

The Ache of the Real: Streets, Cyberspace and Alternative Vision



(((by Mariette Papic)))

Reflected in the quickly sprayed black tag erupting in aerosol or within pasted explorations of sublime myth, urban expressions of reclamation charted through the culture and history of New York City draw a line that has no fixed end.

Although policies of suppression have been researched and enacted, the creative expression and presence of unsanctioned, public-space voices continues, despite buffing campaigns of every type. These systems of control have often been the first response of policy makers who conveniently avoid the basic catalysts urging these voices forward. Systematized denial of the creative urge generates an ever-evolving tension, that not only finds itself at home in the geography of local asphalt, but also on the virtual streets of cyber existence.

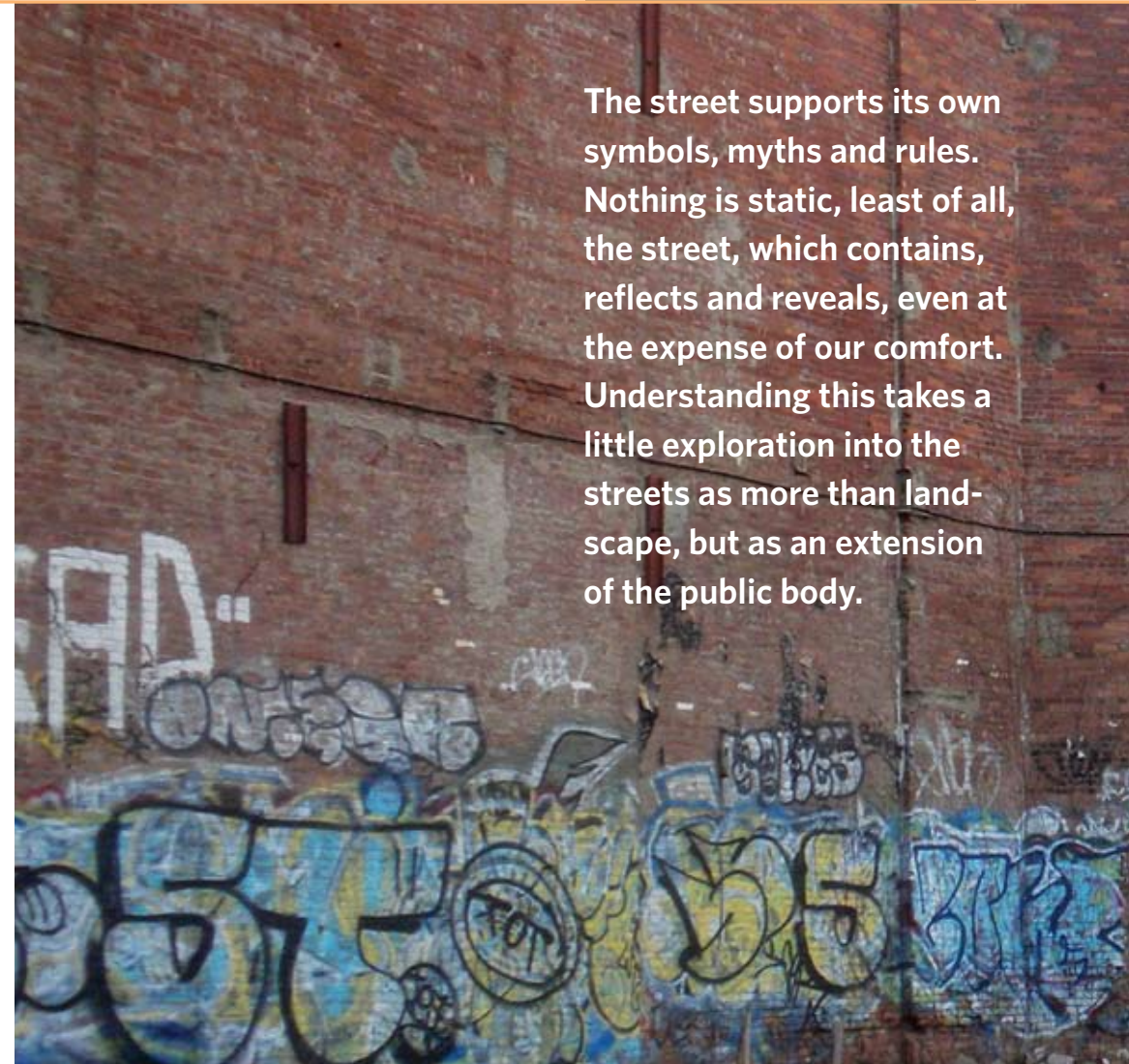
The ache for self-expression links the tagger to the hacker, not because they are in practice so similar, but because they function within society as an active, oppositional and viral subculture.

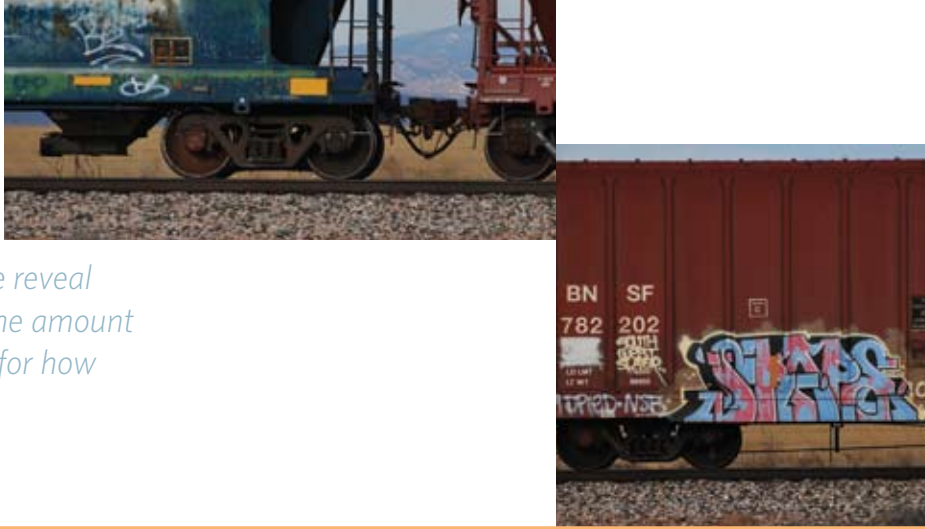
Depending on how this subculture is dealt with, in part, determines either its virulence or positive potential. The nature of public space and free expression within it place the street artist in a context where access, censorship and control become core concepts uniting the legacy of the tagger with that of the hacker. A unifying element comes from the very nature of the streets as thoroughfare, exchange and forum. The street supports its own symbols, myths and rules. Nothing is static, least of all, the street, which contains, reflects and reveals, even at the expense of our comfort. Understanding this takes a little exploration into the streets as more than landscape, but as an extension of the public body. The urge for self expression on the street can be suppressed, appropriated and dealt with from a top-down method, as it has been, or it can be seen as a forum and a key to unlocking alternative voices, and an alternative history that can invigorate society at a much greater level.

Imagine New York in the 1970s, it was a time known largely for crime.

During this period, two intertwined cultural movements arose from streets that few desired to tread. One movement was hip-hop and the other, graffiti. Both are documented as responses to alienation and denial of power. In hip-hop came the beat boxers and the MCs, those who created their own music, giving rise to a collective voice that reinvented itself at the end of an era when commercialization and appropriation had destroyed disco. As one cultural experience withered, another stepped in, offering voice; in this way, hip-hop was born. In graffiti also existed a move to reclamation, but this one was of space, of walls and trains. Whether expressions of wild style love or youthful hubris, streets offered canvases that were public. The gallery, however, wasn't the clos-

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est approximation; the streets were more akin to forum and message boards, which were just then emerging in the late 1970s. There should be no mistaking that by the time that graffiti was firmly alive in New York City, so were those individuals who were native to its streets, warehouses and landscapes. Underpasses and the fallow sides of buildings were not simply streets, but the earth into which many of these children were born. This was the new Eden and it was built of concrete and walls made for climbing. This is the story of the city as garden and garden as living body. In this place, the native child of modern urban culture was born. In this place, the basic urges to discovery and self-exploration were often antagonized by the systematized violence of inequality and prejudice.

Now imagine some older time periods in history.

Let's do a little hop, first to Egypt, where two and three-dimensional wall writings whose language and symbols led readers through texts. We can pass then to Europe, even further back to the fascinating caves of Paleolithic drawings of Lascaux. Much too quickly we find ourselves vaulted onto the shores of the new world. New Amsterdam, and the birth of a city whose filth and difficulty was largely worth the enduring for the bizarre and sublime landscape of varied people, architecture and the opportunity contained within high density. Theorists such as Harold Bloom (*Global Brain: The Evolution of Mass Mind from the Big Bang to the 21st Century*)¹ suppose that cities are not only areas of increased activity within groups, but that they generate an increased interior evolution within each individual. If this is true, then it makes a lot of sense that to look at one of America's oldest and most deeply entrenched cities gives us a sense of what public space means when people are living cheek to jowl. Follow this thread a little further and it also seems less surprising that as these quarters become tighter through population increases, each square of public space contains a real potential for humans to connect and this connection fuels their ability to adapt. In this context, visual expressions in the public space reveal a history worth charting, not just for the amount of output or its artistic merit, but also for how it exposes our collective evolution.

Understanding the experience of the city in a multi-dimensional here and now, through mapping its pulse points over time and space, we can begin unearthing the depth of these varied street level expressions.

As to why people are still compulsively using walls to express themselves, the answers are not contained in a singular reason. It's not a huge leap to imagine poverty as a restrictive element, so that canvas becomes whatever is available. It's also not a huge leap to imagine that a young native urban dweller will also have an innocent component that, if it is moved to self-expression, will utilize that which is also native to his landscape, irrespective other available paths. So whether it be analogous to the caves of the Paleolithic era or whether it be a way of sharing knowledge as it

developed in Egypt and other civilizations, the streets have no choice but to serve both as a landscape and as an extension of the persons and the myths contained within it.

A body extends out into its city, its natural world.

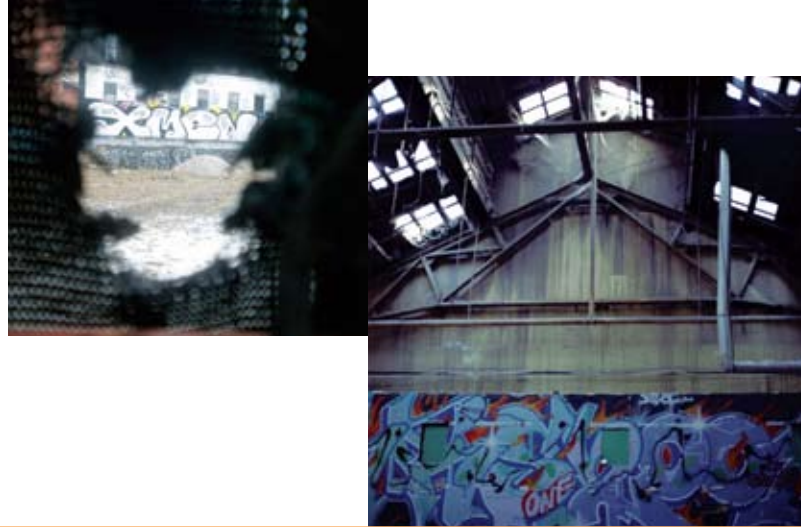
Criminalizing this thread of self-expression is not in and of itself the biggest problem facing public space, since to some degree, penalties ensure that public needs for order and aesthetics are met. The level, though, to which order and subservience are exalted by the establishment may also in turn, remand the tagger and other visual artists working in the streets to the role ultimately, of the vandal. The tension of needs between individual and community will never be completely resolved, but ignoring this tension by buffing it away, or denying its origins, will only continue to turn native bodies into native opposition. This tension has already spread into the suburbs and the art schools and onto the web in tangible ways, effectively creating new tensions of appropriation, commercialization and free speech. Now, otherwise well-educated, well-received members of society have found freedom in encrypted identities and guerilla exhibition tactics. For better or worse is not the issue; the spread of this urge will most likely continue, enabled by the internet neo-tribes, population densities and shifts in economics.

As much as the vandal is at the heart of the depiction of the graffiti artist, this generalization is, of course, one of convenience.

It doesn't address the sheer beauty, force and passion of what has been unleashed in New York City throughout these last few decades. It does, however, get to the "Broken Windows"² campaign that was waged by the Giuliani administration, according to an article that was featured in *The Atlantic* in 1982. In fact, that campaign was notable for its own naive delusion that to suppress the graffiti artist-vandal would somehow eradicate the output and the need that drives the impulse to be heard in a public space. As many of us know, the campaign ignited a malignant streak that continues to create a polarized debate that generally arrives at solutions operating on a superficial level. Even if a debunking of Broken Windows, as it was put forth in the popular book, *Freakonomics*,³ were to be fully accepted, we would arrive not at a static answer, but at an entry point that requires us to acknowledge the lack of power available to most private citizens, equal to that afforded the state or the corporations who continue their advance on the urban landscape.

New York has a paucity of community space or open walls available for sanctioned street art of varying types, and instead finds itself constantly courting large projects with established artists, while marginalizing many other voices who activate this terrain at little or no cost to others.

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In fact, these large works of art, meant to inspire or to mollify, can instead remind those living within the city of their lack. As for those who make no pretense towards expression, but who simply spray in fits of anger or assertion of territory, these voices in particular require a deeper listening by all involved, artists, policy makers, law enforcement and those within the art world structure. Listening does not mean surveillance. Listening means that all levels of street expression should be heard as the pulse points that reveal deeper levels of societal health. This type of deep listening requires a suspension of prejudice towards the individual voices and a recognition that an increasingly surveilled and corporatized public sphere will continue to be challenged. In this sense, graffiti and other types of non-sanctioned art are, irrespective of aesthetic merit, all valid expressions of experience. The voice of the street is not unified, but in its culture jamming potential, there is a recognized convergence. This generates fear. All street writers are considered an equal danger from the current point of view of the authorities. In turn, this fear exacerbates all attempts at open dialogue and creative reclamation of space and voice.

There is true magic to be found in those that transcend trends of culture and the hype of the fad by asserting their own voice by all means necessary.

However troubling the appropriation into the galleries and museums might be, this course has proven historically inevitable. The future lies not in false or faddish distinctions, the future lies in the solidarity of all artists who choose to work on the street. Even those artists who abandon the street can and could not hide from chances to turn their acceptance into a chance for amnesia. Alternative histories must be charted, remembered and seen in context. Those who succeed in the gallery market must renew their internal commitment to honesty and genuine acknowledgement of those voices that have been overlooked or perhaps even shunned by curators and museums. The artists themselves must engage in the project of charting the lineage of public space expression instead of shying away from these difficult and sometimes paradoxical benefits afforded to them because of their involvement on the street. Evolution from vandal to professional artist is a tricky experience in today's system of markets. Those markets have historically denied women, people of color and the undereducated. In fact, at this time while other groups are engaging in projects to generate living histories and archives, the artists who have worked on the street must come to terms with their own place, culture and larger context. Perhaps the problem is that an official movement or manifesto outlined by an official agenda does not bind graffiti artists. Maybe some of the problem also stems from the appropriation of its original counterpart, hip-hop, into the mainstream. The time for exploring the history, the implicit politics and the personal actions of artists is now. Public space artists of all classes should dedicate time to the debate, documentation and dialogue of all street level art.

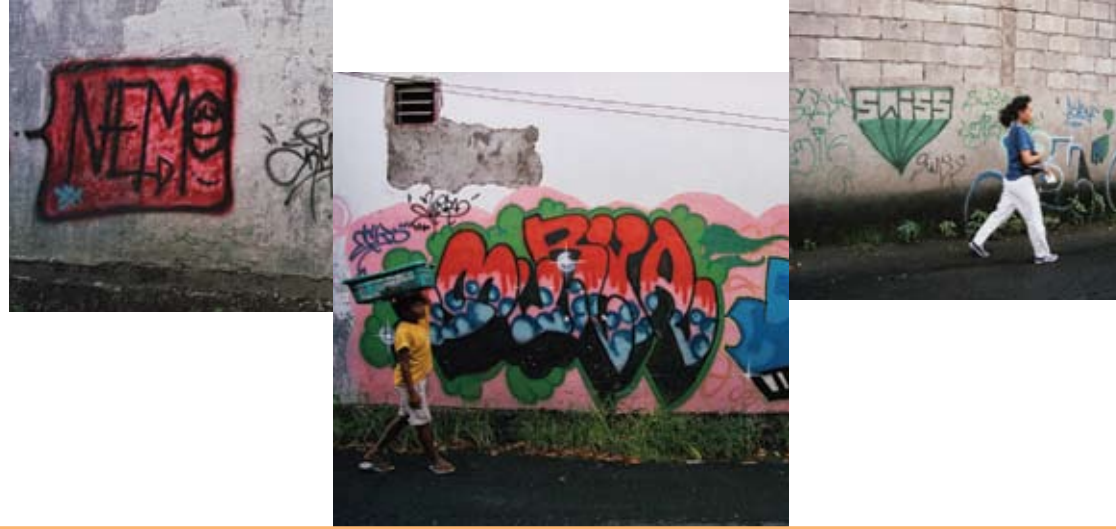
There is no shortage of New Yorkers working to explore the public space. The problem presented to those who work on the street is that the living street is at once constant and chameleon, exhibiting the real lives of its people.

Even a conciliatory artist might find himself straddling a spectrum of work that does not fit within his own perspectives regarding the street. The important thing here is not to define and define to the point of death, but to explore further what the street is saying. Going forward, one must look to history as well. This responsibility of questioning falls to every artist who has stickered, stenciled, pasted, put up or bombed. This exploration is open and helpful to all going forward. Opening the streets to alternative voices requires community building, dialogue with merchants, landowners and politicians. Reclaiming this landscape will need to include a greater mixing of themes as well. Reclamation is only legitimate if it engages with issues of rising school tuitions and supplies, as well as early childhood art education. Moving into the cyber age, these attempts must also seek to explore the place where the practical politics of public space merge with that of open source, net neutrality and other seemingly far off issues. Considering the level of potential censorship both locally and globally that threatens the alternate space of the virtual streets, the time to engage with this is no other than now. As the mind and the body expand into cyberspace, so will the form of the tagger merge with that of the hacker.

As the tagger sought beauty in the landscape of post 1960s New York, so now comes the hacker, involving himself in culture jamming and the reclamation of space and freedoms of expression.

Of course the virulent hacker seeks less for collective liberation or connection to beauty, but this is not the majority. Consider this line from *Hacker Crackdown* by Bruce Sterling, “the heartfelt conviction that beauty can be found in computers, that the fine aesthetic in a perfect program can liberate the mind and spirit.”⁴ The hacker recalls the ache and desire for liberation found in the tagger. The hacker often demands transparency and freedom in communication. He demands freedom in the cyber public space in order to preserve the egalitarian promise of the web. Improving transparency or demanding that corporate and government entities do not dominate this new sphere is not so different from conscious efforts on the part of street artists, especially those within most recent street history who have taken to remixing and reclaiming the symbols of corporate billboards. The lessons of the street and of the virtual world resonate and amplify the deeper needs of the next stage urban dweller, who is just now arriving. The ultra modern native is one whose landscape is increasingly divided between screen and concrete and, for him, the definition of street is equally fluid.

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A city dedicated to beautiful neighborhoods must strive to do this genuinely, to reflect its populace in varied form and amidst streams of increased population, gentrification and concerns for public safety.

It must reflect compassion towards alternative voices, taking particular interest in those who languish with little or no sense of voice. Ignoring this experience ignores the connectedness of the fashions, the fusions that have generated some of the most potent currents of today's popular culture. Paying respect to local needs has positive implications that are too often ignored. True alternative spaces are most likely not found within museums and other centers where art is now used as a marker of sophistication and wealth. However, these institutions, in their desire to appropriate street level culture into their high culture sphere, must note that their acts of curation, and the imposing buildings themselves, carry the “implicit recognition of the inherent value of the idea of creation,”⁵ an idea noted by Renaud Ego in an essay exploring alternative space and lifestyles that are a result of the commonly experienced de-professionalization of the artist.

Silencing street voices, without offering alternatives, undermines the connectedness of identity and practice and places antagonism as a foundation for all interactions between citizens and power structures.

Community walls and inclusive solutions that seek conflict resolution might be a beginning to envision the next age of public space. As the ultra modern age raises its head, it can be integral to the cultural rebirth of the bricks and mortar version of New York. This reciprocal renaissance must come from all quarters and must explore the street artist as something more than vandal. Those who oppose or ignore these visions face deepening stagnation. The role of the museum, and even the gallery, may find itself increasingly obsolete as the web records and collects its own living record, and potentially directs energies to its own growing archive, while the internet opens up avenues of commerce and education that are decentralized. As the street knows, no space is neutral. False neutrality on the part of individuals or institutions will not be recognized as neutral, but as perpetrating an old paradigm of professionalism, hierarchy and restrictive copyright.

In many discussions with artists, I have observed an intellectualization of process and purpose, coupled with a denial of the definition and term, street art.

There is often a slightly worried gnashing of teeth as vandalism and the street artist as vandal become falsely joined as one. As freedom of speech is assaulted with vague allusions to terrorism, dissent and alternative vision are also increasingly and falsely drawn as one. Even legends of the street might try to escape identification with this difficult territory. This denial is another key of

sorts, since each of us, at our core, seems to prefer the liminal space where all of our daily identities meet. The types of people and the reasons they create are constantly shifting and shaping. With those perhaps raised on the streets, or with others who are also capable of deeper listening, comes a sense that the street remains a barometer of community. Its appropriation is the joke, the shame and the curiosity of many. In reclaiming a pantheon, a sense of history is hopefully portrayed; a door to a project is opened. In reclaiming this thread of public space as context and text, the next generations of citizenry might be more apt to examine the basic need for all of us to be creative within our landscape.

Due to the double-edged sword of acceptance into the art market, once again, comes this new post-moment. It contains an opportunity for the coming together of various factions to contextualize the history of the street into a much larger and living matrix.

The streets of the Internet potentially reflect and amplify the current issues and experiences of New York City and in fact, all other cities, as what exists now is the very basis for cyberspace (*Cyberspace: First Steps*)⁶. Acknowledging this exposes the urgent need to consider the history of events, crews and individuals who have explored this terrain to date. The street generations of this era are now challenged with drawing the lines of their history backward and into the future simultaneously, within the context of a transitioning urban existence. Equally important in this moment is a move to apply a critical and compassionate eye to existing inequalities, so as to create a new precedent in the relationship of power structures and their citizenry. As New York City faces a shift in paradigm, charting alternative histories may offer a much stronger voice to those who have felt previously denied. Revealing the true urge and nature of these passionate vandals could help the next generations, who will surely share this ache to perpetuate their own myths and symbols, in short, to be real in their world.

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1 *Global Brain: The Evolution of Mass Mind from the Big Bang to the 21st Century* by Howard Bloom, Wiley; 1st edition (July 28, 2000).

2 *Broken Windows, The police and neighborhood safety* by George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson. Atlantic Monthly, 1982. theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/4465/

3 *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* by Stephen J. Dubner and Steven Levitt, William Morrow, 2005.

4 *The Hacker Crackdown* by Bruce Sterling. mit.edu/hacker/hacker.html

5 *Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces*, edited with preface by Steven Rand. Page 108, “The Forest in the Clearing” by Renaud Ego. 2010 Apex Art.

6 *Cyberspace: First Steps* edited by Michael L. Benedikt, 1991, MIT Press