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Stealing from the public

The value of street art taken from the street

Peter Bengtsen

Introduction

Since the early years of the twenty-first century, street art has come to be a ubiquitous part of the urban landscape of major cities as well as smaller towns around the world. Initially unsanctioned and often illegal, street art has steadily gained popularity and acceptance, and an economy has been built around the phenomenon, with, for example, organized street art tours and curated street art festivals becoming increasingly commonplace.

Street art is placed in public space (or at least what is perceived by many as public space). Its content is often easily understandable and frequently relies on figurative subject matter and references to popular culture. In addition, street art commonly entails using mediums different to the somewhat stigmatized freehand spray painting of traditional graffiti. These are reasons that street art has managed to engage a wide audience spanning from members of a general public that would not normally set foot in an art gallery and rarely visit museums to a demographic of young urban creatives and seasoned art enthusiasts.

In the wake of the growing interest in street art, since around 2007 well-known art auction houses like Sotheby’s and Christie’s have regularly been including in their contemporary art sales studio work by artists who first became known for working in the street, and in February 2008 the less established art auctioneer Bonhams held its first auction entirely dedicated to so-called urban art. While this term is sometimes taken to be synonymous with street art, it is also commonly used to describe commercial art products made by artists who are in some way associated with the street art world (Bengtsen, 2014). Being labeled an urban artist does not necessarily entail actually having done work as a street artist. Antony Micallef, for example, is an artist who was – at least for a while – discussed as an urban artist solely because of his association with the Lazarides gallery in London. Until 2008, Lazarides represented Banksy, perhaps the most famous creator of street and urban art. Other artists who have been placed in the urban art category include Takashi Murakami and Chiho Aoshima who were part of an early show of urban art entitled Spank the Monkey, which ran at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, U.K. from the fall of 2006 to the beginning of 2007 (Vincentelli, 2006). Murakami and Aoshima, however, are traditionally more closely associated with the Japanese art movement Super Flat (Murakami, 2000).
The early successes of auctions featuring urban art – however vaguely that category was defined – garnered quite a bit of press coverage which in turn led to a further popularization of both urban and street art, and helped establish a veritable urban art market (see, e.g. Dickens, 2009; Derwanz, 2013). This market, to a large extent, exists online and caters to a partly new art buying public. As I have pointed out elsewhere, this creates numerous problems. Since this art seems to speak to people who otherwise have had no deep interest in – and therefore possess little knowledge about – art and the wider art market, it has also established a partly new customer base which relies heavily on the expertise of art dealers in relation to questions about value and authenticity and which is therefore easy to manipulate and exploit (Bengtsen, 2012).

This chapter will primarily focus on a more experienced faction of urban art enthusiasts who in many cases have been following the urban art market since its inception. Many of these aficionados imbue with importance a perceived connection between urban artworks and the street. A connection that can be established, for example, by replicating existing street artworks, using spray paint, incorporating paint drips and/or using found materials in studio works. Interestingly, these same people are often critical when it comes to the trade in actual street artworks that have been removed from the street (Bengtsen, 2014). Although a number of such objects have been put on the market in recent years, they are for the most part currently perceived not as collectable artworks, but rather as worthless both in an artistic and monetary sense. There are, however, also competing discourses, which highlight the potential future value of removed and preserved street artworks.

The removal of street artworks with a view to sell adds new dimensions to an already complex field of social and legal issues associated with graffiti and street art. In relation to the creation of graffiti, in the late 1970s sociologist Nathan Glazer contended that the subway rider in New York City

is assaulted continuously, not only by the evidence that every subway car has been vandalized, but by the inescapable knowledge that the environment he must endure for an hour or more a day is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and that anyone can invade it to do whatever damage and mischief the mind suggests.

(Glazer, 1979)

The latter part of this quote subsequently appeared in the famous essay “Broken Windows,” which introduced the highly contentious broken windows theory and vilified graffiti further (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Joe Austin (2001) gives a comprehensive account of the way that graffiti was constituted as a social problem in New York City from the late 1960s onwards.

In recent years, the focus on issues like vandalism and trespassing in relation to the creation of street artworks and the social or political implications of the criminalization of the practices of street art (Dickinson, 2008; Young, 2014) have been augmented by other concerns. While Alison Young (2012) shows that graffiti is often considered a “serious” offence by the judicial system regardless of the actual damage done, Ian Edwards (2009) argues that this has become more complicated since, in the specific case of Banksy, the defacement can actually add monetary value to the property it is conducted on. The popularization of street art has seemingly also had other effects: In a court case from 2014, a judge reportedly heard that the nineteen-year-old defendant could be “the next Banksy” because of his stencil paintings in the street. Due to his artistic endeavors, the defendant was spared a jail sentence despite having thirty-one prior convictions. It is interesting to note that the defendant was not arrested on suspicions of doing graffiti, but of stealing an iPhone (Jones, 2014).
The changing status of street art can be related to the increasing commercial success of some artists’ studio output, which bleeds over into the perception of both monetary and artistic worth in relation to their street work. This change, described well by Mary Elizabeth Williams (2013), is gradually creating a situation where some street art is no longer described as vandalism, but instead as attracting vandalism: People who object to the commodification may seek to paint over or otherwise destroy the art, while others may attempt to remove it for its potential commercial value, destroying property in the process. In the latter case, the act of theft may also come into play.

With the increasing value of street artworks, questions of securing street art as intellectual property are also increasingly prevalent (Lerman, 2013; Smith, 2014), although it falls without the scope of the present chapter to further explore these issues.

Street art removed from the street: a few cases

In the fall of 2006, Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón’s dystopian film Children of Men, based on the novel by P.D. James, introduced to its audience a not-too-distant future where human beings have seemingly lost the ability to procreate. As a result, hopelessness reigns and society has all but broken down, giving way to a brutal and totalitarian state. At one point, the film’s protagonist, Theo, visits Battersea Power Station in London, which has been turned into one of the last bastions of human history and culture: It now serves as a repository for some of the dying world’s most renowned artworks.

Slavoj Žižek, in a commentary of the film, has pointed out the absurdity in the creation of such a place, observing that the artworks collected there “are deprived of a world, they are totally meaningless because what does it mean to have a statue of Michelangelo or whatever? It only works if it signals a certain world. And when this world is lacking, it’s nothing” (Žižek, 2006). As Theo arrives at this so-called Ark of the Arts, a large cut-out section of a wall with a rendition of Banksy’s stencil painting Kissing Coppers is standing in the middle of the entrance hall. This suggests that in the year 2027 — when the film takes place — this street artwork is considered to be among the most prominent artistic masterpieces ever produced. An interesting point here is that the painting depicted in the film is not created on canvas or another traditional and movable medium, but rather on a wall. This suggests that it is not meant to resemble a studio artwork by Banksy, but rather one that has been removed from the street. This can be seen as a subtle indication that the artist’s street work may prove more important in an art historical sense than the commercial work.

When Children of Men was released in 2006, the idea that removed street artworks might one day be preserved and displayed in this manner seemed almost comical. In the years since the release of the film, however, the practice of removing, preserving and exhibiting street artworks by Banksy and a number of other artists has become increasingly commonplace as prices for the artists’ studio work have gone up. A prolific example is the exhibition Stealing Banksy? which opened in the basement of the ME London Hotel on The Strand in central London in April 2014.

On display at Stealing Banksy? were eight paintings allegedly by Banksy that had been removed from their original locations and were to be auctioned off at the end of the show. Estimates ranged from £100,000 for a stencil painting on a piece of plywood of a police officer to £500,000 for a stencil painting on a wall of two kids playing with a red “No Ball Games” sign. The latter painting had been cut into three sections, presumably to reduce the total weight of the piece (Figure 31.1). In the show was also a painting on canvas entitled Brace Yourself, depicting the
grim reaper riding in a bumper car, which was not for sale. In addition, a specially produced newspaper called *The Banksy Bugle*, which served as a catalogue for the show, advertised a ninth street artwork not actually on display: the so-called *Liverpool Rat*, a giant mural which was painted on the side of a pub in Liverpool in 2004.

*Stealing Banksy?* was not the first exhibition to display and attempt to sell multiple street artworks allegedly created by Banksy. In August 2011, an exhibition in Southampton, New York – jointly arranged by Bankrobber Gallery and Keszler Gallery – featured two large murals originally painted in the Palestinian part of Bethlehem in 2007 as well as four other street artworks that had been removed from the streets of Los Angeles, New Orleans, London, and Brighton.

Banksy publicly denounced both the Southampton exhibition and *Stealing Banksy?*. In relation to the latter, the artist’s website published a statement that the exhibition had “been organised without the involvement or consent of the artist” and added the tongue-in-cheek comment that Banksy “would like to make it clear – this show has nothing to do with me and I think it’s disgusting people are allowed to go displaying art on walls without getting permission” (Ellis-Petersen, 2014; Vincent, 2014).

Banksy is so far the only artist who has had (unauthorized) exhibitions entirely dedicated to what are claimed to be his removed street artworks, and he remains by far the most obvious example when discussing artists whose work is taken off the street and put on the art market. However, similar removals and attempted sales of a number of other artists’ work are in fact
taking place. For example, four stencil paintings on metal from the streets of Berlin, ostensibly by the New York-based artist collective Faile, went under the hammer and sold at Fine Art Auctions Miami in February 2014. The same auction saw the apparent sale of a heavily restored rendition of Banksy’s *Kissing Coppers* – the image also featured in *Children of Men* – which was removed from the outer wall of a pub in Brighton. Two other street artworks painted in New

![Stencil paintings by Faile and Bast in Brooklyn, New York City, 2011. Photo © Peter Bengtsen](image-url)

*Figure 31.2* Stencil paintings by Faile and Bast in Brooklyn, New York City, 2011. Photo © Peter Bengtsen
York City in October 2013 and attributed to Banksy failed to sell (Major Street Art Auction Catalogue, 2014; Rushmore, 2014). Other artworks by Faile have been removed and sold. In January 2011, Faile and the Brooklyn-based artist Bast, created a cluster of thirteen stencil paintings on a large metal-plated door in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (Figure 31.2). The whole door was eventually taken down and the plating cut into smaller pieces. In the period March–June 2012, nine of the individual stencil paintings were put up for sale on eBay with eight pieces actually selling at prices ranging from $460 to $1,144.

Even though they are difficult to remove in one piece, several street artworks by the French artist Invader have also been taken down and put on the market in recent years. Invader has become famous within the street art world for creating and adhering to street walls tile mosaics that replicate or paraphrase characters from the late 1970s arcade video game, Space Invaders. More recently the artist has also begun to incorporate other characters in his work, although the Space Invaders game remains central to his oeuvre.

An example of a removed Invader street artwork is a large mosaic of a princess on a background of numerous white space invaders (Figure 31.3). It was put up on Orchard Street in New York City in October 2013 and was promptly removed by the building’s owner (Litvak, 2013), who has claimed that he is “going to hold on to it and cherish it” (Turco, 2013a). Although this particular piece has thus apparently not been put on the market, a number of other artworks supposedly by Invader have been removed and offered up for sale through galleries, eBay, or Internet forums dedicated to street art.

Figure 31.3 Mosaic by Invader on Orchard Street, New York City, 2013. Photo © Mark Miller
Views on removals and a discourse of stolen artworks

There is a clear tendency for graffiti and street art enthusiasts and practitioners to consider the removal of and trade in artworks from the street as both problematic and antithetical to the ethos of graffiti and street art. In an interview following the removal of the Orchard Street mosaic in late 2013, Invader responded to a question about his feelings towards property owners that take his artworks down:

If it is because [they don’t] like it, that’s ok. If it’s to sell it on eBay or to put it in [their] living room, that doesn’t make me happy. Street pieces are made for the street and for the people in the street to enjoy them.

(Turco, 2013b)

In a similar vein, the British artist Eine has stated that street artworks are

not painted to be sold a few years later . . . This is one reason I don’t sign my street stuff, and, like other artists, would never authenticate it – it’s not made to be sold, but to be enjoyed.

(Shaw, 2012)

The issue of authentication brought up by Eine is central to the status on the art market of removed street artworks and will be discussed in the following section. In addition to those who legally remove artworks from their own property, there have been numerous examples of street artworks being taken without permission. In some instances, artworks removed in this manner potentially fall into the category of stolen property. Although no criminal convictions on the count of theft have so far been made, the removal in February 2011 of a street artwork attributed to Banksy often referred to as Sperm Alarm led to a case in which the defendant, Leon Lawrence, was convicted of attempting to convert criminal property (Daily Mail, 2012).

It should be noted that irrespective of whether the art is considered stolen property in a formal sense, many street artists, as well as street art enthusiasts and urban art collectors, on principle find it inappropriate to remove and trade in art from the street (Bengtsen, 2014). There is a strong notion that street art is ephemeral and should remain on the street until it disappears “naturally” (e.g. being whitewashed, destroyed by elements, or gone over with other art). Removal with a view to collect or sell is not considered natural or acceptable, and even legally-removed street art is often described as having been stolen from the public for which it was intended and to which it – in a moral sense – rightly belongs. This is a quite pervasive discourse in the worlds of street art and urban art, and one that is also hinted at in the title of the Stealing Banksy? exhibition.

The authentication and authenticity of street artworks

The negative stance taken by many artists towards the removal of their artworks from the street influences the status of these works on the art market. It is a fundamental notion when trading in art that it is important to be able to substantiate the origin and authenticity of an artwork since this may significantly increase market interest and the work’s monetary value. If an artist or an artist’s representative is unavailable or unwilling to authenticate an artwork, establishing good provenance (e.g. dating, assembling a list of previous owners, and appearances in exhibitions and auctions and collecting paperwork attesting to the artwork’s origin) becomes paramount,
since “[d]eterminations about the authenticity and value of paintings and other art objects are largely made based on the provenance of the work” (Carter, 2007: p. 76).

As suggested by Eine, when it comes to work taken from the street, many artists will not provide formal authentication. Other provenance is therefore important and often consists of visual documentation of the relevant work in its original context and during the removal process. In addition, any direct or indirect acknowledgement by the artist of having created the artwork can be put on record. For example, when an image of a street artwork appears on Banksy’s website, this is taken by many as circumstantial evidence that Banksy created it. Although indirect, such recognition by the artist is usually the most persuasive indicator of genuineness available.

At the 2011 show of removed street artworks attributed to Banksy in Southampton, the organizers had to rely heavily on the above-mentioned types of provenance, since none of the artworks had been authenticated by the artist’s authentication company, Pest Control. The same was the case at Stealing Banksy?. Of the nine removed street artworks for sale at the 2014 show, only one – a 2.4 by 9.95 metres painting originally created on the side of a semi-trailer – had been given a certificate of authenticity by Pest Control. Even though many of the artworks at these two shows were being presented with relatively convincing provenance information, none of them sold.

The lack of sales may in part be explained by factors such as the high estimates the artworks had been given, their restored state, and in some cases their size and weight which would present a potential buyer with significant logistical challenges. However, the lack of sales were also partly caused by the fact that establishing good provenance is often perceived as insufficient by the art market when it comes to removed street artworks. One reason for this is that street artworks are created – and often embedded – in a specific context, and their meaning can change quite drastically when they are removed from their original site. In relation to works of such a site-specific nature, authenticity is not tantamount to simply establishing their origins beyond reasonable doubt.

The context of street artworks can at times be of a specific geographical or socio-political nature. Italian artists Blu and Ercailcane’s large-scale oil-and-environment-themed mural painted in Stavanger, Norway in 2010 and Banksy’s famous murals created on the Israeli separation wall in 2005 are examples of this. However, the ever-present and fundamental relationship of any street artwork to the street must also be considered. The street constitutes a site beyond, and perhaps in opposition to, the ideological and economic constraints of an established and elitist art world which Miwon Kwon has observed is seeking to “actively disassociate the space of art from the outer world” (2002: p. 13). The street as a site creates a direct connection between art and lived life and thus plays a fundamental role in establishing the meaning of street artworks. Therefore, even if it is possible to remove an artwork from its original location without breaking it in the physical sense, embedding that work in the context of the art market or an art institution could still damage or destroy it conceptually and, for that reason, monetarily (Bengtsen, 2013). In addition, street artworks in the same area often feed off and add meaning to each other. As a result, even street artworks that may initially appear relatively self-contained can become increasingly site specific over time as they are gradually embedded in a network of meaning together with other artworks.

The site specific nature of street art is one reason that the intentions and views of the artist are currently being taken so seriously by the art market. In relation to Banksy, contemporary art expert Lock Kresler from Christie’s London has stated that the auction house “will not sell anything removed from the street because it’s something the artist isn’t happy with, so we try to abide by the wishes of the artist” (Corbett, 2011). A certificate or other direct acknowledgement from the artists or his/her representative of a removed artwork’s authenticity is taken to
be important not just because it confirms whether the artwork in question was originally created by the relevant artist, but also because it is indicative of whether the removed object should be considered an artwork in its current form. This focus on the potentially changed status of the removed object in the eyes of the artist – and the risk that the object might eventually be publicly denounced as a fake – may in part explain why work has failed to sell even if it has been removed legally and has reasonably good provenance.

In addition to the more conceptual issues related to site specificity, the removal of street artworks and the lack of official recognition by artists of such removed objects also raise a practical concern about the risk of buying outright fakes. In a statement on his website in April 2014, Invader commented on the trade in artworks attributed to him which have ostensibly been removed from the street:

The Space Invaders I put up in the street aren’t signed and are made from readily available mosaic tiles, which [make] them easy to copy. A mosaic that has been removed from its original site loses all value as it can no longer be distinguished from a reproduction.

One of the techniques used by illicit dealers is to destroy the Space Invader in situ, then recreate it using new mosaic tiles which they artificially age. The copy is then offered for sale as an original. Sometimes several copies of the same piece are made. Examples regularly come up on eBay.

(Invader, 2014)

Similarly, in September 2008, Pest Control issued a statement that they do not authenticate street artworks and that Banksy would “encourage anyone wanting to purchase one of his images to do so with extreme caution” (Pest Control Office, 2008). This was seen by many as a hint that five street artworks coming up for auction at Lyon & Turnbull at the time might be fake and is believed to be a major reason that none of these artworks sold.

While the lack of sales of removed artworks is becoming less clear-cut as some do seem to sell privately or at auction, many collectors still appear to be adhering to the negative stance taken by artists in relation to the removal and sale of street artworks. In the few cases where larger artworks removed from the street have ostensibly sold, the lack of transparency on the art market means that there is a lot of skepticism among collectors and street art enthusiasts and there is speculation as to whether a reported sale is genuine or a ruse to attempt to drive up prices and demand for other street artworks the same seller or his/her associates may have in stock. By way of example, in a discussion thread from July 2014 about the alleged sale of a car door with part of a stencil painting attributed to Banksy, a member of the Urban Art Association – one of the most prolific internet forums dedicated to the discussion of and trade in urban art and street art – commented:

The piece did not sell. The article you are thinking of states it received an offer of 145k USD (I do not believe that personally). It did not meet the reserve which I believe was 200k USD. This was back in [February 2014]. . .the same piece was still for sale as of about two months ago by [Keszler], the same person who listed it in the Miami Auction, for 185k USD.

Knowing [Keszler] I would be [. . .] shocked if he had an offer of 145k and passed. That’s just a quote drummed up by his PR person to try and generate interest in the piece. (“AFR1KA,” 2014)

Alternatively, some artists do sometimes authenticate street artworks, and this can change fundamentally the attitude of prospective buyers towards the relevant artworks. An example of
this can be found in the responses to a post on Urban Art Association, where a collector advertises for sale a removed street artwork by Faile. The sales post reads as follows:

I’m selling my original Faile on wood. This piece was originally a street piece in Brooklyn. It was removed by the person I purchased it from (who claimed it was on a building being torn down, etc., the usual story). I’m not one to buy pieces taken from the street, however, I contacted both members of Faile before purchasing the piece and was provided with full authenticity, as well as their blessing to go ahead and purchase the piece as an original. I will include this correspondence with the piece as provenance.

(“solar77,” 2008)

Unlike in other cases on Urban Art Association and similar forums where removed street artworks have been offered for sale, the responses from other members contain no critical comments. Instead, many members express their interest in the artwork. There are several factors that may have contributed to this outcome. The seller is clearly aware of the dominant negative discourse surrounding the removal and sale of artworks from the street. He begins by making clear that the artwork was taken down by someone else, thereby absolving himself of any direct involvement in the removal. He invokes the common notion among street art enthusiasts that removing artworks from condemned buildings is somewhat acceptable since it can be perceived as an act of rescuing artworks that would otherwise have disappeared from the street anyway. Highlighting the exceptional nature of the sale by stating that he would not normally trade in removed artworks, the seller also explains that he contacted Faile and received their approval before buying the painting. The significance of the artists having recognized and authenticated the artwork “as an original” and of the promise that documentation of this will be provided to the buyer is reflected in the response from one member that the artwork “is a beauty and well done on getting the official nod of approval before buying it” (“Ged,” 2009). This case exemplifies the emphasis put on the views of the artist by collectors, as this particular removed street artwork is perceived by the forum community as an authentic Faile not only because the artists made it, but also because they are said to have acknowledged its status as an artwork in its current state.

Possible benefits of removing street art from the street

After Stealing Banksy? ended with no sales in April 2014, The Sincura Group, who organized the show, published a statement. They claimed that

many of the pieces displayed were not actually available for sale. Furthermore, those artwork [sic] made available had strict caveats placed on them – that upon purchase they would be put back on public display and that the proceeds from any sale would benefit local charities.

(Stealing Banksy? website, 2014)

In the statement, it was further asserted that the whole event had been a test to assess the viability of establishing in central London a museum dedicated to removed street artworks. While it still remains to be seen if such a museum is in fact underway, the idea itself feeds into an existing argument for the possible long-term benefits connected to the preservation of street art – an argument that challenges the prevalent view among street artists, street art aficionados, and collectors that the removal of artworks from the street is necessarily negative. An example
of this alternative argument can be found in the following post from the online art discussion forum *The Artchival*:

you need a certain percentage captured from the wild in order to save for posterity, like a breeding program for an endangered species, but in this case breeding scholarship and continued interest in the genre. I’d think things would be far less interesting, for example, if all the Haring subway drawings had been left & lost, if we didn’t have vintage NYC subway windows and doors, full of a generation of tags, in private collections, and museums, if all we had left of KAWS bus-stop distortions were old photographs, etc., etc.

There is a preservation aspect that I appreciate.

(“Mose,” 2012)

Though, as suggested in the above-cited forum post, there may be beneficial long-term consequences of the removal and preservation of street artworks, these are often disregarded in public discussions among street art enthusiasts. Co-editor of the influential book *Beyond the Street: The 100 Leading Figures in Urban Art*, Patrick Nguyen, observes in an email

the knowledge [among street art aficionados] that recognizing any grey area or validity to the salvaging argument will simply serve to justify the removal of further street pieces. Street art enthusiasts are thereby discouraged from engaging in open and honest debates on the matter.¹

Although the argument that the removal and preservation of a certain number of street artworks may in time prove to be beneficial is still not widely accepted among street art practitioners and enthusiasts, there does seem to be a growing awareness – perhaps fueled by pragmatic resignation to the fact that street artworks *are* being removed regardless of anyone’s feelings about the matter – of the potential benefits of preservation. These benefits include having access to a more complete overview of certain artists’ body of work and allowing future museum goers and researchers to study samples of actual street artworks from the early twenty-first century rather than only photographs and other forms of documentation. However, since the preservation argument hinges on at least some removed street artworks in time becoming accessible to the public, it is significantly challenged by the fact that these street artworks have so far ended up in the hands of private collectors or in the stocks of galleries.

**Conclusion**

Among street artists and street art enthusiasts, there is a widespread idea that street artworks are ephemeral and site specific, and that they are meant for the public and should be allowed to remain in their original location until they are destroyed or gradually disappear. With the increasing prices commanded by commercial studio work by some of the artists who are also known for their work in the street, however, in recent years the removal of and trade in street artworks has become increasingly commonplace.

The market reception of removed street artworks has generally been negative. The market puts a lot of emphasis on the wishes and opinions of the artists, who often will not authenticate removed artworks. Cases where removed artworks have been authenticated by artists and subsequently have sold underscore the importance of artists openly acknowledging a removed object as their work. By doing so, they confirm not only that they have created the initial street artwork but also that it should be considered a work of art after it has been removed from its original site.

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While the status of removed street artworks on the art market is currently very much reliant on statements from the respective artist, the continued effort to take down, restore, and preserve artworks at great cost suggests that some expect either that more artists will eventually come to acknowledge the removed artworks as part of their oeuvre or that the emphasis now put on the artists’ statements will diminish in favor of other types of provenance.

The negative stance towards the status of removed street artworks is also being challenged by the preservation argument, which focuses on the long-term importance of preserving a certain number of street artworks and making sure that they become available to the public. However, even if artworks become accessible to the public, their removal, restoration, and preservation in an art institution entails a significant trade-off in terms of the loss of their original context, which often adds meaning to the artworks. Since street artworks are in essence site specific, the shift to the context of the museum may significantly alter how the artworks are perceived, and in some cases deprive them of meaning. Although market forces may be chipping away at it, the dominant public stance among street art enthusiasts and sellers of urban art can – for the moment – be summed up by paraphrasing Slavoj Žižek’s observations about the masterpieces of art collected at Battersea Power Station in the film *Children of Men*: Street artworks removed from the street are deprived of their context, they are totally meaningless because what does it mean to have a street painting by Banksy or whatever? It only works in a certain context. And when this context is lacking, the artwork is nothing.

Note

1 Email correspondence with P. Nguyen (February 10, 2013).

References


