Introduction

Since the early 1980s, multiple factors have coalesced to make Paris and its suburbs one of the most active and dynamic centers of urban graffiti and street art in the world. In order to understand this progression, this chapter explores the rise of Parisian graffiti and street art in the context of the historical transformations of French society and cultural production in combination with

Figure 22.1 Rue Dénoyez, Paris. An important center of graffiti and street art inside the city of Paris © the author
the globalization of France, both in terms of the influx of immigrants and cultures of immigration, but also the influence of graffiti and hip-hop cultures from outside the hexagon, or mainland France.

It should be noted at the outset that one of the key elements that has structured the practice of graffiti writing and street art in the Paris region is precisely the geographic and demographic situation of Paris proper in relation to its banlieues, or suburbs, many of which have become home to populations who had immigrated from France’s former colonies in the aftermath of the collapse of the French empire. In many ways, the banlieue has functioned as a gateway through which much graffiti and street art first entered the country, at first under the influence of the New York scene. From these nerve centers on the periphery of the French capital, graffiti spread inwards to the center, becoming more visible (Paris being a city with a multi-billion dollar tourist industry) while also influencing, and coming into contact with, the rich cultural history of this cosmopolitan city where the artistic traditions of salons, galleries, and museums have long existed alongside more spontaneous expressions of popular sentiment.1

Graffiti and street art are forms of expression that are typically undertaken with the understanding that they will be erased or painted over. In order to reconstruct their history, researchers must therefore consult a unique kind of archive, one consisting of photos and videos of graffiti, alongside interviews with writers and readers of street art. In the case of Paris, there are two sources in particular that have compiled the oral histories, photographs, and videos of the birth of the local scene. *Paris Tonkar*, a 1991 book written by Tarek Ben Yakhlef and Sylvai Doriath, and the film, *Writers: 20 Years of Graffiti in Paris*, a 2004 full-length documentary directed by Marc-Aurèle Vecchione. While the ephemeral nature of graffiti and street art determines the contours of its cultural history, the importance of visibility and fame within the graffiti community determines the locations of its particular form of geography. In addition to these two milestones, the 2007 film *Bomb It!* includes voices of a group of inhabitants of the banlieue, who insist that graffiti started in these suburban ghettos, and was later exported, so to speak, to the center of Paris, in order to “tear up” the city. American graffiti artist Futura 2000 also gives a shout-out to the banlieue, when he dates the emergence of a full-fledged movement in “Paris and the suburbs” (Vecchione, 2004). Most of the recorded documentation of the movement, however, focuses almost exclusively on work that was done in Paris proper. In this early period, there is little or no distinction made between graffiti and street art as two distinct genres. Yet while figures who would come to be associated with the street art scene, such as Blek le Rat and Space Invader, began producing their work at the same period as those working in a more explicitly New York influenced style, more documentation of the New York style graffiti from this early period exists than for street art.

Despite the difficulty of establishing how the relationship between suburb and city center operated in the early days, the pioneers of graffiti in Paris tell a story that is clear in terms of the importance of New York City and the influence of seminal writers such as Taki 183 in the early 1970s. One of the key players at the emergence of the Paris scene was Bando (Phillip Lehman), who tagged with a number of crews in the 1980s and 1990s, but remains most closely associated with “Crime Time Kings” (CTK), and has been credited with being the first person to write graffiti in the New York style in the city of Paris. As he tells it, Bando went to New York City in 1981 or 1982, where he met and started tagging with local writers (Vecchione, 2004).

In the next several years, tags, throw-ups, and pieces start to appear at a variety of locations within the city: Along the quays of the river Seine, on walls lining vacant lots, and at construction sites. Perhaps the most important of these centers of activity was the work site on the grounds of the Louvre museum, where I.M. Pei’s glass pyramid, commissioned by President
François Mitterrand in 1984 and completed in 1989, was under construction. This site offered budding writers a vast unguarded surface to write on at the center of the city, within eyeshot of tourists and Parisians alike, in the shadow of the former royal palace turned epicenter of France’s artistic patrimony. Privileged sites such as the fences lining the Louvre Pyramid under construction were likely to have facilitated the formation of crews of writers and the development of uniquely Parisian styles of graffiti.

From the beginning, graffiti in Paris was a cosmopolitan practice, bringing together writers from New York, France, and other parts of Europe. Any attempt to name the most important or visible graffiti artists from this first period (roughly 1983–1990) will necessarily be incomplete and biased. *Paris Tonkar* lists no fewer than seventy-seven crews, along with the pseudonyms (tags) of the individual writers, all prefaced with the following caveat: “This is not an exhaustive list, especially since several Graffiti are in many groups at the same time” (Ben Yakhlef & Doriath, 1991: p. 122). Nonetheless, a number of tags, names, and crews have come to be synonymous with the development, excitement, and influence of these early days. As Bando meets and collaborates with Shoe, an artist from Amsterdam who became part of USA (United Street Artists) crew, and French writer, Mode2, starts tagging with a British crew, TCA (The Chrome Angelz), work that was at first an imitation of New York style first comes to distinguish itself, and then begins to influence and motivate graffiti in other European cities.

In Paris, as in other cities where hip-hop was taking root throughout the 1980s, graffiti was often linked to a broader repertoire of youth cultures that also included styles of clothing, music, and dancing. While the birth of hip-hop can be traced specifically to the Bronx, and more generally to black and minority groups in the U.S., Paris was quick to emerge as a second center of hip-hop culture on the world stage. Around the same time that Bando and others were importing New York graffiti styles to Paris, the “New York City Rap Tour” came to Europe, making stops in both London and Paris. The tour featured an impressive slate of rappers and DJs, such as Afrika Bambaataa and Rock Steady Crew, but also graffiti artists Futura 2000, Phase 2, Ramelzee, and Dondi. One of the French DJs who had been largely responsible for first disseminating hip-hop in France, Sidney Duteil, the son of immigrants from Guadeloupe, would, two years later, in 1984, host the first television program devoted entirely to hip-hop music and culture, H.I.P. H.O.P. As one commentator has remarked, the difference between how hip-hop developed in the U.S. versus France was that it cultivated in New York as a relatively “unmediated” form of culture, whereas in France it was an import, and a mass-produced one at that, marketed in the form of cassette tapes and packaged tours (Charry, 2012: p. 5). While this may be largely true in terms of music and fashion, graffiti, because of its very nature as an underground and usually illegal activity, remained an important element of hip-hop culture that strongly resisted the market forces at play in its global dissemination.

**Graffiti and street art?**

Both *Paris Tonkar* and *Writers* focus on hip-hop graffiti to the exclusion of what is now often recognized as the semi-independent category of street art. On one level, this distinction is significant. If graffiti is all about the letter, then the rise of street art as a distinct mode of public art is notable for its abandonment of typographical experiments and its focus on the image. In a recent video interview with Blek le Rat (Xavier Prou), the “father of stencil graffiti,” Blek narrates his compulsion to work on walls as a “need” he “cannot express in words” (Silver, 2014). Such a statement might seem to affirm the distinction between graffiti and street art. One problem with this kind of categorization, however, is that Blek le Rat claims to also have been influenced by New York graffiti of the 1970s (along with the large-scale human painted
figures of the Canadian public artist, Richard Hambleton). Both hip-hop graffiti and street art continue to flourish in Paris, often on the same walls as each other. It is also important to point out that it was and is quite common for hip-hop graffiti in Paris to juxtapose stylized letters of the writer’s name or crew with figures drawn from comics, film, or pop culture. On the other hand, more image- or figure-based work also relies often enough on words, whether the signature of the writer/artist, or a longer text.

In order to situate graffiti and street art in their shared social and geographical context in the city of Paris as closely related if not identical modes of graffiti (in the general sense of the term), we can examine the competing styles of two of the major crews from the 1980s who were working in a more hip-hop oriented style (BBC and TKC), alongside two major figures in the world of Parisian stencil graffiti: Blek le Rat and Miss.Tic. BBC (Bad Bad Crew), whose members included Skii, Ash.2, Jon, and Jay, privileged the form of the name as part of the overall look of a piece, in which the relationship between letter and non-letter was fluid and integrated. CTK, featuring Bando, Boxer, Senz Sign, and Squat, on the other hand, tended to focus on the readability of the letters, which were often notable for their strong outlines and bold colors. American photographer and documentarian of graffiti, Henry Chalfant articulates the overall difference between the new Parisian styles and the New York styles that inspired graffiti writers in France, saying that “while they got their base from New York graffiti, they immediately transformed it into something different.” Chalfant attributes what he calls “art school style” to the early graffiti in the city of Paris, specifying that “the color-sense was all different [than that of graffiti in New York],” as was the “technique and rhythm of the line” (Vecchione, 2004). Japanese animation and comic book style in general are clear influences on the painted figures and characters of French graffiti in this period. Hip-hop style graffiti in Paris have thus long blurred the line between “graffiti,” as something that primarily experiments with the shape and volume of letters, and “street art,” as a play of figures and images, of lines and colors.

Cited by renowned British street artist Banksy as a major influence, Blek le Rat started putting up stencils of rats around the city of Paris in 1981, about the same time as the work of the first taggers, graffiti writers, and crews first appeared. Preferring the term “urban art” to “graffiti,” Blek grew up in a well-off family, the son of an architect, in the posh Paris suburb of Boulogne. While Chalfant’s “art school style” might not apply to Blek’s work, Prou did in fact attend art school and also studied architecture. His work thus represents an encounter between New York style graffiti and the long history of art and architecture, and especially the radical or even utopian tradition of art and art criticism, on the continent. He tells us that he began by painting rats, his signature emblem, for two reasons: First, he says, they are “the only free animal in the city,” outnumbering the human population of Paris two-to-one. “Rat” is also an anagram of the word “art” (Silver, 2014). A hooded man in the shadows holds out a hand as if asking for change, a figure sleeps on the ground beside a dog, Leonardo’s David holds a semi-automatic rifle, a ballerina suspended on a concrete wall dances in a blue tutu: These are among the life-sized stencils of human figures Blek has now painted on walls worldwide. Perhaps most notable is his stencil of a man in a dark suit and sunglasses carrying large suitcases in each hand: “The man who walks through walls.” This piece, which features Blek’s head and Buster Keaton’s body, and which functions as a figure for the artist himself, expresses the desire for mobility and the revolt against enclosure that all graffiti share.

A rare instance of a highly visible woman graffiti artist, Miss.Tic has also been painting illegally in Paris since the mid-1980s. A self-described “cerebral libertine,”² her work most often features a dark-haired pochoir (stencil) avatar of herself, usually in provocative poses, staring at the viewer, bent over, or lifting the hem of her skirt, alongside lyrical or aphoristic stenciled text. “À Lacan ses lacunes,” reads one such piece – “Lacan’s gaps are his own” – a playful way of turning the
supposed lack that characterizes the feminine in some accounts of psychoanalysis back at the men who theorized it. “I have frissons tattooed on the skin of my memory,” “I leave to desire,” “The abuse of pleasure is excellent for your health,” are a few of Miss.Tic’s texts, which combine the wit of a one-liner with the mindful provocation of a zen koan. Combined with images that both evoke a third-wave feminist celebration of sexuality and riff on stylized glamour advertisements, Miss. Tic’s work carves out a space for a highly iconoclastic feminist critique in this capital of fashion.

Figure 22.2 Belleville neighborhood, Paris. Stencil (pochoir) by Miss Fuck, “I hate the world” © the author
Without elaborating a full-blown argument about why hip-hop graffiti and so-called street art in Paris should be discussed in relation to one another instead of in isolation, one may nonetheless affirm the value of categorizing graffiti (in the general sense of the term) as an illegal act. While a focus on illegality may certainly be used as “an essential support beam for the theoretical claims being advanced by the author” or obfuscate the graffiti writer’s desire for “integration” into the larger society or a “conventional” lifestyle (Kramer, 2010: p. 237), an emphasis on illegality does tell us a great deal about the positioning of the writer at the moment of writing in relation to the regimes of private and public property, of media and advertising, and how a desire for visibility and mobility makes graffiti writing worth the risk of arrest. Beyond the ethnographic specificities one may collect by interviewing members of a crew such as CTK, or the aesthetic analysis of a piece by Miss.Tic or Blek, exists the common gesture of re-inscribing or re-coding public space. Thus, while street art may tend to be informed by the history of so-called high-art, and while it is often done by individual auteurs, it is counter-productive to over-emphasize the aesthetic axis at the expense of the juridical one. A similar critical tactic could of course be deployed for hip-hop graffiti: In their own emphases on criminality or oppositionality, critics should avoid simply reinforcing the criminalization of such work by the police, and should instead actively seek out the fluid beauty and avant-garde grotesque of the psychogeographical sublime that is graffiti.

It is precisely because the walls of a city offer a common workspace for people from diverse backgrounds, whether they prefer being called writers, graffiti writers, graffeurs, graffeuses, urban artists, public artists, bombers, or situationists, that critics should take care not to isolate styles and authors based on categories of analysis pertaining to class or ethnic identity, but should instead consider the diversity within the larger phenomenon of writing and painting on such walls. In the case of writers from France, marginalization of communities based on ethnic or religious affiliation exists alongside the Republican ideal of the abstract citizen. Parisian graffiti can be seen as a vivid illustration of the tension between these two poles of public life in France. On one hand, a tag, throw-up, or a piece can be understood as a reterritorialization of urban or suburban space, a way of inscribing identity, specificity, and the temporalities of bodies moving in space into a what Michel de Certeau has called the homogeneous space of the abstract modern city (de Certeau, 1988: pp. 117, 121): A place cleansed of the heterogeneous mess of bodies and memories, of desires and interdictions. On the other hand, unauthorized illegal writing and art in public allows graffiti and street artists to experiment with identity, anonymity, and pseudonymity. A wall is a place where what matters is what a body can do, specifically with spray paint, pens, stickers, stencils, tiles, pieces of a rubik’s cube, or other materials, not what it looks like or where it came from.

Contagion and criminalization

While the term “viral culture” is most often used in contemporary discourse to describe the speed and reach of digital cultural production, graffiti can be said to have pioneered many aspects of this phenomenon. The fact that the practice of hip-hop graffiti from New York made a stop in Paris on its way to becoming a worldwide phenomenon itself demonstrates how graffiti participated in what Jeff Ferrell has notably called a “world politics of wall painting” (Ferrell, 1995) long before the internet would accelerate its viral spread. Graffiti begets other graffiti. As the writers and artists who create them tend to do so out of sight of the public eye, graffiti can create what we might call a viral effect, as letters and images seem to appear suddenly throughout a city as if created by invisible hands. A wall that was blank in the evening is now covered with colors and lines.
In Paris, this viral spread of graffiti accelerated throughout the 1980s, which results in a concomitant escalation of police enforcement, perhaps most notably seen in the notorious tagging (or graffiti “bombing”) of the Louvre metro station in 1991 and police and news media reaction (discussed below). The spread of graffiti in Paris is increased by what graffiti artists see as a wildly disproportionate police response. Not too far from the Louvre Pyramide was the construction site around the Stravinsky Fountain at the Pompidou Centre: The first was one of Mitterrand’s grands projets, and the second a joint venture between the city of Paris and the national Ministry of Culture. These two projects, which involved modernizing France’s cultural heritage for the new generation, and which were designed with younger tastes in mind, provided the platform, literally and inadvertently, for graffiti art to flourish in the city of Paris. From these sites, graffiti spread to many others: Metro trains and regional RER trains, as well as train yards and tunnels.

It was the area in the northeastern part of Paris, near the Stalingrad metro station, where the tenth Arrondissment (or Borough) meets the nineteenth Arrondissement, that provided the next true nerve center for graffiti writers in the city. From approximately 1982 to 1993, the vacant lots in this area came to be known as the “Hall of Fame” of graffiti in Europe. Such a designation indicates the roles that geography, nationality, and cultural specificity played and continue to play in the nomadic and transnational art of graffiti. Whereas a designation such as “francophone” is often used to designate literature written in French from writers who are not French or not of French extraction, the location of Paris as a site for graffiti art, or a specific location such as Stalingrad, functions in a very different way. The vacant lots of Stalingrad provided writers with a combination of the visibility and the anonymity offered by the French capital.

A watershed moment in the history of graffiti in the center of Paris proper occurred on the night of May 1, 1991, when the Louvre-Rivoli metro station, “among the most beautiful” in the city, according to Pascale Manzagol, the newscaster who reported on the event the following evening, was covered in tags overnight. The media coverage of this event captured (and perhaps even manufactured) some of the public uproar over this event, with interviews with commuters and public officials. At the same time, these news reports helped promote the fame of the writers and of the very practice of graffiti writing itself. One young man interviewed at the station provided a close-reading of one tag, which the camera relayed to viewers: “La RATP [the company in charge of regional public transportation in the Paris area]: Qui sème le vent récolte la tempête,” a reference to Hosea 8.7 from the Old Testament: “They sow the wind, and they will reap the whirlwind.” A moment later, a middle-aged woman is arguing angrily with the young people, calling them “dogs,” as they ask her whether cutting off a hand or a head would be a more appropriate punishment.4 Paris Tonkar includes a mini-manifesto about the discourse of criminalization that reaches a head with this event. Signed by the writer OENO, of the VEP crew (Vandales en puissance, or “Vandals in Power”), beside the words “DISSIDENCE GRAPHIQUE,” the rant begins by citing the supposed price of the clean-up: “500,000 fr[ancs]. What a bargain! So many zeros for our newspaper hungry for a scoop and a spectacle. In any case, why question these figures, since they come from such a respectable institution as the RATP!” (Ben Yakhlef & Doriath, 1991: p. 39).

OENO’s manifesto articulates the double-bind that graffiti makes palpable for many:

Either graffiti is the mirror that reflects the malaise of young people, or you just have to wait for society to evolve . . . or maybe we’re just simply bad. If that’s the case, then tremble – for graffiti is just the beginning. This is the dawn of destruction.

(Ben Yakhlef & Doriath, 1991: p. 39)

The Louvre station would be bombed again in January 1992, magnifying the fame of the writers involved while also increasing police surveillance of highly visible locations, such as centrally-
located metro stations, and increased penalties for those caught “defacing” public or private property.5 The viral nature of this event is clear in the dialectic of prohibition, media attention, and the explosion of graffiti that followed. The viral effect continues to this day, a fact that becomes clear when one watches the YouTube clip where this news report is today viewable online, as it is in fact an advertisement for a book of graffiti images, *Descent Interdite*, about graffiti in the Paris metro.

The Paris police expressed their response to the repeated attacks on the Louvre station as a desire to maintain the city center as a “clean” and unmarked space, free of what RATP director Christian Deplaces called the “scribbling” of the taggers. The graffiti writers’ work thus demonstrated a direct challenge to this regime of urban neutrality and hygiene, and the graffiti themselves often commented on the fact that their task in the larger order of urban signs is that of an intervention aimed at disturbing the spatial ordering of the French city as decreed from above, and at bringing the margins into the center, the very heart of Paris. At the same time that this new insistence on protecting the city center against the so-called contagion of what was perceived as uncivil behavior, French urban policy also turned its attention to the banlieue as a “troubled” locale in need of special attention from the technocratic penal state. Mustapha Dikeç sums up the overall trend of the spatialization of social policy in terms of a form of neoliberalism of urban policy:

> Neoliberal strategies deployed in cities, it has been argued, sharpen socioeconomic inequalities and displace certain groups from cities, whose presence in the city is deemed undesirable . . . Urban neoliberalism is deeply concerned with imposing a certain ‘social landscape’ on the city. The third issue follows from the [socioeconomic and sociospatial manifestations of neoliberalism], and involves new and aggressive strategies of policing and surveillance aimed at particular groups and particular spaces (mostly city centres), criminalization of poverty, and the increased use of the penal system. (Dikeç, 2006: p. 63)

French urban policy in the 1980s and 1990s can thus be seen as a set of “substantially spatial practices that produce spaces of intervention (or containment), although the discursive articulations of such spaces and the modes of legitimation vary depending on established political traditions, as do forms of neoliberalization and state restructuring” (Dikeç, 2006: p. 77). The effort to keep the Louvre station free of “scribbling” thus represents one element of France’s contribution to the European penal state and the work of taggers and writers an explicit act of direct action committed against the rapid spread of this apparatus in France.

**Official response to graffiti and street art**

Article 322–321 of the French Penal Code, created in 1994, is most often used to punish acts of graffiti and street art in Paris. The law imposed a 25,000 FF fine (roughly equivalent to 3,700 USD) for “tracing inscriptions, signs, or drawings, without prior authorization, on facades, vehicles, public thoroughfares, or urban street furniture or fixtures,” provided the damage is not severe.6 For more severe acts of vandalism, that is, for “destruction, degradation, or deterioration” of property belonging to someone else, the penalty is a two-year prison sentence and a fine of 200,000 FF (roughly equivalent to 40,000 USD). In addition to the existing law and criminal penalties, politicians from different levels of government have reacted to graffiti and street art. During the 2002 deliberations in the French Senate, regarding the price of graffiti removal, Senator Alain Gournac articulated his concerns with graffiti and the effect of graffiti
culture on public life in the Ile-de-France region and France’s national self-image. Gournac spoke of the “sad spectacle of the facades of our public and private buildings,” saying that tags “eat away at our cities and harm our environment, the image of our country, and its morale.”

The numbers cited in these deliberations affirm that from 1998 to 2000, the RATP paid a minimum of 26 million euros per year for graffiti removal and prevention, whereas the national railroad company, the SNCF, paid a minimum of 15 million euros in the Paris region. Other sources cite vastly different sums, ranging from 6 million euros per year for cleaning SNCF trains, to 50 million euros per year for the all graffiti–related costs for the RATP. While it can be difficult to obtain accurate numbers for the cost of graffiti removal in a given locale, one may compare this 41 million euro price tag for graffiti cleaning on Parisian public transportation cited in the above Senate deliberations to the 4.5 million euro cost of graffiti removal within the city itself. It is also worth noting that Paris is often cited as being the only city that pays for the cost of cleaning graffiti from private property (Michot, 2012).

As of 2012, Paris contracted three companies for this task, which has become an increasingly specialized industry employing over forty so-called “tag hunters” (Michot, 2012). Korrigan, one such company detailed in a 2012 article in *Le Figaro*, is based in the municipality of La Corneuve, which was one of the hotbeds of the banlieue riots of 2005, and also a center of graffiti in the Paris region. While the Département of Seine-Saint-Denis, where La Corneuve is found, provides funds for graffiti clean-up comparable to those of Paris proper, it is nonetheless symptomatic of the relationship between the suburban margin and the urban city center: Writers from the banlieue go into Paris to write; Paris hires a company from the banlieue to erase the writing; Paris thus serves as a self-erasing canvas.

La Corneuve, one of many banlieue neighborhoods categorized by the French government as “sensitive,” also played a special role in the events leading up to the 2005 riots. In the aftermath of the shooting death of an eleven-year-old boy, then minister of the interior, Nicolas Sarkozy visited in June, 2005, and proceeded to tell inhabitants and the media that “beginning tomorrow, we will clean out this project [cité] with a Kärcher,” equating policing of the area with the cleansing of graffiti done by Kärcher high-pressure water cleaning machines used by companies like Korrigan. Combined with Sarkozy’s comments from later that year, where he called residents of the banlieue “scum” (*racaille*), a rather explicit position had emerged, further exacerbating tensions between the local and national authorities and the banlieue youth, largely of immigrant origins.

**Aesthetics and illegality**

At the same time that graffiti in Paris has been viewed as a symptom of brute criminality and lawlessness, as a sign of the decay of French civilization, the encroachment of a kind of “visual pollution” (in the words of François Dagnaud, the Mayor’s “Assistant in Charge of Cleanliness”) from the margins into the city center, it has also, of course, been viewed as a practice at the cutting-edge of art, writing, design, and activism. To explore graffiti and street art in the contexts of galleries, literature, cinema, and pop culture at large is to remove it from the world that gave birth to it and from which its meanings derive, but also to view it from a different angle and open up its tangled lines and often opaque meanings. Graffiti artist Delta articulates the relationship between aesthetics and illegality in graffiti by affirming that writers “have to be a lot more original on a legal wall” (Vecchione, 2004). In other words, whether on the street or in a gallery, graffiti exists on a continuum in which risk and originality determine the prestige value of a particular piece.

Before work done in France was to achieve the recognition that accompanies being displayed in a Paris art gallery, it was primarily New York artists who were featured in these spaces.
Following his appearance in the previously mentioned 1982 Rap Tour, graffiti artist FUTURA 2000 was perhaps the first graffiti artist to have a solo gallery show in Paris, in 1983 at the Yvon Lambert Studio. By comparison, Jean-Michel Basquiat, the celebrated New York City artist whose work borrowed elements from graffiti, would not have a solo show in the city until January 1987, at the Galerie Daniel Templon, after having shown his work in cities around the world. Graffiti thus entered Paris art galleries before Basquiat’s work did. New York transplant JonOne followed suit with a series of shows beginning in 1991. As French street art developed its own audience, so did its visibility in the gallery scene in Paris, which grew exponentially to comprise over sixty galleries featuring street art and graffiti, which now constitute approximately 10 percent of all galleries in the city. With the global reputation of street artists like Banksy, graffiti and street art have continued their ascent into the world of haute culture, for better or worse, which also exacerbates the tension between simpler tags and more elaborate pieces and instances of street art.

A kind of apotheosis occurred in 2009 and 2010, as two major exhibitions of graffiti art took place in Paris: Né dans la Rue at the Fondation Cartier for Contemporary Art in 2009, and Le Tag au Grand Palais in 2010. The later exhibit can be seen as a moment when graffiti in Paris came full circle: Whereas the movement began on the makeshift walls and barriers around the construction site at the Louvre, it had now entered the hallowed halls of a historical monument, Le Grand Palais built as a crowning achievement of French culture and industry for the 1900 Universal Exposition. The work of Thomas Hirshhorn, a Swiss artist working in Paris, represents what can be perhaps be seen as a more adventurous instance of placing graffiti-style writing and messaging into a museum setting. His free 2014 exhibit at the Palais de Tokyo, La Flamme Éternelle, was built from an enormous maze of recycled automobile tires (evoking a new kind of barricades for an age of planetary self-consumption) and featured a range of interactive projects, in which participants could freely create posters, write, draw, and sculpt the exhibit itself, creating the kind of open-ended, interactive space that so much graffiti already imagines in the real spaces of the contemporary city, where the specter of private property and policed public domains continually collide. The exhibit was draped with large cloth banners that featured spray-painted slogans left deliberately unfinished, inviting visitors to collaborate by finishing them: “PEOPLE BEFORE PROFITS! NO TO.” It evoked the history of unauthorized popular expression in the French capital, from the 1789 Revolution, to the 1871 Commune, to May 1968. Instead of ripping graffiti out of its context, Hirshorn’s Eternal Flame invited the public to participate in the creative spirit of popular revolt, at the same limit where street art and illegal graffiti inscribe their signs.

In addition to its temporary home in the street, subway, gallery, and museum, graffiti and street art in France continue to find a place in cinema and literature. The number of French films and written fiction where graffiti makes a cameo is too great to list here, but a brief discussion of a few examples can elucidate important aspects of how graffiti functions in the larger cultural imagination in France. La Haine (Hate) (1995) and Banlieue 13 (2004) illustrate two contrasting ways that graffiti has been used in French cinema. La Haine begins with documentary footage of riots, and then cuts to a main character, Saïd, tagging the back of a police van with his name/tag and the words, “Fuck the police.” Other scenes in the film show the young characters from the projects using spray paint to interact with their environment and counteract official messages that clash with their lived experience. Banlieue 13, on the other hand, is a sensationalistic comic-book style film in which the banlieue that police have deemed the most dangerous has been walled in and surrounded by checkpoints. While the film vividly depicts the spatial marginalization and political abandonment of this community by the French government, it also mainly uses graffiti as a backdrop that signifies crime, lawlessness, and a dystopian future.
Published in 1983, Mehdi Charef’s *Tea in the Harem* tells the story of a group of young men growing up in a poor, working-class housing project in a banlieue of Paris. Beyond using graffiti as a symptom of delinquency or a sign of social decay, Charef’s novel in many ways can be said to model itself on the act of writing graffiti itself. Just as he uses the term “concrete” as a metonymy for the drab milieu of the housing project itself, graffiti appears in the novel in a way that parallels Charef’s very writing, as the characters echo the uncensored, frequently misogynistic language of the graffiti in the novel.

*Figure 22.3 Rue de Tolbiac, Paris. Side by side paste-ups by Moyoshi and Levalet © the author*
The current state of graffiti and street art in the French capital

From its origins in the early 1980s, where it appeared in clusters at selected locations in Paris and environs, graffiti and street art have become a ubiquitous feature of the urban landscape in neighborhoods throughout the city and throughout France. Parisian graffiti and street art could perhaps be most aptly characterized by its innovation of technique and a diversity of materials. Figures who emerged out of the early scene, such as Lokiss and Nasty, have gone on to become legendary figures in the world of graffiti. The list of well-known street artists is long, and the current chapter only provides the space for a small number of those who deserve to be named: Jeff Aerosol and Speedy Graffito, two masters of stencil graffiti, contemporaries of Blek le Rat; Space Invader (or just “Invader”), perhaps the most iconic of all Parisian street artists, who uses ceramic tiles and other materials, such as pieces of Rubik’s Cubes, to create video game style “invasions” of cities worldwide; Jérôme Mesnager, whose evocative human figures animate walls around Paris and beyond; Dj’alouz and Septik, who continue to experiment with geometrical forms; El-Seed and l’Atlas, whose groundbreaking work transforms Arabic calligraphy and arabesque designs in public space; and many other established and emerging names, such as Monsieur Chat, Seth, Levalet, Mygolo 2000, who have all radically transformed the visual terrain of Paris.

While the rise of street art has by and large made graffiti more respectable and accepted by the French public, the conflict between what is considered vandalism and what can be said to constitute art continues. While millions of euros are spent in the region on cleanup and prevention, many municipal government officials have embraced street art. Jérôme Coumet, mayor of the thirteenth Arrondissement in the southeastern part of the city, has been a notable advocate and promoter of public graffiti and street art projects. Among these projects was the Tour 13, which opened up an entire building set for demolition to graffiti writers and street artists, and ballots sent to residents that allowed them to vote for one of several proposed compositions in their neighborhood. Today, those interested in exploring the graffiti and street art of the city can book tours through sites like undergroundparis.org. Among the most active sites today are the Rue Denoyez (near the Belleville metro station) and Les Frigos (near the Mitterand National Library site). But as the French public and their elected officials continue to disagree, at times vehemently, about what constitutes crime and what constitutes creativity, many of the most innovative and powerful works of this hotly debated form of expression can only be found online.

Notes

1 For a view that contrasts the North American “black ghetto,” as a marginalized space where race plays the determining role, with the banlieue, where class is the key distinguishing factor, see Wacquant (1992; 2007). For a recent, opposing view, which seeks to revive the term and concept of the “ghetto” for a sociological analysis of the French banlieue, see Lapeyronnie (2008).
2 www.liberation.fr/portrait/2005/11/17/une-femme-mur_539317
3 Kramer’s (2010) notion of analyzing graffiti as a complex practice that occurs along two axes, a juridical axis and an aesthetic one is a useful tool for understanding graffiti, provided one avoids identifying more supposedly “sophisticated” forms of graffiti and insisting on reading them through an aesthetic lens, and/or identifying so-called “lower” forms and reading through the lens of illegality and lawlessness.
5 http://fresques.ina.fr/jalons/impression/fiche-media/InaEdu01205/la-station-de-metro-louvre-est-recouverte-de-tags.html
David Fieni

8 www.leparisien.fr/une/les-tags-un-fleau-qui-17-03-2005-2005787083.php?xtrref=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2Furl%3Fsa%3Dt%26q%3D%26esrc%3D%26source%3Dweb%24cd%253D2%24ved%3D0CD0QFjAEOBGQ%254uri%3Dhttp%25253A%25252F%25252Fwww.leparisien.fr%25252Fun%25252Ffiles-tags-un-fleau-qui-17-03-2005-2005787083.php%24ei%3Da9toVJ3-EIuoNsizgfgM%2524sug%3DAFQ%2524Gd%2576vXcI%2524I%2556%2524Bw%252524s%253DKPEL%253Dx%253BH401%25252F2wzX%252524b%253Dwl%253Dbw%79142246%24Cd.eXY. Accessed November 11, 2014.
10 www.ville-la-courneuve.fr/4_evenement/even.php?id=2234
11 www.europe1.fr/politique/on-va-nettoyer-au-karcher-la-cite-273835
12 For a more in-depth discussion of Sarkozy’s comments in the context of French urban policy and French attitudes towards immigrant youth cultures, see Fieni, 2011.
13 www.artnet.com/artists/futura-2000-lenny-mcgurr/biography
15 The slogans were left unfinished, inviting visitors to collaborate by finishing them.

References