of defamiliarization that Shklovsky delineated in 1917 can easily seem like an old-fashioned remnant of a romanticized past—one that ignores the complex hegemonic discourses that govern both human and nonhuman lives.

An underlying shared experience of quotidian familiarity within a particular object or rendering of an object is inherent to the notion of defamiliarization. This shared experience depends not only on time but also on one’s cultural perceptions of and relationship to an object or form. For example, an artist can, in the current epochal moment, paint a picture of an iPhone in such a way as to defamiliarize the iPhone, say by obscuring its form, thus making the viewer wrestle with the object rendered by the piece. Yet, if the artist chooses to paint a cassette player,

the portable music device of the 1980's, the object itself is already defamiliarized to the children who grew up in the 1990s in the sense that it is inherently unfamiliar. Can it then be “made strange” since the object was never “habituated” in the first place? Similarly, an iPhone is an expensive object—a commodity located in an elite consumerist society and may be unfamiliar to those from lower socioeconomic statuses. I would argue that defamiliarization of such an object requires a particular lens—a lens that does not effect defamiliarization for everyone but does for a certain group of people living in a particular moment in time. Despite these contextual exceptions, the concept of defamiliarization proves essential to any discussion of art and aesthetics because, I believe, like Shklovsky, that art does indeed work to “make the stone *stony*,” or in Duchamp’s case, the urinal “urinally.”

Walter Benjamin poses the apposite question in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction,” “has the whole social function of art been revolutionized? Is art now based on a different practice: politics” (64)? Benjamin contends that the loss of the aura due to mechanical reproduction via film and photography transformed the role of art in society into a political undertaking. Within the context of the increasingly globalized lives of the twenty-first century, art, and more specifically the artistic endeavor to defamiliarize an object, subject, or experience, is, necessarily, a political project that can make visible the underlying hegemonic discourses that surround an object, subject, or experience. Jacques Rancière’s definition of politics in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, underscores my stance: “politics revolv[e] around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time” (13). Art today encompasses not only the traditional mediums of oil, acrylics, bronze, and clay but also makes use of the viewer, social activism, and, as Nato Thompson notes in *Living as Form*,

“methods of working that allow genuine interpersonal human relationships to develop” (21). Where the artist’s relationship to the viewer has historically been, as Grant Kester traces in *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* “necessarily distanced and custodial” (54) as seen in Shklovsky’s conception of the artist and even Rancière’s notion of who has the “talent” to speak, the relationship now, via socially engaged art, “require[s] a mode of thinking rooted in the situational operation of identity and [that is] driven by a reciprocal testing of the assumptions of both theory and praxis” (83). Thus, socially engaged art often begins, not with an artist independently conceiving of a piece, as Kester observes in the *One and the Many*, but “with the experiential knowledge generated through collective or collaborative practice” (212).

The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his environment.
-D.H. Lawrence

In *Living as Form*, Nato Thompson defines socially engaged art as “not an art movement, [but rather a set of] cultural practices [that] indicate a new social order—ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power, and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theater and the visual arts” (19). Art historians, curators, and artists debate the parameters of the emergent field of socially engaged art. This paper will not articulate the debates between the individuals working to define this form and will instead define socially engaged art broadly, utilizing Thompson’s *Living as Form* as a template for organizing the many voices working to define the practice. Defining the practice broadly allows for examining all the different variations of the form and thus, all of the political and theoretical possibilities of the form. Thompson’s definition grows out of Nicolas Bourriard’s delineation of “relational aesthetics,” outlined in the text of the same name where art takes “as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent

and *private* symbolic space”¹ (emphasis in original 14); Suzanne Lacy’s denotation of “new genre public art” as “visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives”² (19); Grant Kester’s articulation of “dialogical aesthetics” which strives to “replace the ‘banking’ style of art in which the artist deposits an expressive content into a physical object, to be withdrawn later by the viewer, with a process of dialogue and conversation”³ (10); and Claire Bishop’s call for participatory art projects that “unseat all of the polarities on which [participatory art] is founded (individual/collective, author/spectator, active/passive, real life/art) but not with the goal of collapsing them”⁴ (*Living as Form* 40). Nato Thompson emphasizes the notion that socially engaged art today is art where “the personal is not only political but the interpersonal contains the seeds of political conflict inherently” (26) and marks “the strategic turn [away from the ephemerality of relational aesthetics] where we find works that are explicitly local, long-term, and community based” (31). Socially engaged art in the world and in *Living as Form* encompasses works done by individuals who identify as artists as well as people who identify as community activists because the question of what art is, is one that is always in flux. Kester explains in *The One and the Many* that “the elasticity of the category of ‘art’ in response to changing historical conditions, the opening out and the closing down, the varying centripetal and centrifugal movements as art periodically encompasses than expels other political and cultural modes is part of its very function within modernity” (38).

Returning to Viktor Shklovsky, if art exists to defamiliarize the everyday, while also

¹ See *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriard (1998) for a thorough examination of the historical background and philosophical underpinnings of relational aesthetics.

² For more on new genre public art as delineated by Suzanne Lacy see “Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,” *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Ed. Suzanne Lacy (1994).

³ See *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Grant H. Kester (2004).

⁴ For more on Claire Bishop’s take on participatory art and her opposition to Grant Kester’s views see *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Claire Bishop (2012).

paying attention to the complex political discourses that inevitably surround a piece, then we must, as Thompson does, analyze socially engaged art produced both by artists as well as other cultural producers. One such socially engaged piece is Elin Wikstrom's *Returnity*, in which red bicycles were ridden by the "audience" in reverse during summer of 1997 in Münster, Germany.⁵



Elin Wikstrom *Returnity* (1997)⁶

The piece was featured in Münster's Skulptur Projekt, an annual sculptural art exhibition, held primarily in outdoor public spaces. It is participatory art that, as Claire Bishop puts it in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, "emphasize[s] process over a definitive image, concept or object. It tends to value what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness" (6). In *Returning On Bikes: Notes on*

⁵For an in-depth analysis of this piece and others in the exhibition see *Contemporary Sculpture: Projects in Munster 1997*, Klaus Bussmann, Kasper König, Florian Matzner, eds. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997)

⁶ Photo courtesy of Elin Wikstrom.

Social Practice, Maria Lind asserted that cycling backwards “required leaving your safety zone to unlearn the most commonplace skill that you probably learned as a child, in order to see the world from an unusual perspective” (47). By making difficult something that is considered so easy that it has, in fact, become a cliché (i.e., “as easy as riding a bike”), the artist not only makes the ordinary strange, but she underscores art’s ability to transform one’s relationships with the everyday. The piece was not exhibited in a gallery but was installed outdoors and was as much about the backward cyclists, the co-producers of the piece, as it was about the piece itself. This type of art, art as social practice, is not meant to be passively pondered in an art salon by a certain segment of society but rather actively engaged with in the real world. It takes as its premise the notion that late capitalism has made people more passive, with less and less critical engagement with the world around them. Social practice art seeks to upend the traditional notions of art as spectacle, in centering around participation, and is important, as Claire Bishop notes in “Participation and Spectacle: Where are we Now?” because “it re-humanizes a society rendered numb and fragmented by the recessive instrumentality of capitalist production” (35). The participatory nature of art as social practice, art that necessitates viewer engagement, works to, in some small way, in Bishop’s words, “repair the social bond” (35). Nato Thompson explains further in “Living as Form” that social practice art is “defined by an active engagement with groups of people in the world, [yet, the artist’s] intentions and disciplines remain elusive” (19). In other words, it is art that speaks broadly to a host of different perspectives (but often remains apart from the artist), that is directed not at elite art critics and connoisseurs but at everyday people, that is participatory (sometimes ephemeral and sometimes long-term), and that is imbued with a social conscience. Cultural critics like Kyle Chayka argue that relational aesthetics, which helped to give rise to socially engaged art, “is the latest step in the process of

turning everything into art” (*WTF is...Relational Aesthetics*) but I agree with Nato Thompson that the point is “not to destroy the category of art, but—straining against edges where art blurs into the everyday—to take a snapshot of cultural production at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (26). This contention—one that sets aside arguments attempting to strictly define art, and, widening the net, allows for examining the effects, affects, and political efficacy of art, specifically art that works outside of traditional methodologies—echoes Sianne Ngai’s assertion in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* that, “if the first step in [identifying an aesthetic system in a historically situated context] is simply to notice which styles and judgments seem most central or pervasive, the next is to pursue the best explanation for why” (51-52). Why are so many twenty-first century artists creating pieces that defamiliarize cultural objects, viewing spaces, and human relations under late capitalism? Why, now, are artists creating art that requires an active engagement with the viewer, or co-producer, to be “complete?” Why are these pieces pointedly political? And what types of feelings, if any, can socially engaged art evoke in modern day viewers, viewers reduced, in Grant Kester’s words, to “an atomised pseudocommunity of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition” (*Conversation Pieces* 29).

In attempting to answer these questions, I believe that we can come closer to understanding the networks underlying contemporary art as well as modern day experience. Twenty-first century lives are increasingly mediated lives, lives that are lived both in the “real world” as well as through the cyber-spaces of social media and the World Wide Web. People get to know each other not only through face-to-face exchanges but also, and perhaps primarily, from our Facebook profiles, tweets, and hashtags. These filtered exchanges may help to explain why encountering a piece of art in the sanctioned space of the art gallery can seem so

inauthentic. We are accustomed to being inundated with visual data at all times, through our televisions, our computers, and our smart phones as well as billboards, signs, and posters and are unaccustomed to needing to go to a specific place to see art, much less art that is meant to be looked at rather than interacted with. Building on Boris Groys's idea in "Comrades of Time" that we live in a world of self-exhibitionism, exemplified by social media, where we have "spectacle[s] without spectators" (section 4 par. 7), is the notion that we spend little time really "seeing." Perhaps because the current epochal moment is so filled with visual data, from advertisements to Facebook pages to Instagram, art must work harder to make artfulness visible, thus the role of the viewer has shifted from passive observer to co-artist or co-producer. In fact, artworks in the heavily mediated, aesthetic world we live in no longer produce traditional aesthetic responses in viewers, either as taste judgments or affective responses. Indeed, the traditional aesthetic taste categories of wonder and the sublime delineated by philosophers such as Hume, Burke, and Kant no longer seem to epitomize the experience of contemporary art and, by extension, modern life. This categorical shift has occurred, to use Sianne Ngai's words, because "aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism" (1). Due to late capitalism, one rarely encounters art in the twenty-first century that can be categorized as wondrous or sublime; rather, one encounters art that is frequently zany, cute, or interesting. We will return to the specific reasons contemporary art (and life) finds the zany, the cute, and the interesting at every turn, but for now, it is enough to simply recognize a profound shift in aesthetic categories is at stake in the twenty-first century.

Nato Thompson points out that "perhaps in reaction to the steady state of mediated two-dimensional cultural production, or a reaction to the alienating effects of spectacle, artists,

activists, and citizens alike are rushing headlong into methods of working that allow genuine interpersonal human relationships to develop” (21). In lives that are divided between online presences and physical, tangible ones, it seems imperative that, in order to provoke an affective response from the viewer, the artist must privilege lived experience alongside the networks of human relations that crosses both planes. Intrinsic to this notion is a pedagogical component: the idea that art can help to instruct. Artists must “engage the ‘praxis’ of the everyday, enabling functional relationships between individuals, as collectives, and their environments, as new critical interfaces between research, artistic intervention, and the production of the city,” as Teddy Cruz insists (63). Simply put, art must have the ability to not only influence viewers in their everyday lives, but also to spark critical engagement with political ideas, such as issues of social justice or environmental awareness. We must spend time analyzing the affective response a piece incites from a viewer or co-artist, because, as Thompson persuasively argues, affect “derives from the understanding that how things make one feel is substantively different than how things make one think” (32). An affective response to a piece of art is, arguably, the stepping stone to thought and, by extension, the stepping stone to art as pedagogy or art as political or social change. Riding Elin Wikstrom’s *Returnity* bicycles, the viewer feels strange, child-like, and out of control. These feelings, emerging in response to the piece, can give rise to a multiplicity of thoughts, many of them political. One may make cognitive connections between cars and bicycles and between the environmental impact of cars versus the environmental impact of bicycles. Or perhaps, in riding the bikes with other volunteers, one feels a sense of community in the form of support from other cyclists also struggling to ride the bikes. The possible affective responses are varied, and the thoughts arising from the affective responses are even more so. In fact, the piece, as a work of social practice, defies traditional discursive boundaries, to use Nato

Thompson's words, by "focusing on [producing affects and effects], [and thus] producing new forms of living that force a reconsideration and perhaps a new language altogether" (32). One language that helps to delineate socially engaged art is the language of twenty-first century aesthetic categories, as outlined by Sianne Ngai.

The principles of true art are not to portray, but to evoke.
-George Santayana

Ngai asserts that the marginalized aesthetic groups of the zany, the interesting, and the cute are "important for the study of contemporary culture not simply because they index economic processes, but also because they give us insight into major problems in aesthetic theory that continue to inform the makings, dissemination, and reception of culture in the present" (2). This assertion means that not only will we find examples of the zany, the cute, and the interesting in practically every modern aesthetic, but also that they may, as Ngai contends, "offer ways of negotiating these problems affectively, both at the formal, objective level of style...and at the discursive, subjective level of judgment" (2). Broadly, the zany, the cute, and the interesting refer to the characters, styles, and genres we recognize instantly: the zany Robin Williams-like characters of comedy, the cute Zooey Deschanel-type women of romances, and the characters and images we don't quite know how to judge (but want to discuss and return to) of the interesting. But, of course, these aesthetic categories reach much farther than that. Sianne Ngai explains that they are about

production, in the case of zaniness (an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor); circulation, in the case of the interesting (an aesthetic about difference in the form of information and the pathways of its movement and exchange); and consumption, in the case of the cute (an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to

aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities). (1)

Simply put, zaniness refers to an aesthetic of constant movement, even in play, mirrored by the constant laboring of the late capitalist laborer; the interesting alludes to the vast networks that allow for the dissemination of information in the current epochal moment; and cuteness pertains to the commodity fetish and consumption. Art as social practice is not only symptomatic of the ever-presence of these aesthetic categories in contemporary culture but also diagnostic of the conditions of late capitalism. As we will see in the next section, socially engaged artists shine an often-unflattering light on the socio-political conditions underlying post-Fordist capitalism by “putting to work” the categories of the cute, the zany, and the interesting and the notion of defamiliarization to create artworks that are not simply meant to be encountered, but artworks that are meant to be engaged with in the real world—art as social practice.

I don't want life to imitate art. I want life to be art.
-Ernst Fischer

Although it takes many forms, socially engaged art is art that “address[es], mimic[s], subvert[s], and redefine[s] public processes, provoking us to reflect upon what kinds of forms—be they aesthetic, social, economic, or governmental—we want to sustain a life worth living” (Jackson 93).⁷ Silvina Babich and Alejandro Meitin’s artistic collaboration as *Ala Plástica* entailed compiling photographs, notes, maps, and satellite imagery to address how the landscape had been “made strange” in the most horrifying of ways as a result of the Magdalena oil spill along Argentina’s Rio de la Plata.⁸

⁷ See “Living Takes Many Forms” pg. 87-93 in *Living as Form* Ed. by Nato Thompson (2012) for further discussion of the question of art’s social function.

⁸ For photos and more information related to the project, see *Living as Form* Ed. Nato Thompson (2012) pg 98-99.



Ala Plástica Installation at Santa Monica Museum of Art for Citizen Culture: Artists and Architects Shape Policy⁹

The piece is steeped in the aesthetic of the interesting, utilizing information and, more specifically, the circulation of information to garner awareness about the oil spill and the effects the spill had on both human and non-humans alike. *Ala Plástica* worked across the disciplines of cartography, photography, history, and ecology to uncover information about the spill and then presented that information locally, globally, and on social media platforms. Their efforts contributed to Argentina’s Supreme Court decision to sponsor a \$35 million cleanup effort, elucidating how social practice art can not only address such issues but also effectuate change by encouraging governmental aid for environmental projects.

In 2006, another association, the Russian collective *Chto Delat?* (*What is to be Done?*)—a group comprised of artists, philosophers, poets, writers, set designers and others—orchestrated a protest known as “Angry Sandwich People” or “In Praise of Dialectics,” rallying against

⁹ Photo courtesy of Santa Monica Museum of Art for Citizen Culture.

contemporary labor inequities in Russia.¹⁰ The group, who considers themselves to be “art soviets,” displayed both Brecht’s poem, “In Praise of Dialectics,” and questions interrogating worker exploitation on sandwich boards, mimicking the low-wage advertising methods utilized by businesses.



Chto delat? “Angry Sandwich People” or “In Praise of Dialectics” (2005)¹¹

Utilizing the aesthetic of the interesting in its privileging of dialectics and the aesthetic of the zany in its emphasis on public performance, the piece worked to object peacefully to unfair labor practices by defamiliarizing a tool of everyday low-wage workers, the sandwich board, thus provoking public engagement with unfair labor practices that often go unnoticed.

Another socially engaged piece that utilizes minor aesthetic categories is Suzanne Lacy’s 1994 piece, “The Roof is on Fire,” involving 220 Oakland high school students sitting in cars

¹⁰ For more photos of the project see *Living as Form* Ed. Nato Thompson (2012) pg 129.

¹¹ Photo courtesy of Chto Delat

parked atop a rooftop garage talking frankly to each other about race, sex, gender, family, and violence in front of a large audience.¹²



Suzanne Lacy “The Roof is on Fire” (1994)¹³

The piece was filmed and aired locally, thus working to subvert the media’s typically negative portrayals of Oakland teens. By humanizing Oakland teenagers through the documentation of their conversations, the public can begin to question why Oakland teenagers—often black and located in a low socioeconomic class—are usually depicted as dangerous, violent, and in conflict with the police. These questions reveal the hegemonic race and class constructs that structure negative media representations. Further, by showing the students engaging in the everyday teen activity of talking in cars, the piece challenges assumptions about Oakland youth; through both

¹² See *Living as Form* Ed Nato Thompson (2012) pg. 178 for more information.

¹³ Photo courtesy of Suzanne Lacy.

the audience and the footage it is able, via the aesthetic of the interesting, to circulate that interrogation amongst a wider public.

Mammalian Diving Reflex is an arts and research group based in Toronto that stages specific interactions between people in public spaces in order to redefine social relationships.

“Haircuts for Children” involved training Parkdale Public School’s fifth and sixth graders in hair styling and culminated in a two-day event where the students—all ten, eleven, or twelve years of age—worked in groups as hairstylists.



“Haircuts for Children”¹⁴

The students trimmed hair, dyed hair, shaved necklines, cut layers, and blow-dried hair on their own, although under adult supervision. The piece used the cute, but able, children to question the rights of children and worked to redefine typical notions of children's abilities. All of the aforementioned pieces are examples of “living as form,” or living that is, in Shannon Jackson’s words, “actively produced” (93).

¹⁴ Photo Courtesy of Mammalian Diving Reflex (Photo by John Lauener)

As we have seen, socially engaged art employs many different techniques and methodologies and the boundaries between socially engaged art projects and social work, environmental activism, and even the avant-garde are difficult to determine. Gerald Raunig emphasizes the variety of social art practices in “Singers, Cynics, Molecular Mice: The Aesthetics of Contemporary Activism”:

[Social art practices] are heterogeneous, multiple, and diverse; they form a whole machinology consisting of many machines—like the actionist machines of Voina and Pussy Riot, like the instituent machines of Park Fiction and Isola Art Center, like the dividualizing machines of individual artists that are nuclei of abstract machines (e.g. Marcelo Exposito within Universidad Nomada, Euromayday, Las Agencias and many more), like the radical-performative machines of the Errorist International, The Yes Men or the Lab of Insurrectionary Imagination, like the queer machines of PublixTheatre Caravan, like the transversal machines of 16 Beaver or Chto Delat, and so many more.¹⁵ (69)

¹⁵Voina is a Russian collective of anarchist artists who produce politically radical street art (see en.free-voina.org); Pussy Riot is a Russian feminist punk rock collective that stages unsanctioned guerrilla performances and then posts them to the internet (see www.pussyriot.org); Park Fiction is a participatory planning project based in Hamburg, Germany that picnicked at a riverbank property purchased by developers for commercial use. The group urged locals to put the site to use as a park for festivals, public lectures, and exhibitions without getting permission for city officials first (see www.parkfiction.org); Isola Art Center is an art collective dedicated to protecting the only public spaces in the Isola neighborhood in Milan from privatization by creating and installing “fight-specific art” (see www.isolaartcenter.org); Universidad Nomada is a anticapitalist, decolonized, and feminist collective of academics, artists, and social activists dedicated to political activism in Spain (See p2pfoundation.net/Universidad_Nomada); EuroMayDay is a collective of social activists that, according to their website, organize a “transnational demonstration of precarious and migrant people” each May Day (See euromayday.org); Las Agencias is, to use their own words, a “network of autonomous groups working on the construction of biopolitical antagonism” (See www.sindominio.net/fiambreira/web-agencias/); Errorist International is a global collective of anti-capitalist artists who utilize a variety of methods ranging from street art to theater to produce socially engaged pieces (See erroristkabaret.wordpress.com); The Yes Men, founded by Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, work to promote political change through public pranks and other creative methods (See theyesmen.org); On their webpage, the laboratory of insurrectionary imagination says they are “an affinity of friends who recognise the beauty of collective creative disobedience” (See labofii.net); The PublixTheatre Caravan is a international theater group, based out of Vienna, that stages political theatrical performances in public space (See no-racism.net/nobordertour/index_uk.html); and 16 Beaver is a space dedicated to the production and discussion of political, artistic, cultural, and economic projects (See 16beavergroup.org).

Socially engaged art is a site of experimentation with artistic methodology and the everyday and its many forms reflect the innovation that exists within the field. Reiterating the definition of socially engaged art articulated by Nato Thompson as interdisciplinary cultural projects that focus on collaboration and challenge the dominant ideology of inequality inherent to late capitalism, one can readily see how socially engaged art includes sanctioned projects like the ones produced by Elin Wikstrom's *Returnity*, but also allows for radical and unsanctioned public expressions produced by collectives like Voina. The techniques of socially engaged artists varies widely but generally appear in public spaces such as parks, urban centers, city streets, and even on the walls of city buildings.

Oh my God, that's so cute. The way you just draw on stuff and think about yourself all the time.

-“Telephone Girl,” Banksy¹⁶

Graffiti, an art form growing out of the late 1960s practice of “tagging” subway cars and expanding in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s into various offshoots, is a fruitful place to begin an examination of art as social practice. Inherently political, spray-painting one's pseudonym, freehand, became a viable methodology for late 1970s and early 1980s hip-hop culture to reclaim the urban spaces in which they lived.¹⁷ In his last face-to-face interview in 2003, Banksy said, “just doing a tag is about retribution. If you don't own a train company then you go and paint on one instead” (“Something to Spray”). In transforming urban spaces, graffiti artists make visible their individual personas as well as the politics of representation at work in those spaces. The work of graffiti art is not complete until a viewer encounters a piece, an engagement which defamiliarizes the wall because such an event is always unexpected and transient, and, through its illegality, sheds light on the politics of lived spaces. Further, the viewer becomes witness to

¹⁶ For a photograph of the piece see Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, (2005) pg. 240

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the history of graffiti see Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff's *Spray Can Art* (1987) and, also, *Subway Art* (1984) by Chalfant and Martha Cooper.

the performance of graffiti, for, as Sonja Neef argues in “Killing Kool: The Graffiti Museum,” there is a “‘choreography’ [to] the sprayer who is ‘acting out forms’” (424). The tag or design “sprayed in aerosol becomes something of the *pneuma* of a breath; it is irreducibly bound up with the presence of the writing hand” (Neef 424). In other words, graffiti is irrevocably tied to the people producing the piece at a particular time in a particular location. This is unlike other forms of writing or painting, in that the graffiti form is so transient that it is always intricately tied to the present. However, through the aesthetic of the interesting and the circulation of the information on the Internet, graffiti in the twenty-first century can be both ephemeral and long-term. This is a tension we will explore in more detail in the following chapter.

Tagging is the most well known form of graffiti, but as Luke Dickens notes, “the dominance of [tagging] frequently obscures a diverse spectrum of alternative inscription cultures and styles” (472). As we will see, graffiti today is not limited to tagging; it encompasses stencils, murals, sculpture, video, vandalized paintings, and other forms. These seemingly disparate forms of graffiti are held together by the notions of reclamation and retribution and involve stenciling on somebody else’s property, sculpting utilizing someone else’s image, using someone else’s image for video, painting on top of someone else’s painting, or in some other way transgressing “private property.” Some art critics and theorists distinguish between “graffiti” and “street art,” a distinction that seems to stem from corporations and art houses’ attempts to commodify graffiti. By these strictures, the illegal defacing of private property, whether in the form of a building or a copyright infringement, is defined as “graffiti” whereas sanctioned art produced in the style of graffiti is usually called “street art.” For example, Peter Bengtsen notes that in February of 2008 Bonhams “held its first auction dedicated to urban art... , and later that year the Tate Modern in London hosted the exhibition *Street Art*” (67). Both exhibits featured curated art made in the

graffiti form rather than unsanctioned art on private property. As Cameron Mcauliffe notes in “Graffiti or Street Art? Negotiating the Moral Geographies of the Creative City,” “the sometimes arbitrary separation of graffiti from street art by metropolitan agencies has allowed an embrace and even valorization of the power of ‘street art’ to activate space, at a time of increasing criminalization of ‘graffiti’” (190). For the purposes of this paper, the art auction house distinction will not be observed and the two terms (street art and graffiti) will be used interchangeably to refer to artworks done by anonymous artists on private property.

Graffiti, although often textual, must be categorized as socially engaged art because it is a cultural practice deeply invested in transforming the public’s interaction with everyday spaces through a reclamation of the private for the public, that is produced sometimes by individual artists but also, oftentimes, produced by groups of artists. Graffiti works to fight back against a world, described by Gregory Sholette and Blake Stimson in *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, as “all but totally subjugated by the commodity form and the spectacle it generates” (12). It is a form of socially engaged art that, much like collectives like *Ala Plástica* or *Park Fiction* is difficult to curate and exists outside of the canon of contemporary art. It is created by everyday people, for everyday people, and is characterized by a particular attention to, what Kester calls in *The One and the Many* “the nuances of space and visuality, of integration and isolation, which structure a given site” (152). For a more thorough examination of graffiti as social practice, we must now turn our attention to one of the most notorious graffiti artists working today, an artist commonly known as Banksy.

Art is an revolutionary act. The shape of art and its role in society is constantly changing. At no point is art static. There are no rules.
-Raymond Salvatore Harmon

Not much can be definitively said about Banksy's origin and upbringing. His interviews, frequently conducted by email, contradict each other. Sometimes he claims to be from Bristol, and other times he claims to be from Yate. Some articles report that he has a gold tooth, others claim that he has a silver tooth, and still others say that he has both. A recent article argued that, although typically represented as a male, Banksy is, in fact, a woman, citing his frequent use of misdirection as proof.¹⁸ Banksy, like all street artists, must remain anonymous because what he does is illegal, but his anonymity also forces the viewer to wrestle with the art rather than the artist. Banksy's anonymity echoes Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author," where it is the reader, not the artist, who ultimately makes sense of the work. In this way, even Banksy's origin story, or lack of one, incites engagement with the work because the viewer is left with no historical clues from the artist and must engage with the piece itself. Further, it is commonly believed that Banksy collaborates with a team of artists to create his more elaborate pieces, a process that underscores his emphasis on community and participation, not only on the viewer and the artwork but also on the creative process itself. What can be said, however, is that Banksy is a social practice artist: his works reveal a desire to, in the words of Claire Bishop "emancipate [the audience] from a state of alienation induced by the dominant ideological order—be this consumer capitalism, totalitarian socialism, or military dictatorship" (*Living as Form* 36). Art as social practice is the realization of Stuart Hall's rearticulation of Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectual" in "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies:" it is "a genuine cultural and critical practice, which is intended to produce some kind of organic intellectual political work, which does not try to inscribe itself in the overarching meta-narrative of achieved knowledges, within the institutions" (44). This paper seeks to unpack how socially engaged art in the twenty-

¹⁸ For a detailed explanation of this argument see Kriston Capp, "Why Banksy is (Probably) a Woman." *CityLab*. 4 November 2014.

first century is both a cultural and political practice—steeped in the minor aesthetic categories of the cute, the zany, and the interesting—through a close reading of Banksy’s New York city “exhibition,” *Better Out Than In*.

Banksy’s N.Y.C. residency elicited immense public attention. In an October press conference Mayor Bloomberg issued a press release stating:

But look, graffiti does ruin people’s property and it’s a sign of decay and loss of control. Art is art. And nobody’s a bigger supporter of the arts than I am. I just think there are some places for art and there are some places [not for] art. And you running up to somebody’s property or public property and defacing it is not my definition of art. Or it may be art, but it should not be permitted. And I think that’s exactly what the law says. (Landers and Watson)

Bloomberg’s response is interesting in that it brings to light the issues of authority/protest, authenticity/inauthenticity, private/public, and accessibility/exclusivity underscored by Banksy’s exhibit. The “loss of control” caused by graffiti is an undermining of the hegemonic influences inherent to late capitalism and is exactly what Banksy strives for. Banksy paints, sculpts, and stages performances on private spaces to reclaim them from the corporate onslaught of consumerism and to make art available to the people. By existing in the city rather than the gallery, Banksy’s work is found unexpectedly, and subsequently forces the viewer to engage with both its political content as well as its form, even if only for a moment. Art’s audience is no longer limited to the intellectual echelon but is now accessible to the multitude in a form they can comprehend without first taking an art history class. Following the logic of J. Jack Halberstam as articulated in *The Queer Art of Failure*, Banksy, and by extension his art “works with others, with a class of people in Marxist terms, to sort through the contradictions of

capitalism and to illuminate the oppressive forms of governance that have infiltrated everyday life” (17).

One major criticism of Banksy has been his overwhelming success within capitalist society. His pieces sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars; a fact that many believe undermines his ability to effectuate change. Banksy’s continued critique of consumerist culture, most recently illuminated in *Better Out Than In*, indicates his unwavering devotion to undermining the hegemonic power structures of late capitalism and, consequently, firmly defines him as the epitome of the socially engaged artist. Banksy has no financial need to create art, much less illegal, politically controversial, highly criticized art. In fact, perhaps the most sensible reason to continue along such a disparaging path *is* to embody the organic intellectual by creating social practice art. When Lauren Collins asked him in an interview conducted via email, “Why do you do what you do?,” Banksy replied ironically, “I originally set out to try to save the world, but now I’m not sure I like it enough” (30).

Bringing it to the Street: Examining Socially Engaged Art in Banksy's *Better Out Than In*¹

Artists to my mind are the real architects of change, and not the political legislators who implement change after the fact.

— William S. Burroughs

October 1, 2013

Good artists copy, great artists steal.
—Pablo Picasso



Banksy "The Street is in Play" (2013)²

The first installment in *Better Out than In* is a piece entitled, "The Street is in Play," depicting two life-size early nineteenth century male street urchins. They are rendered in black

¹ The website has been taken down but you can still see it by entering the url (www.banksyny.com) into the search tab at:<http://archive.org/web/> (The Wayback Machine Internet Archive).

² Photo retrieved from public domain.

and white, furthering the anachronistic feel of the piece. One boy is bent over to embody a makeshift stool for the other boy, who reaches into the sign to grab the spray paint can from within the red “No” symbol above the “Graffiti is a Crime” lettering. The bent over boy appears to be smiling while the boy that is reaching for the aerosol can appears to be quite serious. The juxtaposition between the cute smiling boy and the cute serious boy reflects the juxtaposition that lies in the aesthetic of cute writ large: the smiling boy mirrors Sianne Ngai’s articulation of cute objects as “objects [that] have no edge to speak of” (59)— and the serious boy mirrors her conception of the acute as “conventionally imagined as hard and cutting edge” (59). The tension between the cute and the acute in the piece lays bare the average citizen’s ability to fight back against the hegemonic discourses underlying modern experience, even when the citizen is a cute child who is generally considered devoid of power. The smiling child even seems to enjoy the fight, while the serious child shows a certain amount of determination through his earnest expression. The scene characterizes graffiti, as defined by Banksy in *You are an Acceptable Level of Threat and if you Were not you Would Know about it (You...it)*, as “a way of snatching power, territory and glory from a bigger and better equipped army” (*You...it*).³ The boys, clearly positioned within a low economic status—a status that is historically rendered silent by dominant discourses—take the paint can as the first step in vocal actuation. The piece defamiliarizes the wall by working on multiple levels: the two-dimensional boys reach into the three dimensional sign to grab the two-dimensional spray paint can lurking within. Banksy then photographs the piece and uploads it to his website, adding another way to encounter the work. The website includes audio commentary on some of the pieces, which serves to ironically “explain” the art

³ Although the book bears his name, Banksy has not formally accepted authorship and the book is unpaginated.

and add another layer of defamiliarization to the piece.⁴ The surprise encounter that the piece loses when taken out of the context of the city and uploaded to the World Wide Web is countered by the unexpected audio commentary. The inclusion of such commentary is atypical, and it mocks the idea that one requires the artist's explanation to give meaning to a piece. As I touched upon in the introduction, Roland Barthes dispels such a myth through his discussion of literature in "The Death of the Author" : "[thus] is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (148). The viewer, not the artist, assigns meaning to a work of art. Much in the same way literature lends itself to multiple interpretations so does art, with no one interpretation privileged over the other. Walter Benjamin furthers this notion when he explains that "the rigid, isolated object (work, novel, book) is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations" (64). The audio commentary, presumably voiced by Banksy pretending not to be Banksy, describes the artist's method: "this effect is achieved by spraying automotive spray paint through an intricately cut shape in a piece of cardboard—or, to give it its proper term—'cheating'" (*Better Out Than In*). The methodology of the street artist is predicated on two things: first, creating the art, and secondly, not getting arrested. Therefore, most street artists work under the cover of darkness with stencils and paint or with glue and pre-designed works to avoid getting caught. These techniques hide the artist from law enforcement while allowing him/her to create elaborate pieces very quickly, thus eluding imprisonment. By describing the typical techniques of street artists as 'cheating,' Banksy forces the viewer to question the authenticity of street art. He defamiliarizes the assumed

⁴ Audio commentary can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-w6TiMQJxsYeEkhSdGRyaUJ0D7RSf3y>

techniques of the artist and even art itself. What, exactly, is art? Who gets to define it? As I noted in the introduction, Walter Benjamin asks if, in regards to art in the modern age, the “criterion of authenticity [has] cease[d] to be appli[cable] to artistic production, [so that] the whole social function of art [has been] revolutionized?” Banksy’s work affirms that art, at this moment in time, is and must be “based on a different practice: politics...” (64). For Benjamin it was the loss of the historicity of the piece—what he referred to as the loss of the aura—that led to his claim. Jacques Rancière further explains in “What Medium Can Mean” that for Benjamin, “the essential thing is that [photographs] are products of the machine age, the age of mass existence and the man of the masses; and, moreover, that these products are also ways of training contemporaries how to decipher this new lived world and orient themselves in it” (37). The loss of the aura opens art up to politicization, whether it is in the form of socially engaged art or the fascist propaganda Benjamin alluded to in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction,” however, it is important to note that Benjamin made the claim during the Fordist-years of assembly line production rather than the post-Fordist years of massive consumption. Art remains open to politics, the aura is still lost, however socially engaged artists must now contend with the issues of inequality and ownership inherent to late capitalism. Thomas Piketty’s definition of capital in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* sheds light on the need to attend to who owns what and how they come to that ownership:

Capital is not an immutable concept: it reflects the state of development and prevailing social relations of each society... The boundary between what private individuals can and cannot own has evolved considerably over time and around the world, as the extreme case of slavery indicates. The same is true of property in the atmosphere, the sea, mountains, historical monuments, and knowledge.

Certain private interests would like to own these things, and sometimes they justify this desire on the grounds of efficiency rather than mere self-interest, but there is no guarantee that this desire coincides with the general interest. (47)

Piketty's articulation of the changing nature of what can be owned is particularly germane to a discussion of socially engaged art as a whole, and, more specifically, graffiti. Socially engaged artists challenge the dominant narrative and graffiti--socially engaged art that works to reclaim public spaces from private ownership--strives to upend dominant notions of who owns what. Calling attention to the fact that only a few elite people get to make decisions about what is displayed in the city for the majority, graffiti argues against private ownership as well as elitism in general.

The audio commentary for "The Street is in Play" addresses the political relationship between art and the bourgeoisie:

What exactly is the artist trying to say here? Is this a response to the primal urge to take the tools of our oppression and turn them into mere playthings? Or perhaps it's a postmodern comment on how the signifiers of objects have become as real as the objects themselves. Are you kidding me? Who writes this stuff? Anyway, you decide. Really. Please do.

I have no idea. (*Better Out Than In*)

Banksy uses the vernacular of the academic to ponder the meaning of the piece. This is highly satirical commentary as Banksy has lambasted the elitism of mainstream art on countless occasions. In fact, in *Wall and Piece*, he says:

The Art we look at is made by only a select few. A small group create, promote, purchase, exhibit and decide the success of Art. Only a few

hundred people in the world have any real say. When you go to an art gallery you are simply a tourist looking at the trophy cabinet of a few millionaires. (169)

The proficient use of scholarly language is not only ironic, but it also showcases Banksy's dexterity with theoretical concepts, thereby pinpointing the axis where theory and practice merge. Stuart Hall elucidates the importance of such a merger: "it is the job of the organic intellectual to know more than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know, not just to have the facility of knowledge, but to know deeply and profoundly" (38). Further, Banksy's use of satire is inherently defamiliarizing, which adds another layer of engagement to the piece. Satire defamiliarizes because it challenges expectations, and, taken at face value one expects Banksy's academic assessment of the piece to continue. So when Banksy ridicules his own scholarly discussion, when he satirizes his own words, the viewer is challenged to find the meaning of what he just said. *Have* the children reappropriated the 'tools of [their] oppression' to fight the capitalist hegemony that surrounds them? *Are* the depictions rendered by the piece 'as real as the objects themselves?', (*Better Out Than In*). Banksy uses the audio commentary as a defamiliarizing tool that mimics the defamiliarization that the piece evokes when encountered on the street. Further, building on Ngai's analysis of the conceptual art of the 1960s, the audio commentary's function in the piece is to provide evidence "in support of [the piece's] implicit claim to be interesting, and in a manner that curiously subordinates the moment of judgment (which we oddly become aware of only retroactively) to the more conspicuously time-consuming presentation of evidence on its behalf" (167). The listener, while judging the piece, considers the complex questions raised in the audio commentary, questions that in a way, prove that the piece is interesting. Moreover, by asking the viewer to interpret the work, the

audio commentary not only engages the viewer in the act of criticism but it also shows, following Ngai, how the aesthetic of the interesting “crosses the border between the common and the specialized, bespeaking a desire to open up the ‘serious’ group founded on the possession of specialized knowledge...in a way that once again points to its special relation to pedagogy” (172). The specialized language of the critic or academic, complete with questions of hegemonic influence and the relationship between signifiers and the signified, is made available to all of the viewers of the piece, both those who exist within academia and those who do not. Such a merger mirrors J. Jack Halbertam’s movement between high and low theory in *The Queer Art of Failure*: the piece “darts back and forth between high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge, in order to push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory...”(2). This ‘darting back and forth’ makes the piece not only accessible, but also interesting to a wider audience. Further, the audio commentary ends with instructions to the viewer to define the art. This again mirrors Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” and shifts the power away from hegemonic discourses and back into the hands of the people.

“The Street is in Play,” as a work of street art, represents Benjamin’s description of a “technologically reproduced” piece of art but still manages to maintain the “here and now of the artwork” (61). Banksy’s work achieves technological reproducibility through the aforementioned techniques of spray paint and stencils, as well as the supplemental website and audio commentary. However, in most of his pieces (“The Street is in Play” included) Banksy asserts that “the punch line comes from the placement” (*You...It*). “The Street is in Play” is located in lower Manhattan, New York City’s center of business and government. By situating this artwork, which is critical of the capitalist hegemony, illegally in the center of commerce and government, Banksy speaks to the authorities, attacking “the establishment to remind you of your own power,

not just for the sake of it. The point is, art should be truly democratic, truly a part of everybody's life and not just another gang bang for the over-privileged" (Banksy *You...It*).

October 2, 2013

There's nothing more dangerous than someone who wants to make the world a better place.
— Banksy



Banksy Untitled (2013)⁵

The piece Banksy revealed on October 2, 2013 is an untitled monochrome work in which he wrote—in a style reminiscent of, in the words of cultural geographer Luke Dickens, “a ‘classic’ model of graffiti ‘writing’—involving the subcultural practices of ‘tagging’ and ‘piercing’ with spray paint—with its origins in Philadelphia and New York during the 1960s” (472): “This is my New York Accent.” Underneath this tagged tribute to the originators of street art, in tiny newspaper-like print, are the words, “... [sic] normally I write like this” (Better Out Than In). This work, situated in the primarily residential Westside neighborhood known as Chelsea, pays homage to the original graffiti artists who paved the way for artists like Banksy. He defamiliarizes his own style, while at the same time paying tribute to the styles that came

⁵ Photo retrieved from public domain.

before him. By emphasizing textual differences, Banksy utilizes the aesthetic of the interesting, an aesthetic that, building off of romantic literary critics' notions of the "interessante," is, according to Ngai, "a distinctively modern, contemporary style" that began "first as an aesthetic of eclectic difference" (112). Here Banksy plays with different textual styles, one that mimics the style of classic graffiti tagging and one that mimics newsprint. The news print text is not typically utilized in graffiti, it is an unexpected and interesting use of textual difference, that, as Ngai suggests, "ascribes value to that which seems to differ, in a yet-to-be-conceptualized way, from a general expectation or norm whose exact concept may itself be missing at the moment of judgment" (112). It shows that Banksy is "fluent" in the New York graffiti style, but is also "fluent" in a more formal textual style. Banksy identifies himself as an outsider, an alien, participating in the New York version of graffiti. In many ways the piece serves as a sort of call and response. It is the graffiti artists' way to call out to other graffiti artists and urge them to respond, thus engaging in socially engaged art that produces, in Thompson's words, "an active engagement with groups of people in the world" (19). Within hours, the local New York graffiti artists responded to the piece in color, first to the side of his piece with "...[sic] then speak Banksy" and then, later, over Banksy's piece with, "so what!" Indeed, building on Stengers' work, Ngai asserts that the aesthetic of the interesting "is what links or reticulates actors; it is not just an adjective but a verb for the action of associating" (114). By speaking back to Banksy via graffiti, the New York Graffiti artists collaborate with Banksy in a socially engaged art project, thus creating a network of sorts, one that invents or enables strands of liminality. This piece pays respect to the originators of the art form, the graffiti artists of New York City, and shows that Banksy sees himself as part of the global graffiti community rather than a celebrity-of-sorts functioning outside it. An individual, coming across the piece either in the city or on the internet,

is made aware of the complex relationships and circulation of information that exist within the graffiti art collective, while, at the same time, the viewer is implicitly instructed through the various graffiti styles and attitudes towards Banksy to pay attention to the signs and signifiers one encounters while wandering the city or the internet.

“Banksy’s New York Accent” illustrates what “sets of communicative genres are valued in what way (newspapers versus cinema for example) and what sorts of pragmatic genre conventions govern the collective ‘readings’ of different kinds of text” (Appadurai 220). As the street artists who responded to Banksy through pieces of their own demonstrated, Banksy’s graffiti tribute is valued by one and devalued by the other in ways that do not resonate outside of the graffiti community. Like any true socially engaged art vigilante, Banksy does not shy away from confrontation, and his next move responds to his New York contemporaries.

October 3, 2013

People say graffiti is ugly, irresponsible and childish... but that's only if it's done properly.
—Banksy



Banksy “All I Ever Wanted was a Shoulder to Crayon” (2013)⁶

⁶ Photo retrieved from public domain.

“All I Ever Wanted was a Shoulder to Crayon” appeared in Mid Chelsea, not far from the October 2nd piece. The title alludes to Banksy’s desire for camaraderie amongst his peers, wanting to metaphorically “crayon,” a pun on “cry on,” fellow graffiti artists’ shoulders. The piece elaborates on this notion further by depicting a silhouetted dog lifting his leg to urinate on a silhouetted fire hydrant that says, via a cartoon thought bubble, “You complete me” (*Better Out Than In*). The thought bubble situates the piece in the realm of the aesthetically interesting because it binds the peeing dog to the fire hydrant, or, more precisely, it “facilitate[s] kinds of “betweenness”—relays, conduits, associations—that in turn facilitate the circulation of ideas, objects, and signs” (Ngai 115). This piece also captures Dick Hebdige’s formulation of the “tensions between dominant and subordinate groups...reflected in the surfaces of subculture—in the styles made up of mundane objects which have double meaning” (431). Here the dog represents the street artist, or “sprayer,” and marks his/her territory by urinating, or “spraying,” the city, which is represented by the fire hydrant. This is underscored by the audio commentary accompanying the piece on the website, “wouldn’t the architecture forced upon our streets be incomplete without the maverick stains of those answering back?” (*Better Out Than In*). Banksy believes that the street artist “completes” the city by voicing the political interests of the masses and, in that way, creates what he calls in *Wall and Piece* “a city that fe[els] like a party where everyone [i]s invited, not just the estate agents and barons of big business” (97). Banksy manages to also respond to the New York graffiti artists that conversed with “This is my New York Accent,” but in this interpretation the dog is the New York street artists’ work and the fire hydrant is Banksy’s piece. In this light, Banksy is simultaneously critiquing graffiti artists that would silence another street artist as well as inviting New York graffiti artists to join the conversation, thereby *completing* Banksy’s democratic vision as a socially engaged artist.

October 4, 2013

One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It's simply too painful to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that we've been taken. Once you give a charlatan power over you, you almost never get it back.

— Carl Sagan



Banksy “Random Graffiti Given a Broadway Makeover” (2013)⁷

Three pieces appear in New Jersey, comprising a series entitled, “Random Graffiti Given A Broadway Makeover.” All three pieces were originally comprised of a simple phrase written in a plain style that does not fit the more elaborate style of the typical street artist. It is reasonable

⁷ Photo retrieved from public domain.

to assume that the text Banksy modifies was originally produced, not by professional street artists, but by amateurs. This is important to note because Banksy's modifications are, under these parameters, not disrespecting the local graffiti artists. Banksy transforms these texts by adding "The Musical," in lettering that faithfully reproduces Broadway signage. The Occupy piece was buffed within twenty-four hours. Banksy's Instagram account documents the exhibit and provides a forum for viewers to respond to the pieces. Hambone650 notes astutely that "its funny how they paint over the 'Occupy' one right after Banksy adds 'the musical' to it. How come no one cared about it when it was just OCCUPY?" (emphasis in original Instagram @banksy.co.uk). Perhaps people care about Occupy when "the musical" is added because, as AK Thompson notes, these types of "incongruous pairings show signs of enabling productive disorientation" (53), while the emphasis on eclectic difference situates the pieces, like the New York Accent piece we examined earlier, firmly within the aesthetic of the interesting. The interesting is an aesthetic category that creates, in Ngai's words, "relays between affect-based judgment[s] and concept-based explanation[s] in a manner that binds heterogeneous agencies together and enables movement across disciplinary domains" (116). In this case, the viewer is made to consider the addition of "The Musical" to the plain text offerings of "Playground Mob," and "Occupy," thus criticizing the tendency of capitalist society to render any subject matter into a moneymaking machine. The 2012 Broadway season produced such musicals as, "The Bodyguard," "Let it Be," and "First Date: The Musical," encompassing adaptations of movies, musical histories, and the pitfalls of dating in the twenty-first century, perhaps indicating a less than inappropriate comparison to Banksy's "Dirty Underwear: The Musical."

October 5, 2013

*What's the use of a fine house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?
— Henry David Thoreau*

Banksy converted what he describes on his website as a “New York delivery truck ... into a mobile garden (includes rainbow, waterfall and butterflies)” (*Better Out Than In*), which is driven around the city every evening during his stay. The truck’s sides display the work of local graffiti artists and the back remains open, enabling public viewing of the lush tropical scene inside, surreal with its too-perfect palm trees, mountains, an eternal sun, pink and yellow flowers, a stream, and the aforementioned rainbow, waterfall, and butterflies. On one level, it works to support Bruce Robbins’ description in “The Sweatshop Sublime” of people “all inhabiting their own little worlds, oblivious of how they fitted into the total picture” (84). Although devoid of people, the piece creates a little world that is encapsulated within a larger world— a world that remains hidden from within the piece. Further, the little world is an idealized world, complete with a romanticized depiction of Nature.



Banksy “A New York delivery truck converted into a mobile garden (includes rainbow, waterfall and butterflies)” (2013)⁸

The traveling diorama features a prominent rainbow, which Philip Fisher delineates as the iconic symbol for wonder in *Wonder, The Rainbow and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* due to its rarity (yet frequent enough to be well known), erotics of color, transiency, arc, and relationality to an observer. Fisher explains that the “essence of the aesthetic state of wonder is the play of the mind over the details of the object itself...In the attention brought about by wonder, the capacity to notice the actual details of the object is a strategy on the part of pleasure that seeks to last as long as possible” (39). However, the scene depicted within the frame of the truck is a scene that does not quite elicit wonder, not only because the rainbow is tiny and not real, but also because, dulled by the everyday onslaught of commercial spectacle and visual stimuli, people seem to be less impressed by objects once considered wondrous, even rainbows. As Hal Foster argues, we live in a time when the “aesthetic and utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything...from jeans to genes—seems to be regarded as so much *design*” (17). Thus, where the rainbow once produced a rarefied experience of wonder or awe, it now (in the simulacra of the itinerant nature scene) produces something less noticeable—the aesthetic experience of the interesting-- described deftly by Ngai as a “judgment based not on an existing concept of the object but on a feeling, hard to categorize in its own right, that in spite of its indeterminacy aptly discerns or alerts us precisely to what we do not have a concept for (yet) (116). In other words, the mobile garden, complete with imitation rainbow, produces an aesthetic judgment in the viewer that is not as powerful as traditional aesthetic notions of wonder, but is, more precisely, described as a sort of dull curiosity.

⁸ Photo retrieved from public domain.

The tiny scene effectively makes Nature, once considered wondrous and sublime, cute. The miniaturized mobile garden elucidates how “cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for ‘small things’ but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further” (Ngai 3). Moreover, locating the traveling garden within a truck builds on the romantic pastoralism interrogated by Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* but situates the garden in the machine rather than the other way around. The effect of this reversal is the heightened awareness of Nature as spectacle, as Other, and as “controllable” by humans. It problematizes the Romantic’s notion of a sort of harmony existing between human, nature, and machine—perhaps defamiliarizing the relationship between all three. The viewer is brought to question what Bill Devall describes in *Deep Ecology* as the “dominant worldview of technocratic-industrial societies which regards humans as isolated and fundamentally separate from the rest of Nature, as superior to, and in charge of, the rest of creation” (65). Further, its deft use of the interesting via the juxtaposition of differing elements—Nature represented by the diorama and the machine represented by the truck—prompts viewers to question how one defines Nature in the current moment. Does Nature include trucks and cars and mobile gardens? Are humans a part of Nature or separate from Nature? Gabriel Egan argues in *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* that “[i]f everything is nature..., then nothing is, for the word has nothing from which to distinguish itself” (130).

Of course, in late capitalism Nature has become difficult to identify not only because wildernesses are disappearing, but also because perhaps, as Timothy Luke argues in *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politic of Nature, Economy, and Culture*, “Nature, in all of its wild mystery and awesome totality, is not being preserved. It is, in fact, dead... Nonetheless, its memory might be kept alive at numerous burial parks... where glimpses of its spirit should be remembered by

human beings in a whiff of wildlife, the scent of a stream, or the aroma of surf” (71). If Nature is dead, then the scene located within the truck is not only cute, but also representative of late capitalism’s devastating environmental impact. The simulated tranquil scene, located ironically within a mobile, four-cylinder, gas-guzzling truck, also belies the twenty-first century “belief that we can adapt, evolve beyond this death [of the human], and remain one with our habitat, wherever and however produced,” postulated by Glenn Willmott in *Modern Animalism* (120). Questions of what constitutes Nature are fodder for the socially engaged artist because, as Timothy Luke posits in “The Practices of Adaptive and Collaborative Environmental Management: A Critique,” “nature is always a political asset” (4). Quite simply, the piece represents Nature as a mobile commodity, controllable by humans and easily transportable to wherever people want to move it, likely to where it will make the most money.

Banksy supplements the piece online with audio commentary where the artist is referred to as “Bambi,” in reference to the cute Disney character who lives an idyllic forest life until human hunters kill his mother. The allusion serves as a relatively explicit reminder of the relationships between cuteness and violence (in this case the slaughter of Bambi’s mother) and between cuteness and consumption (in this case hunting and the possibility of eating Bambi’s mother). The reference also critiques man’s domination of animals and Nature while at the same time satirically aligning Banksy with the Disneyfied tropes that Judith J. Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure* “[join] a narrative of hope to a narrative of humanity and entertain a critique of bourgeois humanism only long enough to assure its return” (22).

The audio refers to the “over twenty-two gallons of water the waterfall pumps per minute,” heightening the absurdity of such a wasteful waterfall (Banksy). The speaker, again presumed to be Banksy, closes the commentary by noting the work’s evocation of a “comparison

between painting unused walls of buildings and the acts of the farmers of the Great Depression who—being kicked off their land by large corporations—took to sowing seeds illicitly” (*Better Out Than In*). Graffiti artists and other socially engaged artists, like the aforementioned farmers, are forced into illegal behaviors by corporations in an attempt to reclaim public spaces from what Banksy calls “the hands of absent landlords at the end of long chains of middle men, propping up a tiny class of prospectors using the city as an investment portfolio....[such] ownership is an illusion. Painting on the walls challenges that illusion” (*You...It*).

October 6, 2013

*I am rich because I always engineer my strokes of luck.
-Scrooge McDuck*

On this day of the exhibition, Banksy posted a highly controversial YouTube video depicting a scene entitled “Rocket Rebel Attack,” seemingly broadcast on the Middle Eastern television network, Al Jazeera, in which three rebel soldiers fight a flying enemy, later revealed to be the iconic Disney character known as Dumbo. Using a cute, animated symbol makes the critique more palatable for an American public while bringing into question what Halberstam calls in *The Queer Art of Failure* “the terms [and] the meanings of the artificial boundaries between humans, animals, machines, states of life and death, animation and reanimation, living, evolving, becoming, and transforming” (33). Moreover, Disney characters, and character-based commodities (mugs, t-shirts, stuffed animals, movies, etc.) are some of the most recognizable in the world. Steven Watts notes in “Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century” that “From Chile to China, tens of millions of people who had never heard of Franklin D. Roosevelt or William Faulkner or Martin Luther King Jr. could identify Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck in an instant” (84). Viewers everywhere will likely know exactly who Dumbo is and see him as a symbol of American culture. Moreover, the American culture that the film *Dumbo* represents is a

product of both Walt Disney's personal conservative values and 1941 societal norms. Claudine Michel wisely notes that Disney movies of this time period in particular were "stark moral tales of Good vs Evil, the forces of light against the forces of darkness" (10). This is important to note because Disney movies, both then and now, clearly reify "the cultural and political conservatism of the American midstream in relation to national, racial and ethnic identities and stereotypes" (Michel 11). *Dumbo* is no exception; in fact, the crows in the film are thinly veiled caricatures of African Americans who speak a "hep, jive-like" vernacular, play Jazz music, and are led by a character rather unbelievably named "Jim Crow." *Dumbo*, then, is not only a symbol of American culture, but because the stereotypes employed by the film can easily be extended to an Othering of Middle Eastern peoples, he is also a symbol of structuralized racism and cultural imperialism. Moreover, the movie *Dumbo* was made specifically in an attempt to recoup the financial losses Disney suffered during the making of *Fantasia*, so *Dumbo* also symbolizes what Banksy calls neoliberalism's "relentless, obsessive accumulation of wealth" (*You...It*).

The video is set in a desert, and the men are wearing traditional headdresses called keffiyehs—worn in different variations throughout the Middle East. The men are clothed in khet partooq's—which is the traditional attire of the Pashtun people, who are primarily located in Afghanistan and Pakistan—and they repeat "Allah Akbar," an Arabic phrase that roughly translates to "God is Great" in English. Each man holds a weapon: one man holds a Rocket-Propelled Grenade (RPG), "currently used by more than forty countries;"⁹ one man holds an M4 carbine, a weapon "characterized as a 'ubiquitous' element of U.S. Army tactical operations;"¹⁰ and one man holds an AK47, "a global brand—the Coca-Cola of small arms."¹¹ These men are

⁹ Wobkenberg, et al. 622

¹⁰ Gourley 54

¹¹ Hodges 62

representative of any number of stereotypes of Middle Eastern nations but cannot be accurately narrowed down to just one based on the information the video provides. All that can be reasonably determined about the men is that they are at war with an American culture, represented by Dumbo, that may have once been an ally, as evidenced by the American M4. Revealing the enemy as Dumbo is utterly strange and unexpected, a defamiliarization of the notion of the “enemy” for a Western viewer. It forces the viewer to confront the often benign, and even cute, appearance of the enemy in the arena of culture and reinforces the invisibility of the hegemonic power structures of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity that govern our daily lives. As Michel wisely explains, “in the best old children’s stories, the wolf or the evil stepmother is always more effective if he or she approaches the door disguised as a harmless figure” (14). Racism and colonialism are more difficult to identify in the cartoon forms of an crow or elephant, while these cute, animated versions are, at the same time, a much more effective cultural reinforcer of such discourses than realistic depictions. Or, as Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart brilliantly declare, “reading Disney is like having one’s own exploited condition rammed with honey down one’s throat” (99). Dumbo symbolizes the binarism Judith Butler criticizes in *Precarious Lives*, a binarism “that returns us to an anachronistic division between ‘East’ and ‘West’ and which, in its sloshy metonymy, returns us to the invidious distinction between civilization (our own) and barbarism (now coded as ‘Islam’ itself)” (2).

The little boy in the video kicks the man who shoots down Dumbo, a move that indicates the child’s exposure to what Banksy argues is “the most powerful propaganda machine ever known and the most expensive standing military force in history” (*You...It*). Dumbo is not only a representation of America-as-enemy and of late Capitalism’s commodity fetish, but he is, more specifically, a cute commodity, one whom, as Ngai explains, “flatteringly seems to want us and

only us as its mommy...the cute commodity, for all of its pathos of powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands...” (64). Dumbo, as a cute character, is able to elicit support from the child in the video, a child that more than likely has little reason to be in support of American foreign policies in the Middle East. The piece utilizes Halberstam’s articulation of *low theory* in *The Queer Art of Failure* as, “a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory” (16) in order to evoke “serious public discussion of how US foreign policy has helped to create a world in which acts of terror are possible” (Butler 3). In Stuart Hall’s words, Banksy, as socially engaged artist and organic intellectual, “transmit[s] those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, to the intellectual class” (39).

October 11, 2013

If we are not given the option to live without violence, we are given the choice to center our meals around harvest or slaughter, husbandry or war. We have chosen slaughter. We have chosen war. That's the truest version of our story of eating animals.

Can we tell a new story?

— Jonathan Safran Foer, *“Eating Animals”*



Banksy “Sirens of the Lambs”(2013)¹²

¹² Photo retrieved from public domain.

Banksy creates a piece called, “Sirens of the Lambs,” in which a slaughterhouse truck filled with crying farm animal puppets is driven around New York city, starting, appropriately, with the meatpacking district. The title refers to the film entitled “The Silence of the Lambs,” which in turn refers to both the spring slaughter of lambs on a ranch as well as the ritualized slaughter of humans performed by the serial killer depicted in the film. Banksy’s title evokes both stories but, by changing “silence” to “sirens,” he indicates that these animals will not be silenced. It is a small but effective act of defamiliarization that, once again, attempts to make the viewer linger with the content of the work. Ngai states that the “cute object or person is one we by definition want as near to us as possible (to the point of phantasmatically crushing, smothering, or even eating it/her” (9). Thus, while the puppets elucidate the suffering of animals being led to slaughter, they also make us want to “crush, smother or eat” them. The animals—sheep, pigs, geese, cows, chickens, bunnies—are primarily pastel in color. Pastels are associated with the feminine, the infantile, and the powerless, and thus, they are the colors that best represent the aesthetic of the cute. While all the animals in the piece are cute, the pigs are, arguably, the epitome of cute. Paula Smith-Marder’s investigation into linguistic usages of the word “pig” reveals that “to be ‘piggish’ means selfish,” while “making a pig of oneself” and ‘pig[ging] out’ refer to overeating” (111). These associations mirror the relationships surrounding the aesthetic category of the cute: greed and the commodity fetish and gluttony and consumption. The cute animals are examples of the way in which the aesthetic of cuteness solicits, as Ngai so adeptly points out, “a regard[ing] of the commodity as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject, appealing specifically to us for protection and care” (60).

In response to the piece, the viewer wants to protect and care for the cute animals and also, as we saw earlier with the mobile garden, the viewer wants to diminish the animals even further because, following Ngai, “cuteness is not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness” (3). In fact, the sheer number of them further elucidates the eroticization of the cute animals. The animals are not only representations of late Capitalism’s commodity fetish, but they are, more specifically, cute commodities, commodities which Ngai explains “bea[r] the look of object[s] unusually responsive to and thus easily shaped or deformed by the subject’s feeling or attitude towards it” (65). Simply put, the animal puppets beckon us to save them.

A YouTube video of the piece as well as accompanying audio commentary are also displayed on Banksy’s website. The video shows the caged animals mournfully crying and the subsequent shocked reactions from children elicited by the piece—reactions that are unsurprising given Glenn Willmott’s astute observation that “children recognize patterns of behaviour in animals (human and non-human) that constitute a set of pre-verbal meanings regarding all social others.” In other words, children recognize “ourselves and others as co-inhabitants of an ecology of subjects” (97). The cute animal puppets are a part of our world, and their despondent cries are as deeply disturbing as human cries. There is also a component of mimicry to the cute, where, in what Ngai calls “an act of automatic mimesis similar to that induced by film’s sensational ‘body genres’...the admirer of the cute puppy or baby often ends up unconsciously emulating that object’s infantile qualities in the language of her aesthetic appraisal” (3). The aesthetic of the cute that dominates the piece makes us want to cry with the animals while it also works, in the words of AK Thompson, “to make visible the things that have been pushed from view” (56). Moreover, because the animals are caged and crying, they are even cuter than they would be if they were not in such a desperate position. Ngai expertly argues that “the more objectified the object, or the

more visibly shaped by the affective demands and/or projections of the subject, the cuter” (65). Here cuteness works with anthropomorphism as an effective method of calling attention to the suffering of animals because, as Simon Estok argues, it “is less easy to tolerate the suffering of nonhuman animals when their emotions, intelligence, behaviour, and feelings seem to resemble our own” (68). Further, the puppets “cannot escape the narrative weight with which they’ve become historically saddled,” as AK Thompson asserts, “[They] mov[e] away from the thing: finally, becom[ing] the thing itself” (56).

In fact, the physical encounter with the face, in Emmanuel Levinas’s sense of the word, explicated by Judith Butler, elicits an inescapable understanding of the fragility of life:

To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. This cannot be an awakesness, to use his word, to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another’s precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other. This is what makes the face belong to the sphere of ethics. (134)

The piece makes visible the suffering of animals led to slaughter through the use of the cute puppets, their cries, and their faces. The aesthetic of cuteness reinforces Ngai’s contention that “art has the capacity not only to reflect and mystify power but also to reflect on and make use of powerlessness” because, as we have seen, cuteness, with its intrinsic relationship to the feminine, children, and the commodity, constantly complicates the tropes of patriarchy, power, and consumerism (109). We easily recognize the aesthetic characteristics of the cute, even when we do not register the emotional impact cuteness has on us. The empathetic response the piece

evokes, via Banksy's deft utilization of the aesthetic of the cute, is a powerful tool for the socially engaged artist. It underscores the politics of visibility, letting one see the quotidian slaughtering of the meatpacking district by putting the "face" on display so one can encounter it, achieving a social commentary that is defamiliarizing, arresting, and impossible to ignore.

October 13, 2013

A shopping cart flipped upside down forms a cage that I use to protect myself from consumerism.

— Jarod Kintz



Banksy Untitled (2013)¹³

Banksy set up an art stall on the streets of Manhattan where a gentleman sells Banksy's pieces for sixty dollars apiece. Actually, he sells one woman two pieces for her children at thirty dollars apiece, another woman buys two for herself at full price, and a man who "just needs something for the walls" buys four at full price (*Better Out Than In*). The project is filmed and the video is uploaded to Banksy's website later in the day. Following Sarah Banet-Weiser, this piece "gives us purchase in thinking about the changing definitions of value because of the way in which [street art] refuses an easy position as either predominantly about the consumer cultural

¹³ Photo retrieved from public domain.

industries *or* about non-commercial aesthetic cultural production” (646). Banksy’s own actions would indicate that it is very much about the latter. The entire New York show is done, not-for-profit—\$420 does not seem like it would even cover expenses—but, upon analysis of his portfolio, it is done for what Halberstam refers to as “the dream of an alternative way of being...where the emphasis falls less on money and work and competition and more on cooperation, trade, and sharing...and should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naive” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 52). Banksy utilizes many mediums for his work, but canvas is rarely one of them. Thus, although his style remains the same, existing on the traditional medium of canvas rather than the street defamiliarizes his work here. Of course, the entire situation is the art project of the day, which is located in the street, so in a larger sense Banksy’s medium remains emblematic of both street art as well as of the participatory nature of socially engaged art. In fact, echoing Kester’s notions of collaborative art practices, the piece “begins with the experiential knowledge generated through collective or collaborative practice and an increased sensitivity to the complex registers of repression and resistance, agency and instrumentalization, which structure any given site or context” (212). By selling his art, not for money, but to provoke awareness about consumerism and art elitism, Banksy effectively defamiliarizes the art vendor. It is telling that the pieces of one of the world’s most famous street artists do not sell well without his name, or brand, attached to them. Banksy’s success in using, in Banet-Weiser’s words, “a creative practice to create a ‘counter-brand,’ one that rejects and critiques the increasing privatization of city resources and shrinking public spaces” is the most heavily criticized aspect of his work, while it remains evident that such exposure broadens his audience immensely (650). Without the Banksy brand or the unexpected encounter with the piece, his art goes relatively unnoticed; thus, the piece serves to effectively draw attention to the power of consumer branding. The piece also

demonstrates Kester's argument in *The One and the Many* that socially engaged art has the ability to "transform our perceptions of difference and to open space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, or political conventions" (11). The individuals that view the video of the piece on Banksy's website know that his art can fetch thousands of dollars at art auctions, so the piece works to challenge people's notion of what constitutes "good" art. Is Banksy's art coveted only because it has become valuable or is it coveted because it is considered "good" art? These questions of aesthetic taste, at first glance seem only to be about aesthetic evaluation, however, they go beyond that. The piece asks not only if Banksy's canvases constitute "good" art, but, more importantly, it asks the viewer to think about what "good" art is. Ngai notes that within the aesthetic of the interesting there is indeed "an orientation towards other subjects in the creation and presentation of evidence" (115). That is, we want some sort of validation that a piece of art is, in fact, "good." However, Ngai continues on to ask the necessary question: "what counts as evidence when we are trying to justify or convince others of the rightness of our aesthetic judgments?" (117). Is the evidence we seek to support the notion of "good" art tied, as Banksy's piece suggests, to monetary value? Furthermore, since Banksy's art stall hardly sold any pieces at all, does that mean that he is not really a "good" artist? In raising these questions the piece exemplifies Ngai's delineation of the interesting as "an ambiguous feeling tied to an encounter without a concept, which then immediately activates a search for that missing concept, [so that] the interesting's way of linking affect and cognition seems to have made it particularly suited for bridging the gap between art and theory" (139). The viewer is left wondering about art in terms of both aesthetics and conceptual knowledge; simply, the viewer wonders what art is, what it looks like, and how it functions in society.

Banksy's work typically gains another level of irony or meaning from its placement and although this piece is significantly located in the affluent area of Central Park, "a landscaped, pastoral creation of the mid-nineteenth century that required the eviction of roughly 1600 poor people," the punchline of this particular piece resides within Banksy's identity.¹⁴ It is only through revealing that the works are Banksy pieces that the larger project becomes actualized. Appropriately, the video encounter with the piece, located on the World Wide Web, carries the weight that is usually afforded to physical placement. The video was uploaded to Banksy's website, and also went viral, reaching thousands of people, and furthering Bruce Robbin's notion that we do not need to forget the human producer of art, "that there exists, in other words, a certain desire to live with the voices in our heads. This desire, not exclusive to intellectuals contemplating works of art, seems to mark a certain political possibility in the humanities" (95). Here, remembering the artist is essential to recognizing the inherent irony of the piece. However, keeping this particular artist in mind, one may agree with his proclamation that "if you really like Banksy, it's more important to copy him than buy his stuff" (*You...It*).

October 14, 2013

I don't remember when exactly I read my first comic book, but I do remember exactly how liberated and subversive I felt as a result.
— Edward W. Said

¹⁴ For more information on this see Ellen Stroud's insightful article, "Dirt in the City: Urban Environmental History in the Mid-Atlantic."



Banksy Untitled (2013)¹⁵

Banksy paints in a bright fuchsia script, “What we do in life echoes in eternity,” supplemented by a life-size monochromatic man scrubbing the text of “eternity” off the wall with a sponge. He includes a caption on his website that reads, “Some people criticize me for using sources that are a bit low brow (this quote is from ‘Gladiator’) but you know what? ‘I’m just going to use that hostility to make me stronger, not weaker’ as Kelly Rowland said on the X Factor” (*Better Out Than In*). Banksy, a true man of the people, uses language from popular film and television, mimicking Halberstam’s oscillation between “high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge” in *The Queer Art of Failure* to highlight the importance of agency and again, following Halberstam, to “push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing” (2). A realm of ‘knowing and unknowing’ allows for possibilities that might be dismissed or even unimagined within more stringent discursive boundaries, thus, new voices, thoughts, ideas, and ways of being and doing in the world might present themselves when such disciplinary boundaries dissolve. In this piece for example, the content of the text seems

¹⁵ Photo retrieved from public domain.

scholarly or philosophical and thus considered “high culture” while the source of the material is located in the realm of pop culture and is therefore considered to be a part of “low culture,” thus the piece blurs the lines between the two realms. Such a blurring allows one to take both pop culture quotes seriously and give time and weight to the messages they convey. Moreover, the ephemerality of the piece mimics the transiency of life, further supporting the need for continued political engagement in the world as well as critiquing, ironically, the only “actor” of the piece—the buffer. The individual who acts upon the piece acts in order to erase it, making his action in the world one which silences the voice of the people, as spoken through a pop-culture referencing street artist. The man, then, represents “the man,” used colloquially to signify the dominant consumerist power structures Banksy so vehemently opposes.

Building on Steven Knapp, Ngai stresses, “what it means to be interested in literature is thus to be interested in analogies between authorial agency and the kinds of agency represented in texts” (116). Under this light, the piece underscores the agency of both the socially engaged artist and the everyday citizen and, underwriting Anne Pasternak’s depiction of social practice art, “provokes [the viewer] to pause, think, learn, and act” (8). Further, by combining disparate notions of eternity, art, pop culture, and philosophy within a work of art, the artwork adheres to Ngai’s conception of the aesthetic of the interesting as “a way of creating relays between affect-based judgment and concept-based explanation in a manner that binds heterogeneous agencies together and enables movement across disciplinary domains” (116). The piece also exemplifies both defamiliarization and the concept of *détournement*, popularized by the Situationists, which, according to Ken Knabb’s translator’s note in Guy Debord’s “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*,” “means deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose” (14). Simply, Banksy

hijacks the brick wall, the words from the mouth of a pop culture cash cow, and the figure of authority represented by the buffer as a clarion call for action.

October 16, 2013

I used to work at McDonald's making minimum wage. You know what that means when someone pays you minimum wage? You know what your boss was trying to say? 'Hey if I could pay you less, I would, but it's against the law.'

— *Chris Rock*



Banksy “Shoe Shine” (2013)¹⁶

Banksy’s mobile sculpture and performance piece for the day consists of a larger than life-size sculpture of Ronald McDonald, an emblem of corporate profits, which is paired with a filthy young man sitting on the ground, shining Mr. McDonald’s giant shoes. McDonalds is, like we saw earlier with Disney characters, one of the most famous brands in the world. The audio commentary that accompanies the piece online highlights Ronald’s recognizability: “Ronald was adopted as the official mascot of the McDonalds Fast Food Corporation chain in 1966. Fiberglass versions of his likeness have been installed outside restaurants ever since. Thus, making Ronald, arguably, the most sculpted figure in history after Christ” (*Better Out Than In*).

¹⁶ Photo retrieved from public domain.

Banksy is not always factual, but in this particular instance he is simply stating the (already ironic) facts. In his book, *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser notes a survey “of American schoolchildren found that 96 percent could identify Ronald McDonald. The only fictional character with a higher degree of recognition was Santa Claus” (4).

Ronald McDonald, as a symbol of one of the most successful global corporations and fast food franchises, is deeply immersed in the aesthetic of the zany. Sianne Ngai explains that zaniness has a long history, beginning with commedia dell’arte’s “zanni” and extending all the way into the zany characters of the twentieth and twenty-first century (195-197). What links these different types of zanies is an often-comedic relationship to labor. Ronald McDonald is, of course, a clown, an occupation that is zany in nature because a clown labors to produce an affective response of laughter in the audience. Stylistically, zaniness functions as a kind of excess, not of capital, but of effort. The aesthetic style of the zany is, in Ngai’s words, “an aesthetic of action pushed to physically strenuous extremes (and an aesthetic of an intensely willing and desiring subjectivity)” (184). Banksy’s depiction of Ronald is faithful to the overly bright colors of the original but intensifies the zaniness by making Ronald’s already big feet absolutely enormous. Further, as the mascot for McDonald’s, Ronald exemplifies the zany aesthetic, an aesthetic that Ngai brilliantly outlines as the “only aesthetic category in our contemporary repertoire explicitly about this politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and laboring” (182). The zany character is more than just silly, s/he is the character that embodies the late capitalist cliché “work hard, play hard”—a description that applies to Ronald, but also, to the boy shining his shoes.

The young shoe shiner is covered in dirt, which, as Anne McClintock notes in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, “expresse[s] a social relation to labor...[it is] the surplus evidence of manual work, the visible residue that stubbornly remain[s]” (153). Dirt serves as a marker for the lower class, racialized Other and here the dirty worker (who carries with him all of the various connotations of the term “dirty”) is contrasted by the shiny shoes of consumerism. Notably, the shoeshine boy is not simply a little dirty but is absolutely filthy, an aesthetic excess that is stylistically zany both because of its excess as well as dirt’s relationship to pleasure. Ngai emphasizes that “the zany [character] insists so strenuously on pleasure” despite rarely achieving it because the zany is an aesthetic about labor and the erosion between work and play (188). McClintock explains dirt’s fetishized relationship to pleasure through her deft delineation of dirt: “a broom in a kitchen closet is not dirty, whereas lying on a bed it is. Sex with one’s spouse is not dirty, whereas conventionally the same act with a prostitute is. In Victorian culture, the iconography of dirt became deeply integrated in the policing and transgression of social boundaries” (153). Aesthetic excesses like the filth of the shoeshine boy are more difficult to identify as zany than the non-stop actions of the zany performer perhaps because the zany is, following Ngai, “an aesthetic about the erosion of an older model of aesthetic experience or relation to the aesthetic in general” (231). That is, the zany aesthetic exemplifies not only a kind of shrinking between work and play but, perhaps also exemplifies the dissolution not of aesthetic perception, but of aesthetic judgment’s function in that perception.

The zany, again, points towards how the traditional aesthetic categories of the sublime, wonder, and beauty do not best describe aesthetic lives during late capitalism and rather it is the minor aesthetic categories of the cute, the zany, and the interesting that best articulate twenty-

first century life and aesthetics. The shoeshine boy is zany not only because he shines Ronald's giant shoes, but because he is, to use Ngai's words, "defined entirely by the specific nature of [his] activity, or by [his] affective relation to that activity" (223). In other words, the shoeshine boy's relationship to his labor defines him so that the only way one can refer to him is to call him "the shoeshine boy" or the "shoe shiner."

Further, Ronald's feet could easily squash the young man—symbolizing both Western society's military might in relation to alternate cultures as well as the corporate company's power to crush the individual. The audio commentary describes the piece as a "critique of the heavy labor required to sustain the polished image of a mega-corporation," a description that, once again, seems less satirical than is typical for Banksy. In fact, I would argue that the piece does emphasize the low wages of the individual working for the ever-richer corporate conglomerate and, broadly, acts out what Lisa Duggan describes as the "transferring [of] wealth from the globe's poorest to its richest locations...practices that constitute a reinvention of Western imperialism" (13). Presumably, neither the shiny, affluent Ronald nor the large corporate McDonalds have any qualms about paying a low wage to the destitute shoe shiner or to the fast food worker in exchange for their labor. Schlosser highlights this labor inequity: "instead of relying upon a small, stable, well-paid, and well-trained workforce, the fast food industry seeks out part-time, unskilled workers who are willing to accept low pay" (68). By calling attention to the plight of both the fast food worker and the incessant laboring of late capitalism, the piece exposes the underlying neoliberal politics that pervade American life and the need to understand them, as Lisa Duggan states, "in *relation to* coexisting, conflicting, shifting relations of power along, multiple lines of difference and hierarchy" (emphasis in original 74). Similarly, the piece exemplifies Brian Holmes' assertion that today's social practice artists must understand

the “convergence of art, theory, media and politics into a mobile force that oversteps the limits of any professional sphere or disciplinary field, while still drawing on their knowledge and technical capabilities” (74). The piece has both performative as well as sculptural elements, exists on the street and on the Internet, and works to effectuate political awareness and change in the world through a variety of methods, including movement through the city.

The sculpture travels around the city, visiting the sidewalks outside of multiple McDonald’s restaurants during lunch hours, exemplifying Ngai’s articulation of the zany as “an aesthetic of action pushed to physically strenuous extremes (and an aesthetic of an intensely willing and desiring subjectivity)...” (184). Since the piece is very much a critique of corporate labor practices and corporate colonization, it is no surprise that “Shoe Shine” is so steeped in the movement-laden aesthetic of the zany (an aesthetic intricately tied to labor) that the zany clown mascot and the zany shoe shine boy move throughout the city. Moreover, this zany roaming illustrates Arjun Appadurai’s notion of the “journey” as a “powerful discursive tool through which the ‘life’ of an artwork in space and time can become central to its meaning” (5). By wandering through the city, the piece not only furthers its impact through exposure but also symbolizes Western imperialism’s limitless ability to claim spaces by mimicking such colonization through the appropriation of spaces. Schlossler notes McDonald’s vested interest in pursuing corporate colonization, citing the companies’ goal of “global realization” (229). He continues, “in order to diminish fears of American imperialism, the [fast food] chains try to purchase as much food as possible in the countries where they operate. Instead of importing food, they import entire systems of agriculture production” (230). Such strategies impose the dominant ideologies of American consumerism upon diverse cultures throughout the world, creating a homogenized global culture that has been called “McDonalidization” by sociologist

George Ritzer and “The McWorld” by sociologist Benjamin R. Barber.¹⁷ However, here “Shoe Shine,” through the zany aesthetic utilized by the socially engaged artist(s) and performers, reappropriates the storefront space outside the corporation, creating a forum for voicing a critique of such consumerism and its intrinsic lack of ethics in its endless pursuit of ever-increasing profit margins.

October 22, 2013

Sense of place is the sixth sense, an internal compass and map made by memory and spatial perception together.
— Rebecca Solnit



Banksy “No Turn Unstoned” (2013)¹⁸

“No Turn Unstoned,” a “1/36 scale replica of the great Sphinx of Giza made from smashed cinderblocks, [complete with] replica Arab spring water” (*Better Out Than In*) is revealed in Queens. The piece, reminiscent of an earlier work, “Peckham Rock,” which was also

¹⁷ See George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press, 2008) and Benjamin R. Barber, “Jihad vs. McWorld,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1992).

¹⁸ Photo retrieved from public domain.

made from concrete, transforms urban waste into urban art. The piece is recursive because it harkens back to “Peckham Rock” and the original sphinx as well as cultural artifacts more broadly. Both Sphinx’s serve to symbolize the cultures and times in which they were made. However, building on Cynthia Deitering’s notion of toxic consciousness, the idea of “a shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste,” the modern day Sphinx, formed out of trash, speaks to a culture riddled with waste (196). Further, following Dickens, the old concrete “symbolize[s] all that was bad with the old paradigm of social housing, and in many ways represents something of an endpoint in the history of modernism...representing a ‘blindness’ to the social problems that have blighted such developments” (478). “No Turn Unstoned” proves aesthetically interesting because, as Ngai argues, “what is interesting is never inherently interesting but only so in comparison with something else” (25). Here the twenty-first century concrete Sphinx is compared to the ancient Sphinx, which is thought to have been built out of natural limestone in 5000 to 7000 B.C. as part of the Fourth Dynasty pharaoh Khafre’s pyramid complex.¹⁹ The ancient sphinx was built on land that, according to archaeologists Hawass and Lehner, the ancient Egyptians considered to be “a sacred port from which the god-kings embarked for the Netherworld,” where the modern Sphinx is built amidst trash (32).

Using the concrete fragments of social housing to recreate a sacred symbol of art and culture creates a jarring dissonance—an encounter that toys with what Dickens calls “the imagination of something both spatially and temporally ‘other’ to the modern city” (480). The comparison between the great Sphinx and the replica Sphinx inevitably forces an unfavorable comparison between the cultures of the ancient Egyptians and that of modern twenty-first

¹⁹ For more about the Spinx see Zahi Hawass and Mark Lehner, “The Sphinx: Who Built it, and Why?” (*Archaeology* 47.5 (1994): 30-41).

century societies. The recursive nature of the piece also makes the interesting new and different, something to reflect upon, question, and interrogate, but, at the same time, through its ongoing circulation, the interesting is also familiar. In this way the interesting is as much about the new and the yet-to-be-determined as it is about the familiar and the reoccurring. “No Turn Unstoned” exemplifies how the interesting, like the cute, represents an aesthetic particularly well-suited to examining the late capitalist world around us, but it also helps people to find new ways of viewing, thinking, and feeling about the world we live in through the marriage of aesthetics to evidence inherent to the interesting.

The piece speaks to the original Sphinx of Giza, located in Egypt, where the transition from autocratic and military rule to democratic rule has been tumultuous. The piece, through the aesthetic of the interesting, elicits a comparison not only between Ancient Egypt and modern societies in general, but also, between ancient and modern Egyptian societies. The aesthetic of the interesting, which is an aesthetic about information and the circulation of knowledge, can be seen then as an aesthetic aimed at what Ngai refers to as “enfranchising outsiders and thus expanding the boundaries of the original interest group” (172). In this particular case, the textual element of the piece, the “polluted Arab Spring water,” serves to remind the viewer of the complicated nature of the uprisings and of US involvement in the politics of the Middle East:

The Protesters of the Arab Spring will chart their own battle, struggling for a better form of regional politics, pitting them against: a) the regional defenders of ‘tradition’ (chiefly Saudi Arabia); b) those who would hijack the political tumult to impose a sectarian or divisive political order on the post-autocratic regimes (see the increasingly sectarian composition of the Syrian conflict); and finally, c) the interests of the major Western powers, headed by the United States, who—

rhetoric to the contrary—have not shown a historical commitment to the emergence of democratic movements in the Middle East region. (Ismael, J.S. & Ismael, Shereen T. 240)

The interesting binds the historical and cultural circumstances of the ancient Sphinx to the historical and cultural circumstances of the twenty-first century. In this way the interesting reveals its relationship to pedagogy, and how a seemingly silly sculpture can have so much to teach one about how to disrupt (or transform or simply notice) the hegemonic power structures intrinsic to late-capitalist life. The title, “No Turn Unstoned,” refers to both the typical weapon of the protestors, the stones, as well as to the corporate advertising Banksy likens to rocks thrown at the heads of the masses. Thus, “No Turn Unstoned” reflects the stones that he believes the people should throw back at the oppressors, whether they are governmental or corporate or both. Banksy’s use of street art sculpture is yet another way to bring his political message to the people. Significantly, in line with the varied mediums of the socially engaged artist, Halberstam wisely observes in *Gaga Feminism* that “since things change in relation to one another, dialectically, that is, then shifts in one area necessitate shifts in other arenas”—so that the non-narrative form of the graffitied wall informs the non-narrative street art sculpture (36).

October 27, 2013

*On one side, the mass of a mountain. A life I know.
On the other, the universe of the clouds, so full of unknown that it seems empty to us. Too much
space.
— Philippe Petit*



Banksy Untitled (2013)²⁰

“This site contains blocked messages” appears on a city wall in bold, white typeface. This piece of graffiti, like the interesting conceptual art of the 1960s, attends to the relationship between what Ngai simply refers to as “pictures and labels, photographs and typescript, images and words” (34). In fact, the work calls the viewer’s attention to not only the relationship between images and language, but also to what Ngai astutely calls “art’s identification with discourse about art” (34). The piece, encountered on the street, clearly refers to censorship and discourses on the Internet and, by itself, says a lot about censorship and who gets a forum in which to speak in general. The piece requires what Kester calls “a mode of thinking rooted in the situational operation of identity and driven by a reciprocal testing of the assumptions of both theory and practice” (83). At its most basic level, the piece reminds the viewer that someone gets to choose which story is told and how it is told. When viewing the piece on Banksy’s website, the viewer realizes that the piece responds to the New York Times’s refusal to publish an op-ed article that

²⁰ Photo retrieved from public domain.

Banksy wrote about the new World Trade Center. In the op-ed displayed on his website he writes, “[r]emarkably for such a tall structure One World Trade lacks any self-confidence. How does it stand up without a spine?” (*Better Out Than In*).

Those familiar with Banksy’s larger body of work instantly recognize his trademark irony. The one thousand seven hundred and seventy-six foot tall building is the tallest building in the United States and, in fact, the entire Western hemisphere—a fact that makes it anything but shy. Rather, the building is an imposing reminder of, in the words of Judith Butler, the “framework in which the [United States’s] injury authorizes limitless aggression against targets that may or may not be related to the sources of one’s own suffering” (4). The article goes on to say, “[i]t reminds you of a really tall kid at a party, awkwardly shifting his shoulders trying not to stand out from the crowd” (*Better Out Than In*). The irony here is that the entire point of the building is *to be* noticed. The Freedom Tower is meant as an assertion of U.S. supremacy—an architectural “flipping the bird” to the rest of the world—that, as Butler states, completely “ignor[es] [the United States’s] image as the hated enemy for many in the [Middle Eastern] region...and consoli[dates] its reputation as a militaristic power with no respect for lives outside the First World” (17). The United States government never asked what led to the tragedies of 9/11; to do so was to align oneself with terrorism. Rather, the US government sought vengeance—as if trading the lives of terrorists would somehow restore the lives that were lost. In doing so, the US forsook an opportunity to join an international conversation: to recognize the lives of the Other as valuable, to let the lives lost that day serve, to quote Banksy, as a “catalyst for [making] a dazzling new [world]” (*Better Out Than In*). Perhaps what is most telling are the American headlines covering the piece—headlines that failed to see the irony. CNN published, “Banksy’s Insult Shows that he’s Clueless about New York”; The Huffington Post ran the

headline, “Banksy Bashes One World Trade Center in Rejected N.Y. Times Op-Ed;” and countless others joined the choir. In fact, a Google search turns up dozens of pages of similarly titled headlines. Not one of these articles acknowledges the satirical tone of the piece, though all of the articles I read include hundreds and, sometimes, thousands of comments. The media may not have understood the irony, but the piece, as well as the headlines, certainly started a conversation about the new Freedom Tower. The self-proclaimed postmoderns (or post-postmoderns) among us, the infinitely skeptical, cannot help but recognize Banksy’s satire—we read everything with an eye on the lookout for discourses of power. Banksy is ever the more important, then, because he starts conversations—he, like Halberstam states in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “realize[s] that people must be led to learn rather than be taught to follow” (14).

October 29, 2013

I like playing with that space between laughter and discomfort where your discomfort can also make you laugh, and you’re confused about the mixed feelings. That’s challenging, and I think that’s what makes for some of the best art.

-Hari Kondabolu



Banksy “The Banality of the Banality of Evil” (2013)²¹

²¹ Photo retrieved from public domain.

Banksy buys an oil painting of an autumn landscape by an unknown artist from a New York thrift store. The scene is categorized as “picturesque,” a popular eighteenth century aesthetic movement defined by landscape historian John Dixon Hunt as landscape painting with a particular attention to “irregularity, roughness and variety” (“The Picturesque”). The eighteenth century English artist, Reverend William Gilpin formulated the following criterion governing picturesque composition: “Every view on a river, thus circumstanced, is composed of four grand parts; the area which is the river itself; the *two side-screens*, which are the opposite banks, and mark the perspective; and the *front screen*, which points out the winding of the river” (emphasis in original 8). The thrift store landscape Banksy purchased clearly fits within this aesthetic category because it both contains natural elements that are irregular, rough, and varied and because it fits Gilpin’s compositional requirements exactly. The eighteenth century scholar, Richard Payne Knight, argued that an object or scene is not in and of itself picturesque, but rather, that the picturesque is only recognizable “to persons conversant with the art of painting, and sufficiently skilled in it to distinguish, and be really delighted with its real excellences... To all others...it is utterly imperceptible” (146). In other words, the aesthetic qualities of the picturesque can only be identified by a particular kind of viewer, one with an eye trained in the compositional tenets of landscape painting. Such elitism brings up issues of elitism in art more broadly; namely the idea that the artist is privy to some sort of insider knowledge that he/she must then, in turn, hand down to the “regular” people. This type of artistic elitism is present in art communities whether in the form of the picturesque as delineated by Knight, the art salon, or even in the avant-garde tradition where, as Kester notes, there exists a notion of the artist as “provocateur, challenging modernity from a position of cultural exteriority” (34). As we have seen, Banksy’s work repeatedly rebukes this notion—both generally and in terms of his own

access to any kind of specialized knowledge or skill set. At the same time, Banksy is undoubtedly aware of the history of the picturesque and, by “vandalizing” it, he takes back the picturesque for the people.

Interestingly (in Ngai’s sense of the term), Banksy graffiti’s the painting by adding a man dressed in a Nazi uniform sitting on a bench, with his back to the viewer, looking out over the nature scene. Following the aesthetic of the interesting as articulated by Ngai, the viewer of the painting is left wondering about the scene depicted in the painting because the piece asks “what [i]s it that I [notice] and simultaneously not notic[e] about the appearance of the object in order to [judge] it interesting? ‘Notic[e] because my attention must [be] drawn by some aspect of that appearance; ‘not notic[e]’ because here I am clearly in a state of wonder about what exactly that aspect [i]s. This wonder itself is a bridge to a more active desire to know” (132-133). The Nazi, instantly recognizable by his SS patch, is an unusual presence in the picturesque mountain scene, thus his presence defamiliarizes the landscape and causes the viewer to spend time receiving and evaluating the piece. The Nazi seems to be in a meditative state of repose, slightly hunched over, with his back turned towards the viewer. Such sloppy posture differentiates him from the “beautiful male body [that] was an important symbol in all European fascist movements,” according to the cultural historian George L. Mosse (248). Mosse continues, the idealized fascist male body “projected both self-control in its posture and virility in the play of its muscles; it symbolized both the dynamic and the discipline which society wanted and needed” (248). Banksy’s Nazi, however, shrugs his shoulders, possesses no discernable muscles, and is rendered small by comparison to the mountains looming over him. Of course, the Nazi also evokes the ideologies of fascism, the atrocities of the Holocaust, and, arguably, evil in the twentieth-century further underlined by the piece’s title.

Banksy re-donates the piece to the thrift store, and a picture of the piece is added to his website along with the title, “The Banality of the Banality of Evil.” Hannah Arendt first coined the phrase “the banality of evil” in “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” a five-part article covering the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. She expounded on the phrase in a piece published in *The New Yorker* posthumously: “I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer which made it impossible to trace the incontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer—at least, the very effective one now on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither monstrous nor demonic” (65). This is a frightening thought because the idea that evil can be ordinary to the point of even being banal means that everyone, under the right circumstances, has the capacity to be evil and that everyone has the potential to blindly follow evil. Erin Overby noted in “Eighty-Five from the Archive: Hannah Arendt” that Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann “as a bureaucrat motivated not by extreme ideology but rather by ambition disturbed many people” (*The New Yorker*). Banksy’s title suggests that people are no longer disturbed by the everydayness of evil, but are, rather, bored by it. Brian Holmes deftly points out that despite living in a time that calls for action, a time riddled with “endless warfare, invasive surveillance, economic precariousness, intensified exploitation of the environment,[and] increasing corruption,” the “laws, ethical codes and the requirements of professionalism in all-absorbing, highly competitive careers make it impossible for most Americans to find the time, the place, the medium, the format, the desire and above all the collective will to...resist the threats” (85). Or maybe, as the title “The Banality of the Banality of Evil” suggests, twenty-first century Americans are bored by such events because, as Teddy Cruz states, Americans “lack the kind of collective sense of urgency that would prompt us to fundamentally question our own ways of thinking and acting, and form new spaces or operation” (56).

One explanation for American apathy is delineated by Judith Butler in *Prekarious Lives*.

She explains how,

[i]n the Vietnam War, it was the pictures of the children burning and dying from napalm that brought the U.S. public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. These were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see...but if we continue to discount the words that deliver that message to us, and if the media will not run those pictures, and if those lives remain unnameable and ungrievable, If they do not appear in their precariousness and their destruction, we will not be moved. (50)

Perhaps, Americans, like the Nazi in “The Banality of the Banality of Evil,” simply have their backs turned to the terror that exists outside the frame. The piece indicts those who fail to question authority and, particularly when considered along side “Shoe Shine,” “No Turn Unstoned,” “Rocket Rebel Attack,” and the unpublished N.Y. Times op-ed, “The Banality of the Banality of Evil” is a powerful critique of US foreign policy as well as a challenge to look beyond the frame provided by hegemonic discourses of power, including those of the US government.

Moreover, through its idyllic nature scene in juxtaposition with the Nazi, the piece also hints at the loss of nature—a loss that as Catriona Mortimer-Sandialand argues, is “very real but psychically ‘ungrievable’ within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief” (333). Even though Nature remains within the frame, it is an idealized nature scene and the everyday loss of Nature that plagues modern existence remains hidden from view. All of the elements of the piece urge the viewer to expose the hidden hegemonic structures that guide what

s/he sees and how s/he sees it. As “The Banality of the Banality of Evil” reminds us and Judith Butler urges us, we need to “interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human,” (and I would add the nonhuman), “at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense” (151).

Conclusion: The Grand Finale

October 31, 2013

*That's the thing about changing the world... Once you do it, the world's all different.
— Joss Whedon, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, "The Long Way Home"*

Art no longer functions in society to shock and dismay, nor to render the awe-struck feeling of the sublime in the viewer. In today's hyperaestheticized world, I'm not sure such affective responses are even possible. That is not to say that art cannot be instructive. In fact, as Nato Thompson points out, "in a world of vast cultural production, the arts have become an instructive space to gain valuable skill sets in the techniques of performativity, representation, aesthetics, and the creation of affect" (22). I would argue that the arts call attention to the fact that people living in the post-Fordist world of late capitalist production are always already performing, representing mediated versions of themselves on Facebook and Twitter, living lives that cannot avoid aesthetics nor the weak affective responses created by them. The zany, the cute, and the interesting are found everywhere because of their ties to labor and performing, consumerism and power, and the ongoing circulation of information. Yet, they can work to make us aware of the profound influence hegemonic power structures have upon our daily lives. Art, as social practice, is defined by Maria Lind as concerning "works with multiple faces turned in different directions—towards specific groups of people, political questions, policy problems, or artistic concerns...at the core of social practice is the urge to reformulate the traditional relationship between the work and the viewer, between production and consumption, sender and receiver" (49). Banksy utilizes a variety of different weapons in an attempt to help the public see and to unveil the hegemonic power structures that ground modern capitalist society: he illegally paints on walls, creates sculptures, makes videos, and creates performance art pieces. He exploits text, images, and audio as well as content, location, and juxtaposition to upset and defamiliarize

the status quo. He travels around the world, spreading a subversive message, a counter hegemonic model, and a democratic art informed by the people and made for the people. Banksy's works are infused with the minor aesthetic categories of the cute, the zany, and the interesting, not only because they permeate modern experience, but also because they are useful in changing the usual relationship between art and the viewer from one of passive receptacle to engaged participant—a change that can do nothing less than create moments of questioning the hegemonic power structures of late capitalism and, thus, work towards greater political engagement and activity through aesthetics.

On the last day of his New York residency, Banksy utilized yet another medium—he installed balloons on a wall in a graffiti style that pays homage to the hip-hop graffiti of the 1980s and 1990s. He bids New York farewell with the following audio commentary from the website:

Banksy asserts that outside is where art should live amongst us and rather than street art being a fad, maybe the last thousand years of art history is a blip—when art came inside in service of the church and institutions. But art's rightful place is on the cave walls of our communities where it can act as a public service, provoke debate, voice concerns, forge identities. The world we live in today is run — visually at least—by traffic signs, billboards, and planning committees. Is that it? Don't we want to live in a world *made* of art not just *decorated* by it?

(Better Out Than In)

Banksy is not just a sensationalist with a can of spray paint and a penchant for destruction. One needs to look no further than his oeuvre to realize that he is absolutely, undeniably devoted to his cause. He embodies postmodern theoretical conceptions of change via socially engaged art and

tries to actuate them. Despite his ceaseless sarcasm, Banksy is a romantic, in that after all that has been said about his works and his artistry, after all the countless times people have misunderstood his efforts, attempted to make money off of his works, or accused him of “selling out,” somehow Banksy keeps trying to, to use his words, “save the world.” That is, if having the “guts to stand up anonymously in a western democracy and call for things no-one else believes in—like peace and justice and freedom” can possibly be construed as saving the world, then Banksy is our subversive liberator, the man that is formed from *shoring fragments* of Antonio Gramsci, Robin Hood, Batman, Punk, and Picasso *against his ruins* (*Wall and Piece* 29).¹

¹ T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land*

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