'This is not a Banksy!': street art as aesthetic protest

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'This is not a Banksy!': street art as aesthetic protest

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[AQ1]

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This paper examines the dialogue and transformation of public space that occurred after Banksy's Slave Labour was removed without notice from a wall in North London, transported to Miami and listed for auction. Despite the high-profile media coverage of the 'theft' of Banksy's piece, the explosion of new works provoked by its extraction was for the most part simply erased as they appeared. We argue that the excision of Slave Labour provided a 'gap in the sensible' (Rancière 2004) and the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a lively local intertextual visual dialogue, which transformed this otherwise apparently unremarkable London side street into an arena for aesthetic protest and critical social commentary.

[AQ2]

Introduction

Its very destruction causes one to remember. (Schacter 2008, 47)

In London alone, 100 million pounds per year is spent wiping the walls clean using various solvents and painting over unsanctioned images and writing deemed not to 'add value' to an area (Greater London Authority 2002). This is a relentless and ongoing everyday practice of surveillance, judgement and erasure, and in consequence the anti-graffiti industry is worth multi-billions (Mubi brighenti 2010). The mundane lawful removal, or 'buffing', of work by agents of the local council or by private residents is predicated on the judgement of such work as diminishing the symbolic capital of an area.Islington Council (2014, n.p.) warns that, 'it can be the catalyst for a downward spiral of neglect in an area, and encourage other more serious criminal activity'. Such aesthetic socio-moral judgements are based on long-held associations between graffiti and criminal activity, as a visible index of social deprivation and urban decay, and as a form of abjection and territory marking akin to public urination, as dirt or filth, or 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2002, 36). Street art may also 'disappear' over time, via the natural processes of degradation and decay; or may be wilfully destroyed by being written over, or 'capped', by others. This is usually a marker of blatant disrespect towards the original work and/or artist. A more exceptional and historically recent form of erasure is through the careful excision of street art for exploitation by capital.

[AQ3]

Paradoxically, the removal of street art for profit appears to occur only after efforts to preserve and protect the work have been implemented by local councils and residents. This 'protection' is usually accomplished by fixing a Perspex shield over the work, which marks it as being 'of value' and worthy of conservation. This is presumably designed to guard against overwriting, accidental erasure or 'defacement' by others, and to preserve the work against the processes of degradation and decay. This form of protective practice is thus predicated on a judgement of such work as 'adding value' to an area. However, marking work as 'valuable' to the community and attempting to protect it from harm may

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have the unintended effect of visibly commodifying the work, which in turn may make it vulnerable to removal for auction on the art market, where work by successful street artists such as Banksy is highly lucrative, even in the absence of provenance, and can reach in excess of a million pounds per piece (Frigerio and Khakimova 2013).

Indeed, the Sincura Group, which facilitated the recent removal of Banksy's iconic No Ball Games from a wall in the socio-economically deprived area of Tottenham, London, drew on this very rhetoric of protection by claiming that the work was being salvaged for restoration (BBC 2013). However, their further claim that the work was not being appreciated *in situ* by the local community proved more contentious. Conservation and appreciation are established practices traditionally associated with the recognition of, and duty of care towards, fine art and cultural heritage. Sincura's assertion that the excised work was not being appreciated *in situ*, and the implication that proper appreciation could only occur in a sanctioned gallery space or museum seems extraordinary, given that street art's very existence, as such, has been argued to be dependent on its *in situ* nature, and ongoing dynamic relationship with the community it exists within (Young 2014). This determinist discourse – of the need to remove and preserve street art of value in order to ensure its appreciation – reinforces the division of the sensible that would refuse everyday inner city citizens the capacity to hold an 'aesthetic attitude', or to engage in a form of subjectification by which they could actively contest the (under) estimation of their capacities, such as, in this case, being incapable of appreciating street art *in situ*.

Street art as a self-consciously indexical and situated practice positions itself in relation to particular aspects of the urban environment, often with socio-political intent evident, in part, through its site of dissemination. In this sense, Dovey, Wollan, and Woodcock (2012) argue, street art and graffiti strives to 'erode' the distance between art and viewer, and to resist ready 'incorporation' into the formalized field of 'art'. However, Burroughs (1988) suggests that it is the very 'disruption' of accepted categories that, paradoxically, constitutes 'art' itself. Irvine (2012) further asserts that a defining feature of what we come to recognize as 'high art' is the work's deautomisatization of established categories. Thus, the very resistance of street art to established categories may render it vulnerable to appropriation and commodification as 'high art'.

We focus here on the transformation of public space provoked by the ephemeral dialogue of a series of relatively unknown artists/writers, over a period of 18 months (February 2013–September 2014) post the removal of a high-profile piece of work by a recognized artist from the same site. While the 'invaluable' work in question – Banksy's Slave Labour – received international media coverage when it first appeared in May 2012, the new works incited by its removal in February 2013 were for the most part simply painted over shortly after they appeared, and were not reproduced in any of the extensive media, community or local government commentary.

Slave Labour's removal was the catalyst for a series of often self-consciously egalitarian works of aesthetic protest. Rancière (2004) asserts that aesthetic protest can create 'dissensus', or ruptures in common sense, and a gap in the sensible, which works ultimately to show that what we see, according to our usual division of the sensible, could be otherwise – thus demonstrating the 'contingency of the entire perceptual and conceptual order' (May 2011, n.p.). Rancière extends the reach of aesthetics to encompass all those practices that make possible new commonalities of sense, and sense-making practices, created by ruptures in common sense itself. This is political, he argues, as politics is located in 'disputes about the division of what is perceptible to the senses' (Rancière 1998, 176). Thus, as May (2011, n.p.) explains, 'politics is itself aesthetic in that

99 it requires a sharing of sense in common; art is not the exemplary site of sensory pleasure
100 or the sublime but a critical break with common sense'.
101   Rancière uses the term 'division of the sensible' to refer to the 'system of self-evident
102 facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible
103 as well as what can be said, thought, made or done' (Rancière 2004, 89). He argues that
104 what is capable of being apprehended by the senses, in turn, provides for possible forms of
105 participation (or exclusion from participation). The division of the sensible operates to
106 allocate people to their proper coordinates, social categories and associated activities
[AQ5] 107 (Rancière 2004, 3). Politics consists in the moments when those excluded from this social
108 order, those who are ordinarily invisible or inaudible, engage in a form of aesthetic
109 subjectivization that unsettles the 'aesthetic coordinates of the community' (Rockhill
110 2004, xiii) with the potential to transform the established division of the sensible. For
111 Rancière, the police represent the institutional form of the maintenance of the division of
112 the sensible, and indeed the policing of graffiti and street art operates to discourage
113 people's aesthetic and political engagement with work on the walls.Iveson (2014, 96)
114 asserts that the policing of uncommissioned and unauthorized work on the walls of a city is
115 achieved not just by its removal by authorities, but also via the discourses used to
116 categorize work as 'vandalism' or as indecipherable nonsense, which effect 'the reduction
117 of graffiti writers to people who write but have nothing to say . . . [and thus have] no place/
118 part in the city'. Here, the operations of the 'police' refernot (just) to the actions of
119 uniformed authorities, but rather to the broader operations of the symbolic constitution of
120 the social that encourages people not to stop and look at that which should not be seen.
[AQ6] 121 ForRancière (1998, 29)

> 122 the police is . . . first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of
> 123 being, and ways of saying, and sees that these bodies are assigned by name to a particular
> 124 place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is
> 125 visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.

126   This injunction takes institutional form here in the material practices associated with
127 the division of the sensible: in the local authority's buffing or erasure of work that is not to
128 be seen; in the protection of authorized work permitted to remain; and in the relocation of
129 work that is apparently too valuable to be seen and appreciated '*in situ*' by the people.

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131
132
Slave Labour
133
134 Slave Labour (Figure 1, below) was produced during the lead up to the 2012 London
135 Olympics, and at the height of the UK's nationwide celebration of the Queen's Diamond
136 Jubilee, marking 50 years of her reign as monarch. However, and despite the abundance of
137 Jubilee-related paraphernalia, advertising and street decorations in London at the time of
138 the work's materialization, most of the media commentary was not overly concerned with
139 what the work may have been intended to critique or signify but was rather initially
140 restricted to a discussion as to whether or not it was 'a genuine Banksy'. TheBBC (2012,
141 n.p.) interviewed a range of 'people on the street' and academic experts and concluded
142 that, 'the image has all the hallmarks of a genuine Banksy'. Similarly, the media coverage
143 of the later 'theft' of this work was largely contained to canvassing the community's
144 protest at its removal for auction in America and speculation as to the agents responsible
145 for the work's removal.
146   When Slave Labour was removed from the wall for private auction, the local
147 community, represented by MP Lynne Featherstone, was vocal in asserting community

Figure 1.   May 2012.

ownership of, and rights to, the work. It was described as a gift to the community to whom, and where, it should be considered to rightfully belong:

> You have deprived a community of an asset that was given to us for free and greatly enhanced an area that needed it … I call on you, and your consciences, to pull the piece from both potential sales and return it to its rightful place. (Tottenham 2013, n.p.)

Protests were held at the site of removal, with residents brandishing signs that read 'Bring back our Banksy'. Here, the protesters assert ownership, but not of the particular work, Slave Labour, but the work as 'a Banksy', or rather '*our* Banksy' – an asset with a recognizable currency – and demand its restitution. This protest was grounded in the community's originally recognized claim over the work as belonging in – and to – its community of origin. However, as Young (2014, 128) points out, while communities' experiences of, and belief in, 'public space' persists, the reality is that in many cities, apparently public spaces are legally comprised of a grid of privately owned spaces. This community protest, which attracted significant media coverage, was initially successful, and on 23 February 2013 Slave Labour was withdrawn from auction in Miami, but the work eventually resurfaced in London where it was auctioned on 1 June 2013 by the Sincura group, representing the building's owners, for £750,000.

As with much street art, the positioning of the work is a crucial element in its (intended) signification, now largely lost through its abstraction from context. Slave Labour was originally placed on the side of a Poundland discount store building in North London (Poundland is the largest discount retailer in Europe). At the time, the store was heavily stocked with Jubilee merchandise, some of which – the plastic Union Jack 'bunting' emerging from the boy's sewing machine – formed part of the original piece, before the local residents stripped it bare. This 'product placement' draws attention to the conditions of production of these disposable nationalistic icons. Slave Labour's *in situ* location, and three-dimensional bunting, implicates the Poundland store and its customers. The precise placement of the work recalls a high-profile public scandal over Poundland's involvement in child sweatshop labour after a boy of seven was found to be working 100 hours a week, for just 7p an hour, in an Indian sweatshop that produced goods for the store (Mail 2010).

197   Children are a vehicle often used by Banksy to deliver a message about the inherent
198 inhumanity of deprivation, subjugation and violence – for instance, a child embracing a
199 bomb in Bomb Hugger (2003); a child frisking a soldier in Stop and Search (2007). These
200 works juxtapose two images that clearly 'do not belong' together, but once joined connote
201 something both innocent and sinister – thus delivering a political message in a comical or
202 surprising manner. Although Slave Labour also depicts a child, it would appear that it
203 departs from this established design logic. The significance in this stylistic break perhaps
204 marks the seriousness of the subject. Unlike the child frisking a soldier in Stop and Search,
205 the child depicted in kneeling servitude in Slave Labour is representative of a multitude of
206 children who exist under such conditions. The life-sized figure of the boy gives human
207 form to the otherwise invisible 215 million child labourers aged between 5 and 17 years
208 old worldwide (ILO 2010). The juxtaposition of the figure of a child with the activity of
209 enforced labour should be as surprising, ridiculous and arresting as the depiction of a child
210 embracing a bomb, or stop and searching a soldier. That it is not – that the viewer does not,
211 at first, see the boy as anything other than a veridical representation of a fixed and
212 determinate socio-political reality – is the shameful source of the work's power. We are
213 all implicated in his subjugation.

215 **Initial visual responses: protest and loss**
216 The community protest against Slave Labour's removal was also registered on the wall
217 itself, with an explosion of graffiti, stencils and paste ups marking the site of removal,
218 which was at that time visible as an unpainted and apparently still damp and freshly
219 cemented section of the wall. These initial responses provide a visual cacophony of protest
220 and loss (Figure 2).
222   Much of this work is an index of community grief at the loss of Slave Labour. A large
223 paste up of a weeping nun was positioned directly over the site of extraction; and a red
224 heart was spray painted on the right-hand corner of the site, dripping red paint onto the
225 wounded wall. Other pieces mark the level of community outrage at the 'theft' of the work

245 Figure 2.   February 2013.

for private auction, and the commodification of Banksy's 'gift' to the community. A stencilled paste-up reading 'Caution: Thieves at Work' abuts the left side of the space left by the extracted work; and dollar notes have been pasted around the perimeters of the site of extraction. There are also pieces that reference Banksy's other work, and that of associated artists. To the left of the wall is a small stencilled rat in the style of Banky's influential French precursor, Blek le Rat, holding a tiny spray can and a sign repeating the demand of the community protesters. Another stencilled rat in similar proportion, but in the recognizable style of Banksy, sits at the same level to the right of the site of extraction. This rat holds a placard with a single-word protest – 'Why?'

This is a democratic multiparty conversation. The contributors include both locally recognized street artists and unknown writers drawn to the site. Unlike curated gallery space, which offers the public a relatively passive position as viewer (though viewing is arguably always an active process), the extramural space of the city wall positions the public as interlocutors with the right to speak. As with any 'public' conversation with multiple contributors, some of the 'talk' appears 'off topic' and made for the sheer sake of being a part of the conversation and making one's mark; some delight in being ostentatious or crude and shocking (one writer's contribution was a giant penis spray painted in lurid pink); some are hurried and scrawled; others are planned and articulate. However, the vast majority of marks on the wall made here appear site and topic specific, and designed to be received as evidence of the force of the community's outrage at the removal of Slave Labour.

This is not a Banksy

After these initial visual protests had been white washed over by the local council, the wall remained blank for several months. The only piece that remained was the small stencilled rat to the right of the site of extraction, which, having been attributed to Banksy, was protected from erasure by a Perspex shield. However, on 17 April 2013, another monochrome stencil appeared, positioned directly over the original site of extraction (see Figure 3). This new stencil is a variation of the iconic Bad Panda stencil, often mistakenly attributed to Banksy.[1]

Figure 3.   April 2013.

295 The panda stands on the recognizable logotype of Banksy's name thus apparently
296 identifying Banksy as the author of this work; however, it wears a signboard that declares
297 'This is not a Banksy'. The panda's signboard is a reworked stencilled element borrowed
298 from another of Banksy's iconic stencils, Laugh Now (2003). The text on the panda's
299 signboard, 'This is not a Banksy', operates both to contradict the claim to authorship
300 provided by Banksy's tag and also to arrest the potential polysemy, or other possible
301 connotations, of the pipe dangling from the panda's mouth. The text provides a reference
302 to the inscription, 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' (trans: This is not a pipe) from Magritte's
303 The Treachery of Images (1928–1929). Magritte's pipe both is, and is not, a pipe, in that
304 it is a representation of a pipe – i.e. not a 'real' pipe. The panda provides the viewer
305 with a similar puzzle, in that it appears to represent/be presented as a Banksy, but is
306 simultaneously, by its own admission, not a 'real' Banksy.

307 If located within the context of gallery space, the image of the pipe alone may have
308 effectively provided a reference to Magritte's work (although it would lose the site
309 specificity of the signification). However, as street art located in public space, this
310 overdetermination of signifiers (the image of the pipe in addition to the text on the
311 signboard) makes this intertextual reference to Magritte's observations on the treachery of
312 images, or the persuasiveness of representation (or what we count as 'real', or authentic)
313 more available to a community likely not versed in art history, creating a democratic ripple
314 in the division of the sensible (Rancière 2004).[2]

315 A process of active interpretation is evident in the additions to the work made by
316 members of the public, which demonstrate the capacity of viewers to appropriate and
317 translate the work in their own terms. Indeed, on the morning after the panda stencil
318 appeared, someone scribbled 'Take me to America' in a speech bubble above the panda's
319 head – a plea, or perhaps a challenge, added hurriedly to the stencil by a passer-by. This
320 request has particular resonance in the relatively socio-economically deprived context of
321 Turnpike Lane, in North London, where few members of the neighbourhood would have
322 the means to travel to America, thus marking the apparent injustice of Slave Labour's
323 cross-Atlantic journey by contrast to the projected aspirations of the panda who appears
324 destined to remain on the wall until its erasure. Later additions to the stencil (see Figure 4)
325 include a single question mark linked with a stroke of ink to the panda's head, marking
326 uncertainty as to the panda's identity; a tiny starred halo drawn between the panda's ears,
327 perhaps mocking its status as a work to be revered; and the block-lettered demand, 'FREE
328 ART NOW!' along the length of the panda's right arm, adopting the form of a political
329 slogan to refer to both to the wrongfully 'captured' Banksy and the unethical
330 commodification of the 'free gift' of street art.

331 This piece introduces a note of uncertainty as to the certainty with which 'a Banksy' can
332 be identified and problematizes the objectified, commodifed notion of 'a Banksy'.
333 It presents the viewer with a puzzle: it is a representation of a Banksy. It is signed by Banksy.
334 Yet it claims it is not a Banksy. These claims mark the potential repercussions of attributions
335 of authorship to the survival of work *in situ*. If it were a Bansky, it would be immediately
336 marked as of value (through the protection provided by a Perspex shield) and would be thus
337 vulnerable to removal for profit. If it were not a Banksy, it would, along with other works by
338 less-recognized street artists, likely be subject to removal via buffing by the local council.

Selling out

342 Another stencil, this time emulating the design of Slave Labour, was added to the wall the
343 following week (see Figure 4). However, instead of producing cut-price jubilee bunting,

Figure 4.   April 2013.

the figure at the sewing machine now produces American dollars, which spew out from the machine onto the pavement in a three-dimensional pasted paper overflow. The only major difference between Slave Labour and this new stencil is that the boy's head has been replaced by an oversized nozzle of a spray can, which identifies the piece as being work by the local street artist Cap Head. This work appears to provide further commentary on the complicit nature of commercially successful street artists in 'selling out'.

A week later, a large female cat standing upright was stencilled on the wall. The cat has a bright red sleeveless bodice that echoes the red heart sprayed free hand in relatively the same position beneath it as part of the works produced in initial response to the removal of Slave Labour. The red heart also recalls the red balloon that escapes the child in Banksy's There is Always Hope (2007). That the cat stencil appears to contain elements of, or references to, other works by Banksy is perhaps further commentary on Banksy's apparent complicity in creating an appetite for street art that now renders work vulnerable to theft for profit. With a curious bent forward stance, the cat looms over the incarcerated Banksy rat trapped beneath its protective Perspex sheet. The cat holds her index finger to her lips and catches the viewers' gaze directly with a defiant, exaggerated 'shhhh!' as she appears to be about to remove either the stencilled rat's protective Perspex shield, thus exposing it to the brutality of the elements, or perhaps to seize and consume the rat itself.

The addition of the cat stencil to the wall creates a triangular composition linking the three works closest to the site of extraction. With tail raised, the cat appears to be spraying or defecating on the panda stencil that is now dwarfed in proportion to the cat. The panda's scribbled speech bubble now forms an abject arc emanating from the cat that serves to link the two pieces, while the third piece is connected via the cat's left hand plucking at the corner of the rat's Perspex cover. The cat stencil thus enacts a creative reworking of existing elements on the wall in an apparent insult to the pre-existing works – both the officially recognized Banksy rat stencil, and the avowedly fake Banksy panda stencil – further highlighting and subverting established notions of authorship, status, reverence and worth.

Two weeks after the appearance of the cat stencil, all of the pieces then on the wall (save Banksy's rat) were whitewashed over by the council.

The boy in a panda suit

The wall remained blank for three weeks after the council had painted over the prior works, then a new stencilled piece appeared directly over the original site of extraction (see Figure 5). It depicts a boy wearing a panda suit. The open face of a panda costume is flung back to reveal a human face with lowered brows and a pensive expression. The panda boy sits cross-legged as he levitates above the street meditatively, with one hand on his knee while the other is raised to rest his chin on the back of his fingers. The trajectory of his gaze, although apparently unfocused, falls across Banksy's rat which is located to the lower right of the piece at the base of the wall.

The boy's panda suit appears to provide a reference to the panda stencil that previously occupied the same position on the wall. That this is revealed to be a costume, or disguise, with a human figure concealed within, adds a further dimension to the ongoing visual exchange regarding authenticity, identity, authorship and worth, i.e. a further representation of what remains hidden, like the earlier panda that also professed to be not what it seemed. That it appears to be the face of a despondent boy that is revealed is perhaps a reference to the forgotten boy depicted in servitude in Banksy's original Slave Labour.

This stencil remained untouched alone on the wall for eight weeks. It was only removed after several other large stencilled pieces were added to the wall. These new works were created with crude mass-produced stencils and accompanying slogans that were presumably regarded by the council as objectionable, or as not 'adding value' to the area, as their appearance saw the entire site (including the boy in a panda suit) swiftly painted over, restoring the blank wall.

Five polystyrene replicas of Slave Labour were placed in a row against the site of extraction at 5.30 am on 1 June 2013, the morning of the London auction of Slave Labour (see Figure 6). These new pieces are the work of Essex-based artist Laura Keeble, and are entitled Supply & Demand (After Banksy's Slave Labour). These three-dimensional pieces have been produced in the exact proportions of Banksy's original Slave Labour.

Figure 5.   May 2013.

Figure 6.   June 2013.

The slightly irregular square of the cut-out section of wall has been reproduced, as has the work's plastic Union Jack bunting and the Perspex shield secured over the original to protect it. However, these pieces were carried away, presumably by opportunistic passers-by, just hours after they were placed against the wall.

This work is both site and temporally specific. It was timed to appear as a concrete form of dissensus or aesthetic protest against the removal and commodification of street art, on the very morning of the auction of Slave Labour. The title of the work, Supply & Demand, is an inversion of the usual form of the idiomatic microeconomic logic of demand and supply, thus providing another reference to the creation of demand or acquisitive greed, which is given further resonance by the swiftness with which the works were claimed and taken from the site.

Cut here

The stencilled piece currently on the wall has outlasted all of the other prior works, and, at the time of writing, has been in position for 6 months (see Figure 7). It has survived road works and a series of adjacently scribbled tags by other writers, and it continues to resist removal by the council. The iconic scissors and dashed lines offer an invitation to 'cut here' of the kind more commonly seen on 'cut out and keep' sections of magazines and consumer packaging. This is a clear reference to the removal for profit of Slave Labour, which was, quite literally, cut off the wall. This new stencil positions this act of removal within the sphere of consumption and the profit economy. However, its consumer friendly design also provides a link to the apparent 'gift' or 'bonus' (to the keeper) of a 'cut out and keep' coupon – an unexpected supplement that operates to expose the 'lack' in the completeness or satisfaction provided by the original item. The consumer/viewer is positioned as wanting what they didn't know they lacked until they received the 'gift' of something for nothing.

Although this piece references acquisitive consumer culture, it also presents a puzzle – why would one wish to remove a blank section of wall? Is the artist suggesting that an

Figure 7.   June 2014.

arbitrary section of a whitewashed city wall is equivalent in worth to a Banksy removed for profit? Is a reference to the production of want and acquisitive greed in the viewer-consumer in the commodification of the 'gift' of street art? Does it allude to the fable of the Emperor's New Clothes, by presenting an essentially invisible work (the blank wall framed by the dashed lines) as being of value, as something that one should want to 'cut out and keep'? Is it a memorial to all of the works – of monetary value or not – that have been removed from the wall?

In common with many of the other pieces that appeared on this site, the cut here stencil also references prior popular works by Banksy. A series of stencilled pieces of a similar scale appeared on various city walls in London, and in other European cities, in 2005. Perhaps the most widely disseminated of Banksy's variants on the cut here stencil was the giant version stencilled on the West Bank Barrier, which received worldwide media attention when it appeared in 2005. Many of Banksy's works placed in Palestine a decade ago were extracted for private auction in 2010, despite Bansky protesting against their removal.

Paradoxically, given its injunction to 'cut here', the work continues to resist removal. Its simplicity in design and mimicry of the form of a recognizable Banksy appears to protect it from buffing by the council, although it has not, as yet, been placed under Perspex in official recognition of its worth or potential authorship. As such, it occupies a precarious position, protected from whitewashing via aesthetic judgement of its symbolic capital, but not from the elements or from potential destruction by others. The absence of a protective Perspex shield protects the cut here piece from efforts to remove the work for profit, while its minimal design and replication of the form of 'a Banksy' appear to accord it a measure of temporary protection against erasure.

Darling look, it's a Banksy!

The most recent work added to the wall, in May 2014, is by the street artist Mobstr, produced in advance of his first solo gallery show in East London. Discussion of the work on Twitter now describes the location simply as 'the wall where a banksy was'. This very large piece covers the entire stretch of wall with painted lettering that animates the public's imagined reactions to the work on the wall, though which of the works it

references – the authentic Banksy rat, the Banksy-style cut here stencil, Mobstr's own piece, or indeed the works beneath since erased as vandalism – is undetermined. This work does not obscure Banksy's rat, which remains fixed under Perspex to the wall, nor does it interfere with the cut here stencil, which at 6 months old is beginning to fade and flake without any level of protection against the elements.

The text on the wall arrests the viewer, with an exclamation and an injunction to look. 'Darling look, it's a Banksy!' However, this is followed by the dismissive and downgrading retort, 'Don't be silly my dear, that's just some vandalism', to which the first speaker concedes, 'Oh right. Yes, of course'. This work provides a satirically banal commentary on mundane evaluations of the status, or worth, of street art. Like the prior works on the wall, it offers a critique of the objectification and commodification of street art; however, unlike prior works, it effects a sharp division between 'a Banksy' worth exclaiming over and looking at, and 'some vandalism' not worthy of viewers' attention. This is accomplished by adopting the perspective of the imagined consumer-viewers of the work, who, as it turns out, are not looking at the work at all, but are simply concerned with categorizing it crudely as 'a Bansky' or as 'vandalism', in order to determine if it is worth looking at. Mobstr thus creates a rupture in common sense by making visible the workings of the very consensus that holds together the 'division of the sensible' (Rancière 2004) that informs our practices of looking. Mobstr's work parodies the symbolic operations of the police – the institutional form of the division of the sensible – which serve to encourage the people not to stop and look at that which should not be seen:

> The police say there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done, but to keep moving … Politics consists in … reconfiguring that space, what there is to do there, what there is to see or name. It is a dispute about the division of what is perceptible to the senses. (Rancière 1998, 176–177)

The aesthetic protest represented by Mobstr's work is thus political, in Rancière's sense, in that it animates a dispute about the self-evident facts of perception, and in so doing exposes our complicity with, and the contingency of, our taken-for-granted perceptual and conceptual order.

In September 2014, an amendment was made to Mobstr's piece. A small paint roller has been used to crudely white out some of the letters in order to change the meaning of the dialogue presented on the wall (Figure 8).

Figure 8.   September 2014.

589   The modified dialogue now reads, 'do be ill' rather than 'don't be silly'. This selective
590 erasure translates the mocking middle-class admonishment, 'don't be silly' into urban
591 slang that contests the dismissiveness of the aesthetic/moral judgement animated by the
592 original piece. Wiktionary provides a definition of 'Ill' as, '(hip-hop slang) Sublime, with
593 the connotation of being so in a singularly creative way' (Wiktionary 2014, n.p.).
594   While the original phrasing of Mobstr's piece provided satirical commentary on the
595 viewer who is persuaded not to look at work once it has been positioned as vandalism, this
596 new appropriation of the piece encourages the inner-city viewer to instead 'be ill' – and
597 to actively engage with/in street art as a sublime and creative aesthetic activity, further
598 disrupting the stultifying consensus or division of the sensible exposed by Mobstr's piece,
599 by 'capping' or 'vandalising' the work by selectively painting over portions of it.

Conclusion

603 The removal of Banksy's Slave Labour for private auction was the catalyst for a
604 transformation of public space, in generating a site for ongoing correspondence, and
605 aesthetic protest, in the series of works that have appeared in its wake. Initial responses to
606 the 'theft' of Slave Labour gave a forceful visual presence to the grief and outrage of the
607 community, while later works provide a critical commentary on the circulation of street art
608 as a commodity, but also highlight that these locally produced works are not part of this
609 system of circulation, which in turn draws attention to the hierarchy of value imposed on
610 works on the street. Most of the works discussed here were painted over shortly after they
611 appeared; however, they retain traces of already erased and apparently forgotten work, and
612 provide a rich source of critical social commentary. They appear, on the whole, designed
613 to be democratically accessible to, and readable by – and indeed to encourage the
614 participation of – a 'non-artistic' community. This is achieved through various means,
615 including the overdetermination of otherwise potentially exclusionary signifiers; via visual
616 and textual references to Banksy, who has come to stand for the commodification of street
617 art; via references to consumer culture; and through the introjection of urban slang.
618   The division of the sensible (Rancière 2004) takes form here in the material practices
619 associated with the 'policing' of that which should and should not be seen: in the council's
620 whitewashing of objectionable work; in the protection accorded to work of value; and in
621 the excision of work too valuable to be seen and appreciated '*in situ*', for conservation and
622 appreciation. However, the dissensus invoked by this prolific series of unruly works
623 unsettles this division of the sensible, in that they urge the viewer to stop, to look, to
624 interrogate the practices of looking that they are engaged in, and even to leave their own
625 marks on the wall. As Rockwell (2011, 55–56) notes, viewers' aesthetic engagement with
626 such liminal art works is political as:

> works of art are collective phenomena that are politicised precisely through their production,
> circulation and interpretation in the social field . . . a work of art that is not engaged with is not
> strictly speaking a work of art . . . a work only works and functions as art insofar as it has a
> social existence.

631   These often self-consciously democratic works of aesthetic protest thus create ruptures
632 in common sense which show that what we see, according to our usual 'division of the
633 sensible', could be otherwise.
634   The practices of removal that street art and graffiti are commonly subject to – whether
635 concerned with 'restoring value' to a community, by its destruction and erasure, or with
636 'recognising value' by its preservation, protection and ultimately removal for private
637 profit – yield divergent and differently recognized conditions of possibility for the public

14   *S. Hansen*

spaces they (re)generate. Removal may be ultimately productive and generative in that it provides a 'clean slate' for future work, and may give rise to a proliferation of new images that provoke and foster visual dialogue and correspondence. The ephemerality and material impermanence of street art is thus a necessary if paradoxical condition for it to survive and persist, as such (Young 2014) however much its recent incorporation into the category of high art, and removal for profit, may appear to threaten this foundational '*in situ*' definition. If erasure is necessary for graffiti and street art to thrive, perhaps this historically recent form of removal for profit may also prove productive, rather than stultifying.

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Notes

1. The original Bad Panda was produced in 2005 by the French designer Julien d'Andon, who designed the panda for French brand KULTE.
2. Bansky himself produced a playful museum located work referencing The Treachery of Images, by framing a 'real' working pipe integral to the museum, and adding an inverted variant of Magritte's inscription, which observes that, 'This is a pipe'.

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