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Discovering Street Art in London

Though street art is often misunderstood, through photography I will address those common misunderstandings, and through my analysis of my photographs I will provide intimate glimpses of the beauty and intricacy of the street artists' work, as well as a deeper appreciation for the conditions and circumstances that enable and constrain their creative expression. I chose to learn about street art because I am a photographer and wanted to study other art forms that I am less familiar with during my experience in London. Color intrigues me and I love seeing the expression of people's beliefs, so I decided my topic would be discovering street art in London. Not only the physical art is important to me, but finding out the culture behind street art, the themes that prevail through all of street art, how street art has evolved over the years, and the different types of street art. Society as a whole has preconceived ideas regarding street art. Originally, I believed that all street art was graffiti, and all street artists completed their work between the hours of 12:00am and 5:00am to avoid being caught as street art is illegal. Additionally, I assumed that street artists have no plan, but instead go to the streets with a bag of spray paint and play around until they are satisfied with their piece. Most of these preconceived notions are incorrect. Around London, street artists shine through their innovative and creative work. Through photography, I sought to capture street art in London. I shot pictures from different angles in order to capture the whole work and portray what I believe the street artists would want people to see.

Taking part in a street art tour gives a perspective I could not get from walking around on the street and viewing street art by myself. After taking part in the street art tour in Brick Lane I was able to travel to other places in London, such as Shoreditch, and critically view the street art.

It adds a voice behind the art I am viewing. As a photographer it helped me to focus on specific aspects of the piece that were important to the artist rather than focusing on the art as a whole. In this way I can be an extension of the artist's voice and perpetuate their story. I allow the way I photograph, using unique angles and depths of field to complement their artistry.

I learned from street artist Mr. Aces that some of the best street art in the world is located in London because street artists globally travel to London to hone their skills. Additionally, London is such a popular place to complete street art because of its exposure to people. People from all over the world visit London on vacation and business. This makes it a prime location for street art to be seen. For example, street artists from Sweden have recently started undertaking street art work in London because although there are walls and art materials in Sweden, there are no street art tours and no places for the art to be seen or appreciated (Simpson Interview).

Some artists create street art to share their political or environmental opinions. By decorating the side of a building in different stencils, banners, and graffiti, the artists are able to clearly display their beliefs towards situations regarding the environment and politics. One artist, Shok-1, began crafting murals of x-rays "to show humanity's environmental impact" (Razaq). Attached is graffiti he created that shows the heart being ripped out (Figure 1). I specifically took this photograph with a straight angle and increased the contrast in order to see the incredible 3D looking effect Shok-1 gave to the bones. It may not look like graffiti, but this entire piece was made out of spray paint. He tries to promote caring for the environment through his work. Other pieces of his include skeletons holding empty cans and garbage. Artists create street art for many different reasons. Some artists just craft art in order to be known as a street artist. Others are interested in receiving commission for the art that they create. Street art is the easiest way for

people to see statements about the environment or politics because artists can put it on display wherever they would like in whatever size they desire.

Figure 1



Creating street art is about “showing that you are dedicated and willing to put in the hard work to win the respect of other graffiti artists” (Simpson Interview). There is a clear difference between vandalism and street art. Certain telltale techniques clearly distinguish the genuine street artist from a random person using a can of spray paint. What someone creates also defines whether or not they are a street artist. It is determined by factors like the lettering the person does, whether or not the paint drips, and what they are creating. Most of the vandalism that occurs is in graffiti. Street artists who use graffiti have a certain style that proves they are artists

versus people committing vandalism. Figure 2 represents an example of vandalism because there is spray paint and marker writing, but it looks like someone was just writing their name or a gang's name. Gang members commonly write their names on a wall in spray paint. No thought was put into this piece. In the street artist culture, the artists are allowed to paint over each other's work, but there are certain restraints. Street art changes frequently because of this culture. When an artist paints over another's work they must first cover the work with a dark colored paint. It is disrespectful to the previous artist if the new artist does not fully cover the work before starting the new piece. If the artist covers it over disrespectfully or does not cover the artwork, then the street artists may engage in an art fight. An art fight entails artists covering each other's works disrespectfully until one decides to be respectful when covering the other's artwork (Simpson Interview). The artists can identify each other's work through their unique tag.

Figure 2



A tag is a signature for a street artist. Sometimes artists use their own name as their tag, or some type of symbol that is significant to them, but the tag is completely up to the artist. Street artists take pride in their tag as it is the only way to identify their work. From my street art tour guide I learned when a street artist first begins completing street art they practice their tag often because “it’s a great way to learn how to use spray paint and how to control the can” (Simpson Interview). Spray paint is difficult to use because after you take your finger off of the paint button the paint continues running for a few seconds. It takes practice to know how long to spray for, and how hard one should press the spray can button. During the street art tour Mr. Aces, my tour guide, declared that “they may paint their tag around a city up to thirty or forty times a night” in order to make it perfect (Simpson Interview). The tag is the most significant part of street art. Attached is a picture of an exquisite tag, and through his work it is clear that this is a talented street artist (Figure 3 and Figure 4). I purposely photographed this art at an upward angle because I wanted to show the scene the artist created the right side of the face. Through this photograph, I wanted viewers to look at the whole image. In Figure 4, the face is the focal point of the image, so if the face was the middle of the photograph people’s eyes would likely never look at the whole photograph. Street artists are recognized by their tags and chosen to do commissioned work. Now with increasing regularity companies are utilizing street artists for advertising because the artwork is both beautiful and inexpensive for the company. Mr. Aces explains that “big corporations are now paying owners of properties to use their edifices as ‘canvases’ for street art as it is cheaper to pay an artist to paint your advertising on a building in a critical location than put it on television” (Simpson Interview). For example, Figure 5 shows a Gucci advertisement created by a street artist. The street art is black and white, but I edited the photograph I took to make the entire image black and white. The colors of the windows and pole

going through the building would otherwise distract from the incredible street art created. The street artists are not proud of creating advertisements and pieces of art for companies, so they do not sign their tag on these pieces of art. The only reason they complete art for companies is because they thoroughly enjoy creating street art and this is how they make a living. Street art is supposed to be for the community, so by creating art for a company such as Gucci the artist may lose respect among the street art community (Simpson Interview).

Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Street art has evolved over time. As technology has advanced, it has allowed for people to be more innovative with the art they create. Mr. Aces claims that “artists even use projectors and project their pieces on the wall and trace it” (Simpson Interview). Using projectors makes street art easier and allows street artists to create more intricate pieces. Artists use photoshop technology to size different parts of their piece to confirm that it will fit on the wall before they begin to create it. Technology such as projectors were very large and expensive, therefore street artists would not have been able to easily purchase them or bring them to sites to create their artwork years ago. Additionally, when artists have tall paintings they use drones and scissor lifts to reach their work. Drones did not exist until recently, and this has allowed for artists to make

their work more concise and higher on buildings. Now, with the existence of social media, artists are able to easily exhibit their work to a much larger population. Not all street artists use the newest technology though. Some street artists will take whatever colors they have around, and they will go to the scene and paint. There are examples of both of these in photographs attached. In Figure 7, the stenciling piece was planned out because the artist created the stencil before arriving at the scene. However, in Figure 6, artist Mr. Sends did his artwork completely free-hand with the exception of the lines for the image of the colorful woman. He did no planning for this piece and instead just took colors he had in his home and brought them to the street to create the masterpiece. Mr. Sends had no sketch and no color scheme picked out ahead of time. This futuristic portrait took him only three days to create. After photographing this street art I had to photoshop a pole out of the picture. The pole takes away from the incredible street art created, and I knew if I did not remove it that it would draw people's eyes away from the intended focal point when they view the image.

Figure 6



Figure 7



Many types of street art exist now that did not previously exist. People assume that the only street art is graffiti, but there are diverse types of art such as sculptures and stenciling. Figure 11 shows two tube cars on the top of a building, so this work can indeed be very creative and risky. Artists are becoming more creative with the placement of 3D pieces and sculptures, so these pieces are increasing in popularity. In order to show the 3D image of the black face in Figure 9, I took a picture with my camera pressed against the wall at an angle shooting upwards toward the face. The viewer can see detail in the face and how far it pops off the wall. For the gray sculpture I had to take a photograph straight on, or else the face is not visible (Figure 8). For example, when viewing the gray face sculpture from the side I could not even tell what the sculpture was supposed to be. The mushroom in the attached photograph, created by Christiaan Nagel, is made out of the same material used to create a surfboard (Figure 10). The mushrooms are all over London and the world because the artist follows the idea that fungus and art spread.

He wants to be the most distinguished street artist in the world, and he believes by placing mushrooms around the world he will accomplish his goal.

Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Through researching and discovering street art I have learned that many of my preconceived notions regarding street art and how it is viewed by society were incorrect. My independent study has shaped me as an artist because I have been exposed to many different types of street art. Through my photography, I have discovered the importance capturing unique focal points and angles when photographing street art. I also realized that being an artist has a broad spectrum of possibilities from building mushrooms around the world using surfboard material to photographing the work of other artists to uncover what it means. Additionally, I discovered how art is ingrained in London culture. Street artists travel from all over the world for their work to have exposure in London. Through my photography, I had the ability to capture

street art and its culture through my lens. I utilized different angles and editing techniques in order to exemplify the beauty and intricate world of the street artists.

Works Cited

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