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Resistance through the Temporality, Placement, and Modification of Street Art in Scotland's Streets

Abstract

Through a methodology of ethnographic walking and photographic documentation this article considers and redefines street art within the contexts of the disciplines of Ethnology and Folklore. By considering wide-ranging Scottish examples of public-facing interventions through the concepts of temporality, placement and location, and modification and defacement, this article contributes to a wider scholarly and general discussion on the role and importance of street art in our everyday lives. It argues for the significance and usefulness of these conceptual frameworks, which not only link street art in Scotland to street art around the world, but also reveal the common hybrid physical and online natures of much street art. The examples included of public interventions are almost all connected through the theme of resistance, whether personal, local, national, or international. Examples explored relate to the Scottish Independence Referendum, anti-gentrification campaigning, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, trans rights activism, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: materiality, resistance, street art, ethnographic walking, temporality, placement

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Introduction

Just days after the Russian military invaded Ukraine in late February 2022, my wife noticed a black stencilled image of the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin on a pavement a few streets away from our home (figure 1).[1] Underneath his recognisable visage was stencilled, in capital letters, the word 'TYRANT'. This kind of stencilling, as well as graffitiing, wheat-pasting, stickering, and other methods of creating and applying unofficial public-facing imagery and text, allow for rapid, publicly-visible responses to wide-ranging concerns of societal, local, and personal relevance (Ryan 2020, 101). Like other more traditional examples of what is categorised as folklore, I would describe these particular material interventions as examples of meaning-making through creative responses to and interactions with everyday life, reflecting its pressures, joys, and mundanities. In examining this material culture, we learn about its creators and witnesses (Christensen 2017), its real-life/online hybridity, and gain insights into perceived hegemonic societal narratives, individual and communal resistance, and the concepts of rule-breaking and transgression.

Figure 1. Image of the face of Vladimir Putin stencilled on a pavement in Aberdeen, February 2020.

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1   All of the photos in this article have been taken by the author.

These interventions can be and have been considered from a number of different perspectives and disciplines, but I consider them through the lenses of Ethnology and Folklore. This article, after grappling with definitions of street art and addressing methodological concerns, principally focuses on these interventions through the concepts of 1) temporality, 2) placement and location, and 3) modification and defacement, with references to semiotic content throughout. Principally, I ask and begin to answer how these concepts affect our and creators' interactions with and interpretations of street art, and how this kind of material culture can be treated in an interdisciplinary way while retaining a grounding in Ethnology and Folklore. Semiotic and/or aesthetic analysis is the understandable focal point of numerous studies (e.g. Riggle 2010 and Ryan 2020), but the actual temporal and physical contexts of these interventions and people's material responses to them have been less considered. The examples herein are entirely from Scotland, mostly from its urban centres, and date from 2014 to 2022. Though the examples in this article primarily represent politically-orientated interventions in public contexts, it must be noted that these exist alongside other public-facing material interventions that might better be recognised for their aesthetic aspirations or, for example, their humorous interjections on everyday life. These creative, public-facing, material interventions, whether politically minded like the anti-Putin stencil or otherwise, are often categorised as 'street art' by scholars (Daichendt 2013), the media (Arlandis 2013), and the general public (Gaskell 2022).

Problematising and Defining 'Street Art'

Like other generic categories, 'street art' is useful in that we can apply it to several creative outputs that share one or more qualities, thus giving us a focal point for study. But as with all terminology, it is worth defining and problematising, particularly in case it gains currency within Ethnology and Folklore, as it has in other disciplines. Like folklore, street art has multiple definitions (e.g. Riggle 2010; McAuliffe 2012), and typical definitions focus on its public and illicit nature, such as Fransberg, Myllylä, and Tolonen's 2021 definition: "public – and often unauthorised – creative art pieces in urban spaces that are produced by self-motivated individuals or collectives". If we are to consider defining our terms, it is necessary to unpack and problematise the connotations innate to a term like street art.

'Street art', like the term 'urban legend' (Brunvand 1981), betrays an urban bias that follows recent disciplinary trends, but belies Ethnology's and Folklore's own (problematic) roots in the study of rural customs at 'home' and abroad. Like with urban legends (more convincingly termed contem-

porary legends), which can be told and take place in rural contexts (Nicolaisen 2001, 137–138), there are examples in rural areas – far from streets – of what could conceivably, in an urban context, be termed street art. I can think of haybales in an Aberdeenshire farmer's fields, boldly decorated in support of the UK's National Health Service (NHS) during the coronavirus pandemic, as seen in one rural example sent to me by my student, Sue Rhodes. If these were urban electricity boxes decorated thus, would they not be considered street art? So streets – at least the city streets that the term implies – do not appear to be an innate ingredient of this kind of folkloric output. Our focus on the urban contexts of such material interventions in everyday life perhaps reflects the city-based quotidian of most ethnographers and scholars who study such creations. Indeed, as a folklorist who in the past twelve years has lived in Scotland's three largest urban centres, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen, my own fieldwork – resulting from walking the streets of these cities – reveals a similar partiality for urban examples. If the urban connotation of 'street' is misleading, however, the word's implication that such interventions are innately public-facing is more useful. The raison d'être of most, if not all, such interventions is to be seen by others, to catch one's attention, indeed, perhaps even to provoke a mental or even physical response (Sage 2016, 856).

If 'street' in 'street art' is imperfect but understandable, what of 'art', in this formulation? Folklorists talk of artistic communication as innate to the process of folklore and most folkloristic studies of art look at it in vernacular contexts, implicitly or explicitly contrasting this with official, 'insider' art (Jones 1987, 154). Folklorists studying public material interventions have examined labour stickering (e.g. Green 1960), scrawls of graffiti (e.g. Grider 1975), bumper stickers (e.g. Salamon 2001), spontaneous shrines (e.g. Santino 2006), ephemeral memorials (e.g. Turner and Merrill 2009), sculpture (e.g. Bezborodova 2016), and murals (e.g. Hopkinson 2021), to give some older and more recent examples. A large number of the scholars actually using and defining the term 'street art', on the other hand, come from disciplines such as Aesthetics, Arts Education, Cultural Geography, Fine Arts, History of Art, and Visual Culture, revealing their own disciplinary predispositions in their research. These scholars studying such material interventions often consider the aesthetically and politically-minded interventions of artist-activists such as the Guerrilla Girls (Wexler 2007), Banksy (Chung 2009), or their predecessors who have made the street their medium (Saunders 2011). Anonymous but identifiable, these artists highlight political concerns and also themselves, in turn raising the profile of their political polemic, the artwork, and their artist aliases.

As a result of differing interests and foci, there is sometimes a disconnect, not only in disciplinary considerations of the word 'art', but also in the types of public-facing material interventions examined by folklorists and scholars of these disciplines. Some definitions of street art exclude graffiti – of interest to folklorists – for various reasons, including that it is an "egocentric form of private communication" illegible to outsiders (McAuliffe 2012, 3), or that it "usually has no message, other than territorial" (Cowick 2015, 30). These limiting definitions of graffiti, which focus on its 'tagging' form – of relevance and interest in its own right – have little to say regarding the graffiti studied by folklorists documenting, for example, latrinalia (e.g. Read, 1935 or Stocker, Dutcher, Hargrove, and Cook, 1972), Dundes's term for graffiti in public-bathroom contexts (1966). Even Fransberg, Myllylä, and Tolonen's more expansive definition of street art quoted above, which is actually an all-encompassing definition for both graffiti and street art in the context of 'graffiti and street art research', could be understood to exclude types of graffiti previously studied by folklorists.

It is clear that street art is a contested term. But its ubiquitous nature makes coining a new term quixotic; a simple redefinition of street art may prove more prudent. It can be of use to folklorists and ethnologists only if we define it in such a way as to be relevant within our disciplinary contexts, and only if we are aware of its problematic connotations. That street art's definition is still being healthily contested perhaps allows me room to gently suggest a new definition, one which may better encompass multi-disciplinary concerns and interests, and one which is derived not from abstract theorising but from years of fieldwork observations of street art. If we take 'street' as a metaphor for public-facing spaces more generally – thus including its rural variants, as well as paths, pedestrian ways, and unofficial, public, indoor spaces like in the case of latrinalia – and 'art' to comprise creative process, product, and person, then ethnologists and folklorists might find use in a definition of street art as fixed, unofficial, creative, public-facing material interventions. *Fixed* refers to its more-or-less static – though not necessarily permanent – nature, thus excluding performances,[2] dress and adornment (unless fixed in location and not worn), and other interesting but innately short-lived street interventions that rely on a person's continual physical presence to exist. *Unofficial* includes here both the vernacular and the illicit, allowing, for example, illegal vernacular graffiti as well as

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2 Though my own fieldwork does not include such examples, an argument could be made to include street performance interventions such as those described by Amy Bryzgel, but even in this case usage of the term 'street art' focuses solely on fixed material aspects and not the performances themselves (2017, 24).

an identifiable artist's rule-breaking, public creation while excluding official public art, e.g. sanctioned statues, monuments, publicly commissioned murals, etc. (Chackal 2016, 360; Arnold 2019). *Creative* comprises both the vernacular processes of folklore as understood through Ben-Amos's artistic communication in small groups (1971) and the institutionally-recognised creative processes of those trained in the 'fine' arts, while recognising the ambiguity and nuances of terms like vernacular and institutional (Primiano 1995; Howard 2008). *Public-facing* means visible in a public space, whether the creation is widely intelligible or not. *Material* refers to the materiality of the creation, whether properly tangible or created through subtraction.[3] *Intervention* refers to the attention entreated of the passer-by and also the innate imposition of the item on the site of creation or placement. Though I find 'street art' to be connotatively frustrating, defined in such a way it can at least be of some use in allowing ethnologists and folklorists to comment on a field of study that has been and continues to be of clear relevance to our interests.

Ethnographic Walking as Methodology

Walking – even walking alone – is a social activity. Neither city streets and their pavements nor rural paths through the woods are separate from those who interact, have interacted, and will interact with them; rather, their very identity and existence is dependent on the ever-changing embodied or disembodied presences of humans, animals, and even machines. In that sense, walkers *are part* of the street, and these streets are both officially controlled and open to vernacular response (Sage 2016, 859). As a result of the dynamic and multivalent nature of the street, any ambulatory excursion, no matter its purpose or familiarity, results in a novel walk with new experiences, new presences, new absences, and thus new dangers, new discoveries, and new mundanities.[4] Though walking is an integral part of my ethnographic practice, I rarely walk with purely ethnographic reasons in mind. Walking, rather, is an intrinsic and unavoidable aspect of my everyday life. It is my sole means of transportation, my principal way of encountering the world outside my home. It is not, therefore, a special, demarcated ethnographic time and space. There is no 'fieldwork site', if only because every place and moment has ethnographic potential. But on walks I inevitably encounter the disembodied presence of street artists who have somehow come and gone

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3   An example of this would be scratching away a layer of paint, with the resulting contrasting colours revealing a message or image, as with sgraffito.

4   For a useful and intriguingly experimental exploration of such ideas see Cheeseman, Chakrabarti, Österlund-Pötzsch, Poole, Schrire, Seltzer, and Tainio 2021.

since my last walk, leaving a sticker or stencil behind, a message in marker, a child's game in chalk, each evidence of their vitality, their anger, earnestness, or fear (Bachrach 2018, 41). Our footsteps echo each other, and in walking I share with them place if not time.

Intentional embodied ethnographies of the street can and have taught us much about the rhythms of contemporary existence and the complexities of urban form (Vergunst 2010; Duru 2018, 100), but walking is such that ethnographic encounters happen whether one is going out to buy vegetables at the greengrocer or whether one leaves home, fieldnotes and camera in hand, walking with great expectations. In other words walking, and thus interacting with that and those we encounter as metaphorical and literal guides to and experts of everyday life, allows ethnologists and folklorists to 'dig where we stand', whenever we are standing, as it happens (Lindqvist 1979). And as walking in the streets of Scotland has been such a regular, necessary activity for me for over a decade, I have slowly observed everyday changes in those embodied and disembodied presences, as evidenced by a home with Scotland's flag, the Saltire, displayed in a window during the 2014 independence referendum, replaced by the drawing of a pandemic rainbow in March 2020, swapped for the Ukrainian flag in 2022 after Russia's invasion of its southern neighbour.

This context is useful when considering something as dynamic and changeable as street art. While walking, one observes regular changes in these creative interventions. They reflect the vicissitudes of society, and going through a decade of photos from various walks I get a visceral, ground-level feeling for what has being reflected onto everyday life in urban Scotland over the past decade: the Scottish 'indy ref', the Syrian refugee crisis, the Brexit referendum, the climate emergency, the gentrification of neighbourhoods, fear and hope at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, a renewed fight against misogyny, a growing recognition of the rights of trans people, 5G and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, the invasion of Ukraine, and more. Seeing photos of this street art gives me access once again to a place now changed. It brings me back to times past, to my own lived experiences; I can feel the pavement under me as I walk back in time, remembering the moments I stopped to take a photo. Street art evokes something of everyday life and of communal experiences; it speaks of anxieties and optimism. It lets one intuitively remember through past feelings and thoughts.

In collecting this data, my methodology has been largely solitary and informal, with the exception of two particular moments, the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic. In those instances, I

decided to expand and formalise the collection process beyond my own walks to include people in other parts of Scotland. During the independence referendum I sent out e-mails to contacts, asking them to spread word that I was looking for examples of referendum-related signs around Scotland to include in the Elphinstone Institute Archives. This was a low-key request, and I received a hundred or so images of 'Yes' and 'No' signs from around Scotland in the weeks leading up to the referendum. During the pandemic, because I was experiencing lockdown in Leith in Edinburgh, far from my students and colleagues in Aberdeen, I was keen to know if the rainbow signs and other street displays my wife and I were witnessing on walks were visible elsewhere in the country. With the help of colleagues and student volunteers I launched the Lockdown Lore Collection Project, with the aim of documenting Scotland's creative responses to the pandemic through submissions from the public and also through over seventy ethnographic interviews conducted online with individuals and families about their experiences. Though I have received thousands of responses to this ongoing project, most photographs that have been submitted are of creative projects that people were working on at home, and generally not the window displays, painted rocks, graffiti, stickers, posters, and other forms of street art that I had been documenting.

It takes a certain courage, or nosiness, perhaps, to photograph window displays and interventions on the street (Whalan 2011, 49–50), and I understand why most people choose not to do so. I always take care to photograph ethically, and from such an angle that only the display shows, with little showing behind the window. Though a keen walker and ethnographer, I have always – quite happily – deprived myself of that most useful tool in the fieldworker's toolkit: the mobile phone. Without a mobile, I relied on a first-generation DSLR camera to take photos. Though people with cameras were a common sight in Edinburgh before the pandemic, suddenly as I walked around with detachable lenses, very clearly and intentionally taking photographs through a view finder, I felt conspicuous, like an intruder on everyday life. I eventually moved on to a poor-quality small point-and-click camera, and finally to my wife's smart phone, which she begrudgingly carried round with her on our walks knowing that I simply wanted it to take photos inconspicuously. That most people now document their lives through mobile phones means that these machines are almost invisible. Actual cameras, however, whose sole purpose is to take photographs, are highly suspect, as if their innate documentary purpose is itself questionable. Of course, on my walks I do not always have a camera or my wife's mobile, and if I come across an interesting item of street art, I will often retrace my steps later in the day to take a photo. Sometimes the intervention is still there and some-

times it is not; other times it has been defaced or modified in some way so as to change its message. On the luckiest occasions I am able to photograph street art soon after it goes up, and then again at a later date if it is modified in any way.

Though most of my other research connects to personal-experience narratives and the stories of people's everyday lives – and thus relies on ethnographic interviews – I have, for the time being, left such narratives out of this investigation. If the street art points to further information, such as a web URL or a hashtag, I have followed those clues for any further context. Following social media ethics standards, I do not include any personal information, nor reference to social media posts that were created without a wider public in mind (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Though neglecting ethnographic interviews deprives me of the vital perspective of the creator – should I be able to find them – it also allows me to primarily consider and interact with street art from the valuable perspective of a passer-by. The perspectives of passers-by are, of course, not universal, and my interpretations of street art inevitably reflect my life experiences as a cisgendered, straight, educated white man who has lived, studied, and worked in several different countries around the world.

The Temporality of Street Art

The temporality of street art is a key feature that must be considered if one is to understand the wider context and content of its creation and interpretation. The timing of an intervention's appearance, as well as any intended or unintended interactions with the past and the future, can inform our understanding of the intervention relative to its creator(s) and audience. Even interventions that have no intentional anchor in the present, which strive for a timeless message or perhaps have exclusively aesthetic ambitions, can still better be understood through the lens of their temporality. Like the Putin stencil, much of the street art that appears in Scotland's streets – and elsewhere – responds quickly and directly to newly emerging issues, whether of personal, local, national, or international relevance (Tedford 2018, 83). Often the intervention is a creative response to a situation widely known by the general public, though equally likely is that the intervention is created to raise awareness and highlight certain issues that might otherwise go ignored (Haskins 2000, 47). When considering temporality, the concepts of *timing*, *momentousness*, and the *flow of time* are particularly relevant.

If we take the Putin stencil as our initial example, we can consider timing both from the perspective of its effect on the passer-by and for the cre-

ator, too. For the passers-by who have been angered or made distraught by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, seeing a timely intervention in the street keeps the topic in mind, anger, anxiety, and frustration fresh. The rapid production of this item of street art allows for a sentiment that the local community – though seemingly far from the conflict itself – is aware of the precarity of the situation and the need for action. While the UK government was initially considering its response to the invasion, arguably more slowly than the US or the EU, this swift piece of street art could be seen as speaking on behalf of those feeling powerless, and reinforcing the need to stop the tyrant behind the war.

Similarly, the creator of the stencil is presumably able to diminish their own potential feeling of powerlessness through this rapid intervention (Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998, 820). Whether actively observing people's reactions to their street art or not, quickly stencilling Putin's face and publicly labelling him a tyrant may, we can imagine, empower the artist to feel that they are bringing a distant war to the local consciousness, possibly resulting in increased local pressure on political representatives or growing participation in support for Ukraine's many refugees and relevant charities. Most interestingly, the timing of this creative intervention allows both passer-by and creator to take in the momentousness of the period. This intervention highlights the historic nature of the moment, demarcating it as beyond ordinary time. Its very existence is a call to join in the urgency of the period.

In the context of the pandemic, even observing street art through the flow of what has been a relatively short period of time – an almost micro-diachronic study – allows us to see subversive shifts in street art, reflecting changing attitudes to government restrictions, mask-wearing, the vaccines, and more. If we break down the pandemic in Scotland into roughly three phases (so far), we might think of 1) the initial lockdown (March–May 2020), 2) the rolling stages of tentative re-openings and regional and national lockdowns (summer 2020–early 2021), and 3) the post-vaccination period (from June 2021). Each phase has resulted in different – though often overlapping – forms of street art, reflecting issues of societal importance to that moment in time. Though there are many exceptions, generally the flow of time resulted in hopeful signs of community and communal resistance (first phase) making way for street art highlighting political scandal and hypocrisy (second phase), itself largely replaced by anti-vaccination and anti-mask interventions (third phase).

Like with the Putin stencil, during the initial UK lockdown in March–May 2020, street art created an atmosphere whose momentousness was impossible to ignore. Because of restrictions against going outside for reasons other than a brief period of exercise, most street art going up in this early part

Figure 2. A typical window-display rainbow created by a child in Edinburgh, April 2020.

of the pandemic was made up of street-facing window displays consisting of rainbows (figure 2) mostly made by children. Window displays are rarely if ever included in discussions of street art, but this seems an oversight when considering the way they unofficially alter the streetscape. The roots of these rainbows are contested, with some sources pointing to a London nurse (Kleinman 2020) and others to a Newcastle mother (Marlborough 2020), but the implicit message seemed clear: we have hope for the future; humanity will resist and defeat this virus.

Soon after, displays and messages in support of the National Health Service (figure 3) also began to appear, with all of these displays and messages coinciding with the 'clap for carers' campaign that took place on Thursday evenings across the UK from the end of March to the end of May 2020. Regardless of their origins, the window displays that were being put up in the first few months of the lockdown were an integral

Figure 3. An elaborate window display in Edinburgh thanking the NHS, April 2020.

feature of any venture outdoors for one's daily allotted dose of exercise. It is worth pointing out that from my observations in Edinburgh these displays were not particular to any demographic or neighbourhood, with private houses and council flats alike showing off rainbows to the street. Timing – and my own worry that such ephemeral interventions would soon disappear undocumented – affected my thinking as a fieldworker and archivist, and so I took hundreds of photographs of rainbows, chalk messages, and other reflections of solidarity, resilience, resistance against the virus, and most of all, hope in the face of the unknown. The creation and documentation of this street art helped define what seemed to be a largely communal moment, before the revelation of various government scandals and the eventual development of vaccines, both of which changed the situation dramatically.

Though the windows were filled with rainbows and also convivial messages written from one neighbour for another, there were, it must be noted, a few examples of more overtly political street art in this period. There were allusions to a 'new normal', to societal changes that were now seemingly within grasp thanks to the enormous lifestyle shifts undertaken due to the pandemic. Some sign-makers saw the historic moment not only as one of communal resilience, but also as an opportunity for seismic political and societal shifts, for resistance to what had hitherto been a dissatisfactory status quo. One top-floor window display I photographed in Leith filled the entirety of two adjacent windows. Separate blocks of text on paper were posted in the top and bottom frames creating, across the two windows, one message alluding to various inequities in UK policy as regards funding for the NHS and the treatment of its staff, many of whom are people who have moved to the UK. The display exclaimed:

FUND FUND FUND THE NHS / PAY KEY STAFF MORE M.P.s LESS / PPE TEST TEST TEST / MIGRANTS MAKE THE NHS[5]

The temporal aspects of this display, with its references to past and contemporary inequities and demands for a fairer future, were key to its messaging. That its creation coincided with neighbours' displays of rainbows gave it a transgressive undertone, indicating a dissatisfaction with these largely apolitical displays whose existence might be seen as resistance against the virus but not the political system itself. In other words, its semiotic strength was derived not only from the content of its message but from the timing of its appearance, as well.

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5   M.P.s = Members of Parliament and PPE = Personal Protective Equipment, the equipment needed by medical workers to protect themselves from the virus.
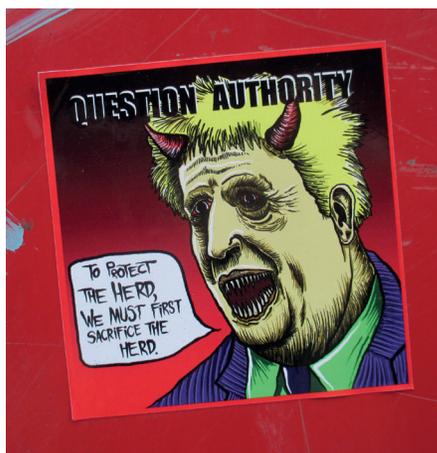
Figure 4. Sticker street art in Leith depicting Boris Johnson as demonic, April 2020.

Other political interventions in this early period emerged after it was reported that the UK government had considered 'herd immunity' as a means of defeating the virus at the expense of significant numbers of deaths (Yong 2020). Two stickers – a form of street art that has a long history in resistance contexts (Tedford 2018, 77) – caught my eye in early April 2020. One depicted UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson with horns and sharp teeth (figure 4) justifying these deaths, and another – referencing the hopeful window displays like in figure 2 – consisted of a simple rainbow depicted on a white background with the words

REVOLT Herd immunity treats people like animals. Don't be a sheep. #PROTESTAFTERLOCKDOWN.

By the time I photographed these stickers the UK government had backed away from any potential plans to pursue herd immunity through widespread infection, but it is clear that scepticism amongst certain members of the population was still strong. This was no doubt aided by the fact that Boris Johnson, who had previously spoken proudly of shaking hands with Covid patients in hospital, was himself – just around the time of my photographs – a patient in the intensive care unit of St Thomas' Hospital in London, suffering from the coronavirus. These interventions served as reminders of the perceived past callousness of the UK government.

The second sticker described above, though arguably of less aesthetic interest, has much to consider ethnographically. Its anger at a policy of herd immunity via infection contrasts with its hopeful rainbow symbol and deference to the life-saving nature of the lockdown. This is a sticker whose message of resistance is heightened not by its visual design but because it has been created to resonate within its moment. It shares the positive messaging of concurrently created hope-filled window displays and respects the NHS, all while expressing anger at what it presents as callous government policy. In other words, the timing of its creation and appearance heightens its meaning and relevance. Indeed, this sticker is so much of its time – this brief period of communal hope, anxiety, and slowly growing frustrations at government policy

– that outside of its specific moment of creation its layers of references and meaning would be difficult to parse.

The hashtag #PROTESTAFTERLOCKDOWN, which concludes the message on the sticker, points to a contemporaneous existence of this message in the digital realm. Reflecting an earlier phenomenon of stickers referencing or being distributed via zines (Radway 2011, 147), this hybridity between the physical world and the online world is very common in street art, with hashtags, or occasionally URLs or QR codes, being used as a means of pointing to an online complement to the message, explaining how to reproduce the intervention itself, or often simply as a way of crediting the artist. As Alison Chang points out,

> By harnessing the "old" medium of print to the Internet, social media and crowd-funding sites, [there is] a bridge between the efficient but disembodied information distribution of the digital age and the power of physical bodies in physical spaces working together (2017, 25).

In this case, the hashtag is easy to trace, as it has only been used by one Twitter account, formed on 11 April 2020, just a few days before I saw the sticker in question. This in-person/online hybridity is important as a means of perpetuating a message beyond the potentially short life-span of street art, allowing the creator to relay more information than is possible on a small public intervention. In this case, the sticker acts as a clarion call for the pedestrian walking past, while also fulfilling the role of a metaphorical hyperlink connecting the physical world with the online world. As this hybridity can be linked not only through temporality but also through the concepts of placement and location, let us use this opportunity to move on to this next principal point of discussion.

The Placement and Location of Street Art

When considering the full contexts of street art, assessing the potential reasons why a creator has chosen the placement and location of an intervention is essential. Placement refers to how a creator presents their intervention in a specific context (e.g. high or low, alone or with other interventions). Location refers to an intervention's geographic position. In the examples below I will consider how these concepts speak to *visibility*, *added semiotic content*, and *wider societal contexts*. First, in order to disseminate created meaning, an intervention must be placed in such a way that it is visible to passers-by. Second, as is the case with timing, placement and location can add to the semiotic content of street art, both from the perspective of the creator and from that of the passer-by. Third, placement and location are not always entirely dictated by the creator of street art, but also by wider societal contexts.

Let us return to the example of the Putin stencil to introduce the first two of these concepts. With regard to visibility, the stencil's placement on a well-used pedestrian pavement heightens, relative to other potential sites, its visibility, certainly for pedestrians. Further, the stencil artist has placed a number of such stencils around the neighbourhood, creating amplified visibility through sheer numbers. If one happens to glance away and miss one stencil, another will be visible nearby, thus helping ensure that as many people see the image as possible or that one person is confronted with it multiple times. As to added semiotic content, that the stencil in question was placed on the pavement specifically is impossible to ignore. Had it been placed on a wall, with Putin's face looking at or down on passers-by and the text at eye level, one might interpret the stencil rather differently, with Putin's image situated in a protected, elevated position. It was, however, very deliberately placed on the central slab of the pavement, with the face looking up, thus situating it in a spot where pedestrians would be likely to see the face while also most probably stepping on it. In this way, the creator has implicated the strides of passers-by into the semiotic contents of this stencil, with each step adding visceral resistance to the idea of Putin's war, progressively wearing away the image itself. It is a perfect metaphorical manifestation of the hopes of all of those against the invasion, and stepping on Putin's slowly disappearing face may give one a fleeting feeling of agency and power while otherwise helpless to prevent the ravages of an unjust war. Notably, the few examples of this stencil that I have witnessed placed not on pavements but on walls, are slightly different in design. In these stencils, the creator has added a black line over Putin's eyes. Not only is Putin not looking down on passers-by, but the line over the eyes may connote death, either of the tyrant or a metaphorical death for the war. In either case, the change in placement seems to have led to a change in the design of the image, demonstrating how placement influences various aspects of street art.

On 18 September 2014, Scotland held an independence referendum to decide its future relationship with the United Kingdom, either as a member nation or as an independent, bordering state. In the weeks running up to the referendum, I took hundreds of photos in Aberdeen of signs for and against independence, and, as described above, made a public call for further photos from across the country. Most, though not all, signs and stickers were mass-produced, and voters for either side could order them from the respective 'yes' and 'no' campaigns. But no matter their production origin, signs like these should still be of interest to folklorists and ethnologists – and other scholars of street art – because the people using them express their creativity and agency through the placement and location of these signs. In that sense, we can understand the vernacularity of this material through its use rather than through its materiality and design.

Figure 5. Yes stickers next to a pro-independence advert in Aberdeen, August 2014.

In the case of the referendum, placement was strategic, with signs positioned in spots of high visibility where repeated viewings would lend power to the signs themselves. Whether or not one agreed with one view or the other, signs strategically placed around the city gave power to the political community behind them, giving strength to their voice and giving the impression of great numbers of supporters or detractors. In public-facing domestic spaces like windows, one's position in the debate was clearly demarcated for all to see, putting pressure on passers-by to witness this political position and accept the unchangeable nature of the political view in this particular residence. In some cases, vernacular street art was placed in concordance with official signage, no doubt to reinforce the semiotic contents of an intervention's particular message. An example can be seen in figure 5, in which around twenty small, mass-produced 'yes' stickers – usually placed on clothing as a public sign of one's political position – have creatively been placed together in the shape of a Y, presumably representing 'yes', on the entrance of a telephone box. The entrance faces a pavement running along one of Aberdeen's longest streets, so pedestrians arriving from a distance would easily be able to see the colours of the stickers and the Y shape, immediately understanding the intervention's semiotic contents, even before noting the word 'yes' on each sticker. But this series of stickers also works in concordance with an official advert of YesScotland.net, a pro-independence campaigning website, which can be seen on the adjacent side of the phone box. In this way the vernacular comments and builds on the official, here represented by a legal paid-for advertisement placed in public view by the telephone company. The creative ordering of the stickers, the highly-visible location, and the strategic placement next to an advert reinforcing the 'yes'

Figure 6. Homemade placard in Leith de-crying governmental hypocrisy, May 2020.

message, show how placement and location can come together to amplify what is, at its essence, quite a simple intervention.

Signs and stickers in support of independence, in other words the 'yes' vote, were highly visible and could be found in numerous parts of Aberdeen, much more so than their 'no' counterparts. This visibility lent a significant feeling of momentum for the 'yes' campaign; it added to the semiotic content of the street art itself. That the street art in support of independence was so visible and ubiquitous actively changed the meaning of an individual 'yes' sign by connecting it to what could be interpreted as a swelling tide of pro-independence voters. Despite the high visibility of these signs and the connotations of their ubiquity, it is worth noting that in Aberdeen, 58.61% of voters in the referendum voted against independence, with 41.39% voting 'yes' (BBC 2014)**.** Had one judged the referendum by the interventions visible to passers-by, one could have easily expected the vote to be 9 to 1 for the 'yes' campaign.

If we move forward in time to the pandemic, and consider the period I have labelled above as the second phase, in which pandemic-related political scandals in the UK were gaining notice in the media and amongst the populace, we can consider some further examples in which placement adds semiotic content to interventions. In May 2020 various newspapers reported that early on in the pandemic, Dominic Cummings, then Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister and suffering from Covid-19, broke lockdown rules and drove to his parents' estate in Durham. Before his return to London, he and his family drove to Barnard Castle, a tourist attraction, purportedly so that he could test his eyesight and ensure he was well enough to drive (Fancourt, Steptoe, Wright 2021). This resulted in a number of angry and mocking examples of street art. The placement of one such intervention, made up of two separate cardboard placards with their messages written in blue marker, caught my eye. The first placard said 'CUMMINGS IS UNELECTED' (figure 6) with two skulls and crossbones in amongst the letters, and the second said 'SACK CUMMINGS NOW', this one accompanied by one large skull and crossbones. What interests me most, though, is that both placards were located in a small lane in Leith, placed on a ground-level windowsill behind the metal bars protecting the windows from the street.

It was impossible to read the entire message of either placard without look-ing from various angles. Regardless of the angle, these thick, vertical metal bars partially covered the name Cummings. The reference to prison bars, and the implication that prison was where Cummings belonged, seems difficult to deny, especially as there were numerous more obvious places in which to place such a placard. Clever placement added to the meaning and message of the in-tervention. Whether or not the combination of vaguely threatening (though cartoonish) skulls and crossbones and the use of prison imagery combined to make a totally coherent message is arguable, but the anger expressed at an of-ficial figure flouting rules his own government created is without ambiguity.

A later intervention, photographed in August 2021, during what I call the third phase of the pandemic, states:

> All they had to do strip you of your freedom was re-brand the flu and convince you that it's a threat to your existence.

The sticker was part of a larger series of anti-vaccination stickers made by a collective, which is common with stickers used in street art (Kozak 2017, 12–13). The content is well in-line with these sorts of stickers which appeared alongside the arrival of vaccines and 'vaccine passports'. And though there is much to consider with regard to what is written on such stickers, in this case I am once again interested by the location and placement of the sticker, which was placed directly onto the window of the Aberdeen office of a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), blocking the photo of the MSP's face, thus making a statement in no uncertain terms as to who 'they' in the message refers to.

Anger and frustration at, and resistance to, officials, government policy, or towards society's hegemonic powers, are often at the heart of the semio-tic contents of street art. In the case of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) move-ment, huge numbers of interventions across the world were created to pro-test against racism existing in all levels of society (Shirley, Lawrence, Lorah 2020). Scotland was no exception to this, and following the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement after a police officer murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, BLM signs and other interventions began to appear. Having mentioned above the hybridity of street art, it is important here to point out that Black Lives Matter as a term was originally used as a hashtag on social media (Wilson and Sharp 2021, 442), so here an online cre-ation has been transferred to the physical world, not only through street art but in everyday conversation. In that sense, the *location* of #BLM co-exists online and in-person, and much street art reflects this through the contin-ued use of the hashtag when physically writing #BlackLivesMatter or #BLM.

Figure 7. Window display in Newhaven underlining Scotland's role in white supremacy, June 2020.

In the Scottish context, the placement and location of interventions relating to Black Lives Matter has evolved over time to reflect wider societal contexts. In order to consider this with some clarity, it is first worth giving a general overview of the types of interventions I witnessed and how they changed with the flow of time. The very first intervention I remember coming across was on 2 June 2020, roughly one week after George Floyd's murder. It was an enormous mural on the seldom visited western boundary wall of Portobello Beach in Edinburgh, with the name of George Floyd abutted on the left by the image of a tombstone with the date of his death. All of this was flanked by two very large pig heads with eyes crossed out, with the names of the police officers who participated in Floyd's murder written above them. A few days later I came across a cardboard placard attached to an official notice board at the beach, which said 'Stop Riot-Control Exports Now / #BlackLivesMatter', referring to the UK exporting riot-control gear used by American police officers. Soon after I saw a message in chalk stating 'NO WONDER PEOPLE ARE ANGRY / #BLM'. Within a week or so, however, the nature and location of BLM-related interventions in Scotland shifted from these anonymous, relatively low-visible contexts to people's windows. Suddenly one could see variants of #BLM on many of the windows across the north of Edinburgh (and no doubt beyond), with some including messages specifically relating to racism in Scottish contexts. Some of these, as can be seen in figure 7, made reference to Sheku Bayoh, who died in 2015 while in the custody of Scottish police (Davidson 2019). In this example, one can note the strategic placement, with the creator taking advantage of their bay window to angle messages in all directions to passers-by. On the obscured right-hand window there is a quote by Maya Angelou complementing the Audre Lord quote visible in the photo.

Figure 8. Anti-racist placards on Leith Links, June 2020

More or less concurrently to these window placards and displays, groups of people gathered in front of government buildings or at city parks across Scotland, affixing anti-racism placards together. Along with the window placards, these signalled an enormous tonal shift. What started as a few examples of illicitly affixed, painted, and/or written anti-hegemonic discourse in public contexts became a mass movement. Affixing BLM signs to one's window or as a group to a fence in an official space allowed for a rejection of a situation in which anti-racist messages could only exist if anonymous and either unassuming or located in out-of-the-way sites (Noyes 2015, 138). Instead, through these actions, what had been unspoken by the mainstream if not unaccepted, suddenly felt not only speakable but necessary. The toppling of the Edward Colston statue in the English city of Bristol seemed to reflect a potential shift in the hegemonic narrative relating to the UK's relationship with racism and colonialism (Watts 2020), with an official monument to a trader of enslaved Africans being toppled and replaced around the country by vernacular, anti-racist placards, as can be seen in figure 8.

At least for a brief period, these examples of street art reflected a societal context in which active demands were being placed at the feet of policy makers, and the loudest voices were those of anti-racist campaigners. At this peak, street art almost ceased to be transgressive (Schacter 2017, 413), finding itself mirrored and co-opted in official and corporate contexts, recent examples of which have been noted by Hopkinson (2021, 486–487). The working together of people to place placards in groups gave power and momentum to the core anti-racist message at the heart of BLM. Ironically, however, the grouping of most BLM street art in official locations like parks or in front of government buildings, means

that, though the message gained strength in numbers in that moment, most of these placards were collected and presumably disposed of by city councils.[6] As signs in people's windows have largely come down (now sometimes replaced by flags or messages about Ukraine), the result is that legacy street art pertaining to the Black Lives Matter movement is difficult to come by. In Aberdeen I recently came across three stickers – designed to look like corporate name tags in an example of culture jamming (Keys 2008) – from that period, near what had been a centre for BLM placards. They state 'HELLO I AM SHEKU BAYOH [RICKY BISHOP / JIMMY MUBENGA] SAY MY NAME', each giving a different name of a Black man who died while in the custody of British police or security guards, and seemingly making reference to the African American Policy Forum's #SayHerName campaign, focusing on Black female victims of police violence (Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer, and Harris 2015). Affixed to lampposts in a location whose significance has shifted, these interventions are now easily missed. Here we see an example of a situation in which temporality, placement, and location come together to affect the creation of street art, its continued visibility, and our interactions with and interpretations of it.

The Modification and Defacement of Street Art

The modification and defacement of street art adds a transgressive, rule-breaking layer to that which is already innately transgressive and rule-breaking. Modification can be used as a tool to add to, alter, or usurp the original semiotic contents of an intervention. Modification is not always vernacular, and the official painting over, co-opting, or removal of interventions by corporations and the State also affect the landscape of street art, as can be seen with the removal of BLM placards. Modification is key to street art, as pristine, unaltered street art generally has a relatively short life. In my experience, it is rare for interventions to survive whole and unscathed for more than a week or two. The official and vernacular modification of street art, therefore, is significant, and the latter has been considered previously by folklorists in the contexts of graffiti and latrinalia (e.g. Longenecker 1977).

We can see transgressive modification of anti-racist street art that is itself transgressive in its own context. On a public wall near the University of Aberdeen, where I am employed, I photographed a wheat-pasted poster depict-

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6   Realising the precarity and ephemerality of such interventions, in early June 2020 I asked volunteers for the Lockdown Lore Collection Project to document as many of these anti-racist signs in Scotland as possible for posterity. Noting the world-wide significance of this, the George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Archive collected examples from around the world (Shirley, Lawrence, and Lorah 2020). In Minneapolis, where Floyd was murdered, Memorialize the Movement has gone beyond photographic documentation to actively 'collect, preserve, and activate' plywood murals (Memorialize the Movement 2020).

ing a raised fist with the words Black Lives Matter in the top-left corner. This carefully located poster, on a busy path between university buildings, can on its own be interpreted as a comment on a British university system struggling with concepts of decolonising the curriculum, and in which minority ethnic members of staff are paid less and are less likely to hold senior positions than their white colleagues (University and College Union 2019). But when modified, the semiotic contents change, and we can see a shift in perception of the target audience between the person who originally wheat-pasted the poster and the person who has modified it. In this distressing case, the poster was modified through the addition of two white-coloured swastikas with what looks like correction fluid. The poster was not torn down or damaged beyond the additions made. We can imagine that in the eyes of the original wheat-paster, the university audience of staff and students needed to be reminded of the inequities and injustices of British higher education. In the eyes of the person who modified the poster, they may have seen members of the university as presumed progressive ideologues, with the intent of the racist modification being to demonstrate that such principles are not without challenge or dispute.

This sort of alteration was common during the Scottish Independence Referendum, with the defacement of signs being perhaps the ultimate act of resistance, giving voice to those who did not have signs of their own to counteract the signs with which they disagreed. This was not simply the uncouth, violent manifestation of simmering tensions resulting from the antithetic political beliefs of 'Yes' and 'No' supporters. Defacement often appeared calculated and seldom haphazard. Roadside billboards were graffitied to invert the message originally being presented. 'Yes' or 'No' stickers were scratched rather than removed, leaving physical evidence, as in the above Black Lives Matter example, for passers-by to witness the defeat of or challenge to the original message.

The coronavirus pandemic has seen many examples of street art that have been modified according to differing political stances and responses to lockdowns and vaccines. In one example documented by my wife on Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow, a street artist called The Rebel Bear created a mural of animals holding placards in support of the lockdown. A tiger's sign states 'BATS RULE' in reference to a possible origin point for the virus. In capital letters written in marker to the top-left of the mural, someone has commented on the mural stating 'Promotion of the Masonic governments [*sic*] fake virus and oppresion [*sic*] of the people is not rebelious [*sic*] it's treason!!!!' The reference to being rebellious seems to be a commentary on the artist's name, and this interpretation is bolstered by the modification of the artist's stencilled signature in which part of the 'The Rebel Bear' has been crossed out and modified to read 'The Rent Boy', what can be interpreted in this context as a homophobic insult. The mural itself has been left completely alone, and one can imagine that the annotator anticipated, in a mul-

Figure 9. Sticker 'battles' in Aberdeen, January 2022.

ti-faceted example of 'jay-talking' (Sage 2016, 855), that passers-by would first see the mural, and then read the threatening and mocking comment, either feeling upset and demeaned by the modification or empowered by its transgressive, conspiratorial, and anti-progressive content.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, anti-vaccination and related stickers have been modified by pro-science activists. Anti-lockdown stickers began appearing in late 2020, but as the lockdowns eased and vaccines were developed and distributed, these shifted to stickers promoting anti-vaccination and anti-mask messaging. By the autumn of 2021, there were large quantities of these stickers in Scotland, and more and more opportunity for those disagreeing to modify them. Figure 9 shows an example taken in Aberdeen in January 2022, in which three stickers on a lamppost were modified.

The top-most sticker, which originally consisted of a masked face with an anti-mask message, has been modified in a few ways. In the first instance it looks like someone unsuccessfully tried to remove the sticker. It looks like the further modifications were made after this attempt at removal, so we may suppose – perhaps mistakenly – that the person attempting to remove the sticker and the person who modified it are the same. Modification became the sole option left to usurp the semiotic contents of the stickers. The message on the mask was obscured with marker, so the face looked like it was simply wearing a black mask. The website of the referenced anti-vaccination group was crossed out, and the words 'STAY SAFE' were written on either side of the masked face. The next sticker, which originally had a comic showing a man in full PPE with gas mask telling someone in normal clothes that they are paranoid, was more successfully removed. On top of the underlay of this sticker was written, 'GET VAXXED WEAR A MASK'. Finally, the bottom sticker, which compared the acceptance of government pandemic policies to the acceptance of fascism in Germany before the Second World War, has been crossed out multiple times,

with the website of the group also crossed out. The modifier of these stickers has either neutralised or inverted their semiotic contents and co-opts the original design of one of the stickers to support their own pro-mask politics.[7]

In recent years, stickers and signs in support of the rights of transgender people have started to appear in Scotland's streets. Most are stickers with messages like 'TRANS WOMEN ARE WOMEN', 'TRANS RIGHTS MATTER', '#LGBWithTheT', or 'TRANS RIGHTS = HUMAN RIGHTS'. On a walk to the beach in Aberdeen in April 2021, I passed by a bus stop covered with at least ten such stickers. Not having a camera on me, I decided to retrace my steps the following day so as to be able to document the stickers. Rather than finding the stickers I had seen the day before, I found the stickers had been removed, with one single transphobic sticker in their place, stating 'TRANSWOMEN ARE MEN / AND MOST HAVE A PENIS'. In this case, because the original stickers had been removed, few passers-by could be expected to be aware of their original semiotic contents. Further, the single sticker was quite inconspicuous and its low visibility meant it was therefore unlikely to be seen by most passers-by. So unlike the BLM, referendum, and anti-vaccination examples, this seemed less a general message for passers-by and more a message directed specifically at the trans-rights activist(s) who placed the original stickers. In this way, the modification through removal and addition mirrors the dialogic graffiti battles that might be more commonly associated with tagging traditions (Meñez 1988).

In addition to such vernacular street battles, established corporations modify street art and/or co-opt its imagery for their own purposes. Over a period of three years of daily observations, I witnessed such an example on Leith Walk in Edinburgh where, through street art and campaigning, locals battled Drum Property, which purchased a building full of small, independent shops and attempted to replace it with student flats (Broughton Spurtle 2018). As the leases of shops were terminated and their windows boarded up, campaigners began using the boards as a medium for their messages and artwork. Much of the street art related to pride in the working-class history of the area and the onslaught of gentrification. The developer repeatedly arranged for the street art to be painted over, only for new messages, posters, and images to appear the following day. The developer changed strategy and hired a street muralist, who was possibly unaware of the wider context, to paint a large abstract mural where the messages had previously been. As the

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7   As a note on the wider context of such stickers, these appeared next to a sticker in support of Palestinian rights and another one on the left-hand side, illegible in the photo, making a claim to 'Reclaim the night!', which appeared after the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a London police officer.

origin of this mural was not immediately clear, and the work of the muralist was apparently respected, campaigners did not add messages or posters to the mural or try to modify it in any way.

This sort of artwashing, in which the motifs and skills of usually transgressive forms of expression are co-opted by the State or corporations to legitimise their own goals (Pritchard 2021, 182), can also be seen in other parts of Scotland. The city of Aberdeen's NuArt festival pays for street artists and muralists from around the world to create officially-sanctioned public art in locations in Aberdeen more generally associated with street art. This strategy allows a corporation or council to control the semiotic and aesthetic contents of publicly-visible art while displacing, and using the tools of, less 'desirable' vernacular expression (Schacter 2017, 414). As a final example of modification, and as an interesting inversion of the official consuming the vernacular, I recently noticed a vernacular response to an official hospital sign describing its no-smoking policy on hospital property. The sign says:

> We care about your fresh air. We are completely SMOKE FREE! This means the use of any tobacco product is **not permitted** anywhere on our sites[.]

A disgruntled smoker, possibly a patient, staff member, or even passer-by, has modified the sign with a marker to now say: 'We are completely SMOKE FREE! AND SMUG'. In addition to being a humorous annotation to the sign, it is a relevant example of someone intentionally not usurping or inverting semiotic contents, but rather adding an additional layer of meaning that begrudgingly accepts the hegemonic narrative being presented, while also sardonically undermining it.

Conclusion

Defining street art in a broad, inclusive manner allows us to work with examples of public material interventions that should be of interest to scholars from disparate disciplines. By looking at a number of interventions from over a decade of fieldwork in Scotland, and by investigating street art through the lenses of temporality, placement, location, modification, and defacement, this article contributes to a wider understanding of street art's dynamic contexts. These foci complement interests in the design, politics, and production of street art, all while similarly informing us of its creators and witnesses, and its complex interactions with and resistance to hegemonic bodies. Through an investigation of temporality, I consider the significance of timing in creating and seeing street art, while also considering how street art demarcates momentous periods. Further, by looking at certain forms of related interventions

diachronically, we witness how the flow of time affects the creation and interpretation of street art, all while shaping its relationship to social contexts. Contemplating how and where street art is placed and located gives insight into the importance of visibility and the malleability of semiotic contents in relation to creative intent and external interpretations. The location of street art can also inform us of wider community or societal contexts, while also hinting at potential durability. Street art, of course, does not begin and end with the creator, and modification and defacement are significant vernacular layers of street art that can often tell us as much as the original creation. Though this article intentionally considers examples from multiple locations and periods in order to highlight the relevance of each of these conceptual frameworks, an in-depth study of street art solely considering temporality, placement/location, or modification/defacement, should yield useful insights that will no doubt inform and contextualise street art, while also broadening its multi-disciplinary considerations. If my fieldwork-derived definition of street art as fixed, unofficial, creative, public-facing material interventions allows ethnologists and folklorists to *identify* street art, considering the conceptual and contextual entanglements of examples like those in this article offers us an opportunity to begin to *interpret* street art in all of its complexity.

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