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Discussion Piece

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Street Art as Deed: A Reply to Kukla

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I. INTRODUCTION

In "Capitalist and Anti-Capitalist Placemaking Through Street Art," Kukla (2024) offers an empirically rich and theoretically ambitious account, which dislodges the reductive view seeing street art as essentially subversive. The article's core argumentative strategy, shared with other "descriptivist" approaches to street art (Bonadio 2023; Kramer 2019), relies on counterexamples: the invocation of murals produced in partnership with brands, artworks commissioned by real estate developers, and city-funded festivals that use street art for gentrification, among others. Drawing on such instances, Kukla shows the actual heterogeneity of street art trends today, playing a central role not just in destabilizing processes, but also in those that are thoroughly commercialized or integrated into market logics. Given this, to insist that only dissident works qualify as street art is to beg the question and obscure the complexity of the phenomenon under examination.

Highlighting, as Kukla does, popular trends in how street art is understood and appreciated is critical for future empirical and theoretical research because it reveals how this art form is received and adapted in diverse social contexts. However, as we shall argue in these few pages, this art form can and should be defined not only *lato sensu* as the creation of visual artifacts or urban decoration, but also *stricto sensu*, that is, as a practice whose identity lies in the execution of subversive acts. The lato sensu, or descriptivist approach, obscures a fundamental tension in modes of appreciation, with important ontological implications.

More specifically, we shall point out that traditionally and "paradigmatically" (Chackal 2016, 360) street art is valued not only for what it produces but also for a specific type of achievement—what Clark (1989) refers to as a *deed*—namely the counterhegemonic use of public space. Our claim is equally supported by practice, as evidenced by Nuart curator Martyn Reed's recent efforts to resist the commercialization of his festival and reaffirm the critical spirit of street art (Riva 2025).

To advance our perspective, we first lay out a threefold account of the art practice in Section II—distinguishing between what is done, how it is done, and the deed. We do so not only to point out a possible conceptual refinement. Rather, following Neufeld's (2014) insight that ontological arguments belong to critical evaluation rather than metaphysical speculation, we provide a more nuanced foundation for understanding street art, reworking rather than rejecting descriptivist approaches by clarifying ontological distinctions that they ignore. In fact, in Section III we suggest a possible reconciliation between lato and stricto sensu understandings of street art: while Kukla theorizes it as a social phenomenon, an aggregate of diverse practices, we identify it as a practice in its own right, one whose identity is defined by counterhegemonic interventions in public space.

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II. STREET ART APPRECIATION AND ONTOLOGY: A THREEFOLD ACCOUNT

What kind of thing are we appreciating when we appreciate street art? At first glance, the answer from Kukla's analysis—and indeed, for many scholars and the general public—seems straightforward: we appreciate the outcome of a street artist's activity and the "expression of [their] agency" (Kukla 2024, 333): the object itself. Whether a work resists or facilitates capitalist placemaking, the mural, stencil, or installation itself becomes the focal point. We can succinctly characterize this mode of appreciation as directed at *what is done*.

The ever-growing practices of musealization, preservation, heritagization, and memetic replication of works of street art are eminent illustrations of the object-centered ontological take that seems to influence and inform also Kukla's analysis. According to this take, for instance, a mural advertising a brand, Stick Man's installations, political graffiti, or Blu's works in Kreuzberg are all the same kind of thing: physical objects created on the street that can be restored, sold, and repurposed without compromising their identity, while contributing to making a place (or playing some other social function) in one way or another.

The reduction of street art to its tangible outcomes that characterizes the object-centered ontological take, however, reveals a critical misalignment within the practice's history. To continue with our succinct characterizations: while some modes of appreciation focus on what is done, others emphasize the *doing* (the performative act of creation), and others still a particular kind of *deed* (the subversive achievement itself). This threefold ontological structure of street art agency (i.e., the done, the doing, and the deed), leased from Clark's (1989) classic work, is what in our view can account for the limitations of Kukla's descriptivist approach. This point needs some elaboration.

Some scholars (Baldini 2021; Chackal 2016) have already challenged the object-centered ontological perspective on street art's appreciation by emphasizing the importance of the doing. They regard the performative dimension as constitutive of works of street art. From this viewpoint, performative variations result in evaluative disparities: Dash Snow's tag reproduced in a McDonald's in France, for instance, is physically identical to an unauthorized version spray-painted by the writer on walls and trains in NYC. And yet, the value of the performances differs—for instance, in terms of the act's "audacity" (Chackal 2016, 369). The point here is crucial: while the done, that is, the tag as a physical object, entered those processes of capitalist placemaking that Kukla well describes, the doing, that is, the performance, did not. The ontological misalignment does set: while some appreciators focus on the done as the focus of their experience of street art, others value the performance itself, remembered through oral histories and reimagined through visual and textual documentation.

However—and this is the overlooked theoretical idea we aim to put forward—the done and the doing do not suffice to account for the appreciative practices associated with street art. To be still missing is the value that emerges only when we also consider the deed, that is, what was achieved by what it was done in the way it was done. This is well illustrated by Banksy's *The Migrant Child*. Painted in 2019 on the façade of a historical palace in Venice, the mural—depicting a child in a life vest holding a flare—was an unauthorized piece of political protest to denounce Italian immigration policies (Binswanger 2023). Quickly, the work of the Bristol superstar has turned into a spectacle. A popular tourist attraction, in 2023, Italy's Ministry of Culture declared its restoration. The following year, the palace's new owner, Ifis Bank, funded the mural's removal and restoration: the work is slated to be displayed in cultural events organized by the bank (Imam 2025). The ontological misalignment is stark: while local authorities and corporate sponsors valorize the done—the object as a cultural asset—others (including Banksy and arguably the police) valued the deed, the transgressive act of protest that gave the work its original political force.

Let us take a moment to state explicitly what we have just claimed. If, on the one hand, *The Migrant Child* had to be appreciated (just) as the done, that is, the physical object, Banksy's actions would appear unreasonable: why would Bristol's maverick risk significant danger to produce something that could be created safely in a studio or with official consent? If, on the other hand,

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the focus of the appreciation should (primarily) be on the performance, what Ifis Bank and the local government do with the mural should be less significant. However, the controversies that arose as a result of spectacularizing the mural in situ and its subsequent musealization provide us with something abductively crucial: *the best explanation is to admit that Banksy's actions were (fundamentally) intended to be appreciated as an attempt at a deed*—that is, an attempt at a specific achievement, namely a politically charged counterhegemonic use of public space. The work's capitalist absorption is indicative of its corporate-induced failure as a deed.

The threefold appreciative and ontological account we propose demonstrates that *some* (and we emphasize this restriction of the field) forms of urban visual culture—often referred to as street art—are valued not only as doings (performances) or what is done (the resulting objects), but also as deeds: interventions with normative force. From this perspective, street artists can accomplish a variety of tasks.[1] Some are aesthetic or technical, such as the early *wildstyle* pieces that pioneered significant formal innovations in graffiti; others are social, civic, or even commercial.

However, a specific subset of deeds attempted by street artists in their capacity as such seems to play a central role in preserving the meaningfulness of this art form: it is those deeds that are associated with a distinct appreciative practice centered on *subversive interventions*. This subcultural mode of appreciation, which is shared by many practitioners, curators (including Reed's recent reorientation of Nuart), and audiences, prioritizes acts that challenge dominant hierarchies of visibility and authority in urban space. Within this appreciative framework, street art acts are counterhegemonic acts that subvert dominant public space uses rather than surface decorations or cultural assets. By contrast, commercial murals and community paintings, though visually similar, lack the teleo-normative aim of reclaiming visual territory and reconfiguring visibility against the grain of authorized space.

Our account, then, is not a mere redrawing of classificatory boundaries but a sketch for reshaping the very foundations of how street art should be understood. In short, we argue that there is an ontological difference—rooted in agency—between artworks functioning as subversive deeds and those operating within aesthetic or economic circuits. To collapse this distinction, as Kukla's otherwise rich taxonomy does, is to miss what is at stake in different modes of appreciation. Preserving distinct conceptual spaces for those different modes is therefore crucial to protect a subset of street art's evaluative integrity against commodification.

Notwithstanding these considerations, we believe that there is a way to reconcile Kukla's remarks on street art's function with our account. This is the next topic we will discuss.

III. RECONCILING THE ACCOUNTS

In a seminal contribution to the study of graffiti and street art, Brighenti (2010) recognized an inherent conflict underlying the movement. He noted that diverse impulses—artistic, economic, political, criminal, subcultural, or personal—did not inherently preclude one another but coexisted in a delicate equilibrium. This coexistence necessitated ongoing negotiation, but he cautioned that beyond a certain limit, the art form risked fragmenting into disparate and incompatible activities. The liminal quality of graffiti writing and, more generally, street art, relied specifically on this precarious balance.

Two decades later, the threshold Brighenti foresaw has arguably been crossed. What once persisted as a precarious unity of motivations has irreparably fractured. There is an ontological gap between, for example, the deeds of Théo Clerc, a recently pardoned French writer who was sentenced to three years in prison for painting the Baku metro in 2024, and Shepard Fairey's multimillion-dollar commercial projects. In this sense, our arguments can be succinctly summarized: contemporary street art no longer coheres as a single field of contested yet common norms but has split into divergent paths—some integrated into institutional art and urban branding, others persisting as counterhegemonic interventions in public space.

As anticipated, recognizing that the movement has diversified into several art forms uncovers a convergence between our perspectives and Kukla's. To unearth that constructive meeting, let us introduce a distinction between practices and phenomena (Schatzki 2002). Practices like vot-

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ing, playing chess, or doing science are intentional, recurring, and organized activities guided by shared norms, beliefs, and goals. Phenomena, by contrast, are broader social configurations that emerge from practices without being practices themselves. Inequality, for instance, arises from many practices but is not a practice per se.

In this ad hoc distinction, our approach treats street art as an urban practice, while Kukla's captures it as an urban phenomenon, that is, a layered outcome of bundled and intersecting urban practices. In other words, Kukla theorizes a phenomenon emerging from creative practices gathering in urban space. This collection, which we could call urban creativity or street art lato sensu, plays diverse place-making roles. On our part, we are concerned with one such practice, street art stricto sensu, whose identity lies in its enactment of subversive deeds aiming at counterhegemonic uses of public spaces. Recognizing this distinction allows us to acknowledge both views as tracking real, but ontologically distinct, aspects of what unfolds on the city's walls.

Our account does not deny that the done and the doing matter in the appreciation of street art. It would be absurd to suggest that the objects produced (e.g., murals, tags, or stencils) or the manner of their execution are irrelevant. Street art is still an artistic practice, and works like Banksy's *The Migrant Child* are undeniably appreciated (also) as visual products, while the ingenuity of his performances (arriving at a site, applying paint swiftly, and vanishing unnoticed) adds a further layer of interest and value.

Our claim, however, is that these dimensions, while valuable, should remain in the background. They can *pro tanto* enrich one's appreciation, but they ought not to occupy center stage. To focus exclusively on the product or on the performance risks distorting what street art stricto sensu fundamentally is: not simply an artifact or a feat, but a deed of a particular kind, that is, an intervention in public space with subversive force. Attending only to the object or to the performance—or other kinds of deeds that a work may achieve—obscures this dimension, thereby preventing us from fully appreciating, and hence correctly judging, a work of street art.

"Street art was and is always more than authorized decoration" (Riva 2025), Guy Denning reminded us when presenting one of his street works for Nuart as restructured by Reed. In this short reply, we have sought to show why both practitioners and audiences increasingly recognize the divergent ontological and appreciative paths the movement has taken. Denning and Reed demonstrate that street art *stricto sensu* can still be what it was meant to be: unsanctioned, urgent, and uncomfortable. Not glossy branding, but protest and confrontation. Much of its aesthetic has been co-opted, but someone is still fighting back—and that is enough to keep the original spirit of the practice alive.[2]

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ENDNOTES

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