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Beyond Visible Cities: Avant-Garde Actions and the Materialized Word in Twenty-First-Century New York City

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BEYOND VISIBLE CITIES:

AVANT-GARDE ACTIONS AND THE MATERIALIZED WORD

IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY NEW YORK CITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
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Title: Beyond Visible Cities: Avant-Garde Actions and the Materialized Word in Twenty-First-Century New York City

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Guy Debord, a founding member of the Situationist International, declared that we live in a world "mediated by images," a world where authentic experiences have receded into symbolic representations. Debord described his modern world as the "society of the spectacle," which he elaborates in a seminal text by the same name: *Society of the Spectacle*. In this world the public consumes, and is consumed by, media illusions. While Debord imagined this condition as fatal inevitability, twentieth and twenty-first century artists see this condition as an opportunity. In this study we will survey a section of language based artists who break, enter, and rupture the spectacle by using elements of the spectacle against itself; they turn media into a force through which to resist media.

These activists accomplish interferences from within the spectacle by operating within the same linguistic structures (media, context, and syntax) of the spectacle. These gestures employ an agitational tactic, also developed by Debord, the *détournement*. This interference is achieved by artists reappropriating, if not tangling, existing spatial (or contextual), semiotic, and aesthetic elements within a cultural sphere. This mode of interruption is a mode of propaganda "which reveals the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres" (Knabb 51) by integrating past and the present artistic productions. We will focus on specific cases when artists use the *détournement* as a cultural weapon to combat and articulate what Debord describes as "a real class struggle." The power of the *détournement* is in how it is "a real means of proletarian

artistic education, the first step toward a literary communism" (Knabb 18). Artists are educating the proletariat by not only merging their works with the spectacle, but merging their works with everyday life, especially language.

This study investigates specific occasions of *détourned* language, which I consider the "materialized word" or "materialized language". The materialized word is a conscious construction that brings together processes of visual manipulation and language function that consciously interrupt the viewer's processes of signification. Materialized words are de-spectacularized, decommodified texts that stall the spectacle to meet the reader with a moment of provocation.

We will survey examples of materialized language that have the power to potentially transform from decommodified texts and into a force that is capable of initiating a change within the viewer, or within the way they interact with the space in which the materialized word appears. I approach this argument from the perspective of critical vanguard studies, arguing that this force comes from within the spectacle instead of from social margins, as early avant-garde scholars once suggested.

The concept of the force, or forcework, that I focus on in this study also comes from the field of what Mike Sell has called "critical vanguard studies"; specifically, Krzysztof Ziarek's *The Force of Art.* Ziarek defines forcework as "art's nonaesthetic dimension, a field that operates beyond the aesthetic features of the social and subjective inscriptions of artistic objects" (34). This function of art does not depend on aesthetic reception (shock), but how the art works to create a transformative rupture, ultimately redirecting the viewer. With this approach, I illuminate how language-based art has the ability to cause the ideological interruption of social, political, economic, and cultural relations within urban spaces.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On September 7, 2014, I completed the Toughman Triathlon in Croton on the Hudson, NY. This race is a half-ironman distance race, which is 70.3 miles in total, and yes, I am bragging. Everything about this race is challenging. Balancing 14 hours of training is hard. The whole routine of being in bed at 9:30pm and waking up at 4:30am is hard. Running a 40-mile week, while working a 40-hour week, is harder still. Then, after 16 weeks of feeling constantly fatigued, so simultaneously tired and hungry that occasionally I would cry when I needed to choose between the two, there is the race: a 1.2 mile swim, a 56 mile bike ride, and a 13.1 mile run…

When people watch triathlons, or any other type of long, boring endurance sport, they assume that it's a one-person event because everyone is scored as an individual. Maybe if spectators stick around for the end of the race they will catch the "big finish" and a glimpse into the athlete's support structure. They may see an athlete stumbling into someone's outstretched arms. They may catch the embrace. The tears. The smiles. The kisses. What they don't see is how he has been waiting for her to cross that finish line for 8 hours that day. They also don't know how he has been alongside her the entire way, right there with her, for almost an entire year before that.

Contrary to how endurance sports may seem, they are not one-person events. Long course triathlon races present an equal challenge to the athlete as to the loved ones, who find they also have been pulled into this journey. These people who drive you to physical therapy two nights each week when your Achilles tendon tears, or who go to yoga with you when you can finally walk again. These are the people who remind you that impossible things are possible. In those moments when you begin to doubt yourself, they are the ones who still believe.

When I think of the teamwork that goes into these endurance sports, especially the teamwork that has gone into my own training, I reflect back on Barack Obama's remarks during the interfaith service in Boston after the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, 2013:

> And that's what you've taught us, Boston. That's what you've reminded us -- to push on. To persevere. To not grow weary. To not get faint. Even when it hurts. Even when our heart aches, we summon the strength that maybe we didn't even know we had, and we carry on. We finish the race. We finish the race, and we do that because of who we are, and we do that because we know that somewhere around the bend, a stranger has a cup of water. Around the bend, somebody's there to boost our spirits. On that toughest mile, just when we think that we've hit a wall, someone will be there to cheer us on and pick us up if we fall. We know that.

I know President Obama was talking about more than marathons at that moment, which is why the quote is so powerful. I know he is making a statement about how we will persevere as a country, how we will overcome evil. I like the way he emphasizes how this type of courageous perseverance is born from togetherness. We can persevere only if we carry on, strive, build, and work a together. I know that. We know that.

There are great metaphors for life in running: the journey, enduring suffering, dedication to purpose, and finishing the damn race. While I was working on this project, my dissertation, I found a great parallel between these two worlds, especially during those stretches of research and writing that made me feel faint, and weary, and lonely in ways I never knew before. Yet, even though I wrote all of these pages by myself, I knew that there were people alongside of me that I could count on to boost my spirits. I really couldn't have accomplished this project without any

of these people cheering me on and picking me up when I fell. I know that. And out of all the pages in this dissertation, that is why these few are the most important to me. I want to take some time and thank you for helping me finish the race.

Above all, I want to thank Mike Sell. Mike is my dissertation director and contractually obligated to respond to emails with outrageous subjects, such as "Higher Education Makes My Soul Hurt" and "My Dissertation is Ending, but Why am I Feeling Blue?" He was with me from the beginning of this journey, when my brain first resonated with this topic during our independent study on avant-gardes, and he stayed with me until the end of my dissertation. I want to thank Mike for a bit of advice he gave me a few years ago when he told me to understand life as a dynamic, not a balance. Balances are static, and because they are so rigid, balances will inevitably topple over. Mike always encouraged me to reconsider life as a dynamic, to understand a busy schedule as a series of moving parts, always in flux, and always moving forward. Priorities will become reprioritized constantly. There will be times when you can write, times when you should run, and other times when you should do neither. He taught me that if I wanted to be successful, I needed to be mentally agile, which is something I practice always.

I also want to thank my committee members, Kenneth Sherwood and Tom Slater, for reading my dissertation and working with me along the way. A special thanks, in advance, to Ken for teaching me to sail one day.

I want to thank Jennifer Lebowitz, from St. John's University, and Andrea Harms, from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, for all of their emotional and mental support, as well as their shared sufferings as we were all going through the process of writing a dissertation together. I

are still irritated with Orton and Pollok's approach to the avant-garde when they describe this concept as "everything and nothing," or an open and closed system because you occasionally remind me of how this annoys you. Again, to clarify, this doesn't mean that avant-garde can be a sandwich, regardless of your insistence on the fact. The avant-garde is not a sandwich. That is just ridiculous. However, (ask Allison Knowles) a sandwich can perform in an avant-garde fashion. Maybe avant-gardes can be sandwiches, but only sometimes and they are not inherently avant-gardes, but we can view sandwiches *as* avant-gardes… it's complicated. I'll get started on my second dissertation to explain this at greater length. Also, thank you for talking me out of going to graduate school for literature, which you did almost daily. Well, Timmy, it's too late! I'm done! The joke is on you!

I should thank my two sisters, Gianna and Monica, but mostly because my mom said I have to. Honestly, I don't know if they had much to do with completing this project. In reality, both of my sisters think that English is a giant waste of time, as one sister is a business major and the other a neuropsychologist. Basically, they just use me as a spell checker or they ask me stupid questions about Shakespeare because they think that everyone who studies English loves Shakespeare… Which brings me to a sincere "thanks" that I want to extend to Monica Ficalora for accompanying me to the Mid Atlantic America Popular Culture Conference because she "read *Romeo and Juliet* a few times and wanted to know why people talked like idiots back then." Then again, I would like to recall this "thanks" as I pause to acknowledge that Monica started a small, but outrageous argument among audience members as she defended a point she was making about oxygen levels and brain activity in relation to elevation…. which seriously had nothing to do with the panel about "outsider art and avant-garde activity." Also, on a side note, I want to reinforce one final time: Avant-Garde is not a person.

I would also like to thank my parents. Dad, thank you for all of your endless, unrelenting suggestions for dissertation topics. You're right; I should have written my dissertation on pirates. Possible titles include:

i.   "Danger on the High Cs: Victorian Pirate Songs."

ii.   Avant-Garrrrrrrrrrrde: Pirates and Modernist Visions.

iii.   "Does Mom Know You Have a Sword Collection in the Garage Because The Neighbors Called When They Saw You Chopping Fruit in the Street like a Fruit Ninja and You Scared a Few Kids Coming off the School Bus"

Mom, thank you for smoking so I never had to. Also, thank you for your tough love and advice like: "stop complaining and just finish your goddamn paper." In all sincerity, I want to thank you for how you reacted when I told you I finished my entire dissertation, which was a simple, "that's good." When I said: "that's it? That's all I get?" You said this: "That's what you do. You do hard things." I can do hard things. Thank you for believing in me.

And to Sean, who I see in almost all these pages and all future pages yet to be written…

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INTRODUCTION

WALKING IN THE CITY

He said to meet him at a place called The Smith, and while it sounded like some Lower

East Side hipster dive, it didn't seem like too bad of a place and he didn't seem like too bad of a

guy. I needed an excuse to get out for a bit. I was spending almost every free minute I had on

writing and when I wasn't working on that, I spent my days working as a secretary, my nights as

a waitress, and my weekends as a college English professor. I don't remember when I found

time to sleep, but I think it happened in those brief moments between when the caffeine coursing

through my veins switched off and the coffee pot clicked on again in the morning. The few

nights that I remember sleeping, like really sleeping, were nights when I sank into nightmares

about drowning- the screaming, panicked kind that made me thankful to live alone whenever I

found myself gasping for air my dark apartment.

I can't remember how I let myself get so tightly wound, but I remember making the

decision not to continue that way much longer for fear that I would come completely undone. I

needed to get away from writing for a bit and a nice dinner is always a good excuse (I eat almost

every day, anyway). Even if the company was unfamiliar, I was certain that I would find some

food I would recognize on the menu. So, I said I would meet him after work on Monday, which

seemed like a very good way to start the week and an even better way to start the spring; it was

finally turning spring after all.

I had been looking forward to the change in the seasons, like every New Yorker does

every year, watching out the window for any sign: a bud, a bird, a certain slant of light that

bounds down the broad avenues with uncoiling yellow forsythia. The winter was harsh this year,

harsher than usual, but without the hurricanes eating at the shorelines. This year, instead, we had

a winter that stalked us like a pack of snarling dogs, growling around the city with bared teeth, gnawing our ankles to the bone while we waited for trains on elevated platforms.

I changed out of my high heels and slipped on a pair of flats after work that Monday. I wasn't about to wear heels because I wasn't about to take a taxi that evening. I wanted to walk downtown to meet him. To walk in New York during the beginning of spring is to really feel the energy of the city. This is the time of year when the rebirth of the seasons and the perpetual renewal of New York align with a force. The flowers open one by one. The restaurants open one by one, peeling back glass facades to make way for sidewalk seating under tall heat laps that burn off the last bit of chill in the air. The city comes back to life in the spring, loud with the voices of people who tucked themselves away all winter, hibernating in small apartments. The warm air draws us all outside again: The African umbrella sellers pop up again on 8th avenue; the Spanish fruit mongers park their fruit carts on the corners; the students at the Fashion Institute of Technology, glad to be rid of their layers, seem practically naked as they walk with fast, bare legs down 7th Avenue.

For the first time in months I could finally take my time walking. There was no wind hurrying me along, pushing my head down and freeing my hands in my pockets. I found myself lost in the crowds: the yuppies rollerblading through Chelsea; the cool kids from NYU strolling through Union Square with songs bumping in their ear buds, cigarettes burning between their fingertips; the Cooper Union stoners, wearing backpacks, and spinning the cube at the intersection of Astor Place and 8th Ave.

He said that when I got to the cube on 8th, I would be close to the restaurant. I unfolded the post-it note I had been carrying in my hand. I reread the address I wrote down before I left the office. The Smith was on 9th Street and 3rd Avenue. It was just below 14th Street, a dividing

line for New York. While the city north of 14th Street is an organized grid, with logical sequence

and obvious gathering points, the city below is a tangle of haphazard angles that unfold like a

riddle. Within a matter of a block, I was set adrift from the geometry north of this divide, lost in

the intersecting intersections that routed me through a district of micro theaters, so small they

look like storefronts.

I was a half hour late when I finally found the Smith. He was waiting out front, wearing

a blue canvas shirt and neat slacks, just like he said. We didn't know each other yet, but we

talked until the restaurant closed for the night, until the candles burnt low, until the waitress put

her hand on his shoulder, leaned in, and said: "it's time."

So we left, headed to the East Village, not with any direction in mind, rambling and

following the rambling streets. He said he was from Brooklyn, born and raised. He went to high

school in Manhattan, just a few blocks up on 22nd Street. Still, he didn't really know the whole

area through and through. I remember asking him if he had ever read Thomas Woolf. He said

"no," but I went on to quote from a short story: "Dere's no guy livin' dat knows Brooklyn t'roo

an' t'roo, because it'd take a guy a lifetime just to find his way aroun' duh goddam town." I don't

think anyone can really know any part of the city. It is always moving, slipping, sliding just out

of the focus of memory, forbidding itself from being truly known, or possessed.

So we wandered through parks, drifted through stores, and drank cheap wine at an

expensive restaurant with sidewalk seating next to a jazz club with standing room only. The

people we passed, anonymous at first, would eventually become critical characters in our story as

we thought back to this night months later: the old woman in the floppy hat riding her bicycle

down 10th street, the drunken designer who gave us one of the pens he developed for Tiffany, the

tourists on the sight-seeing bus who were being interrogated by the NYPD, the transgender

prostitutes cruising Chelsea Pier. They all suddenly belonged to us as much as they all belonged

to the city. Sometimes we think about how it could have been different if we chose another train,

a different taxi, turned left, or went to the pier before dark. It would have been our story still, but

it could have been so different, everything would have been so different.

He said that walking in the city is like inhabiting a Choose Your Own Adventure Story,

he told me this when we have to make a critical decision between a left and a right, or a zig and a

zag. Each street is a choice, presenting itself like a chapter that may or may not become part of

your narrative. Each person in the city is at once a character and an author responsible for

making an adventure, or at the very least, a story. To maintain this perspective, to see the city as

a story, is a choice, too.

I think of Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City," a chapter from *The Practice of*

Everyday Life, where he writes that the perspective a person maintains within the city, to see the

city, allows them to "construct the function that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city

readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text" (92). He presents the city

as an urban text and the wanderer as writer. People in the city put in motion the meaning of this

text within. They determine what is to become   something, or nothing, or almost nothing, or

spaces of great significance that "orient a walker's steps."

However, to impose personal meaning within a city, to rewrite it, one must first undo the

structure of the city by resisting how it presents itself to be read. Cities are organized in neat

grids that create an orderly, easily navigable working design to help (or force) people to find

their way. Even though New York City is a tangled clutter of streets on the south end of the

island, there exists a nexus of precise organization between 14th Street and Washington Heights.

The difference between the north and south was how the bottom of Manhattan developed

organically, while the north of the island was planned even while it was still uninhabited. The Commissioners Plan of 1811 laid twelve north/south avenues and 155 east/west streets over the 11,000-acre space. The result was an efficient, legible city.

Ric Burns' documentary, *New York: A Documentary Film*, reviews the grid in the first episode of the seven part series, which I think makes a powerful statement about the importance of urban planning. According to Burns, "The grid envisioned a remarkably uniform and democratic city, and with its hundreds of streets running down to the rivers, a relentlessly commercial one" (Burns). The grid made the city efficient for non-English speakers arriving into New York harbor by the ship full. As Burns states above, New York was, and still is, "relentlessly commercial." The main reason why the streets were numbered was to help immigrants find their way to work and shopping. More than anything, New York's grid is in place to facilitate business. The architecture of New York pushes and pulls people to specific points within the city.

He grabbed my hand to help me over a pothole. We were heading away from the draw of the grid uptown, the major train stations, the stores, the crowds, the burning lights of Times Square. We followed a trail we didn't recognize into a park that became immediately familiar. We walked a winding path along the water that perpetually smells like low tide and home. The paths in Riverside Park were designed to bend and curve, to be indirect and serpentine. I understand why planners make these choices, which is to break the monotony of the grid that guides people directly from one point and quickly to another point in the city. New York City parks diverge from the grid. For example, when Ric Burns describes Fredrick Law Olmstead's design for Central Park, he mentions how the paths are "skewed away from the city's ridged street plan." Visitors can enter the park, leaving the sights, sounds, and grid of the city behind.

We tried to get lost in the lattice of Riverside's running trails, but we were only successful in becoming briefly disoriented, which lasted for a thrilling few minutes before we knew exactly where we were again. Even if the city forbids itself from being known, even if it seems to be one step ahead of memory, and the signs change, and bakeries give way to high end health food grocers, and hardware stores concede to boozy beauty bars, the logical ebb and flow of the city's design prevents pedestrians becoming unanchored in the urban environment. The force is something that is deeper than the superficial visual layer.

When I think back to that night, the wine, the walking, and the conversation, I think of the Situationist *dérive*, the art of separating one's self from the gravity of the city grid to drift through spaces based on desire. According to Guy Debord:

> Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a derive, one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. (62)

A *dérive* taps into possibility, but relies on the possibilities created by personal and intrapersonal connections to, and within, a city.

While this Situationst thesis seems to be presented as a playful strategy for exploring a metropolitan city, I see the psychology of psychogeography, and the *dérive* associated with this perspective, as essential tools of avant-gardes. Rather, I understand these momentary breaks in the spectacular movement, a persons' conscious decision to resist movement in the city, as manifestation of an avant-garde imperative.

In this dissertation, I will argue that the notion of an avant-garde exists beyond aesthetics and within the forcework that the particular gesture of avant-gardes puts in motion, which we can observe and theorize in the redirection of the audience's perceptions, desires, and imaginations. We will survey aspects of this intervention as initiated by artists who break, enter, and transform the spectacle in order to physically redirect the audience, leading them, ultimately, to a new way of seeing the city and a new way of moving in it.

This concept of the spectacle is derived from Guy Debord, a founding member of the Situationist International (SI), who observed that his modern world was "mediated by images." Debord describes a world where authentic experiences receded into symbolic representations. For Debord the modern, or industrialized West, is a "society of the spectacle," which he elaborates in a seminal text by the same name: *Society of the Spectacle*. In this world, the public consumes, and is consumed by, media illusions. While Debord imagined this condition as fatal inevitability, twentieth and twenty-first century reimagine this condition as an opportunity.

In this project I will present examples of contemporary artists breaking, entering, and rupturing the spectacle by using elements of the spectacle against itself. However, Debord and the Situationist International were the first group to target the spectacle as such. In 1966, the Situationists wrote a tract that began with the following statement: "It is pretty safe to say that the student is the most universally despised creature in France, apart from the policeman and the priest." This is the opening line to "On the Poverty of Student Life," a text that the Situationists published in collaboration with students at the University of Strasbourg. "On the Poverty of Student Life" takes aim at the university student, claiming that they willingly allow their lives to be controlled by the academy. They not only accept a bohemian life of misery, but they

collectively expect that this is part of the overall university experience. The poverty in which a student lives, which they have come to accept as part of their education, is in reality, only "the most gross expression of the colonization of all domains of social practice." The students' willingness to accept these material conditions and ideological practices "masks the poverty and servitude of everyone." Therefore, by becoming complacent to this system, they affirm that a student must live a life of monastic cultural servitude, bound to their studies by economic hardship.

The Situationists argued that if the students accept this fate, their consent allows similar abuses into other social domains, which is why the Situationists hold the students in contempt: "He is contemptible not only for his actual poverty, but also for his complacency regarding every kind of poverty, his unhealthy propensity to wallow in his own alienation" (Debord 408). The Situationists and the student sympathizers admonished the university student for their complacency within this system. Through their subservience to the university system the students were escaping the reality of an alienating, isolating, oppressive educational system. The Situationists demanded action from this group and planned to wake up the students by distributing 10,000 copies of "On the Poverty of Student Life" during the opening day of the university in November of 1966.

Two years later, René Riesel and Daniel Cohn-Bendit emerged as leaders of the Enragés, a small group of student agitators at the University of Nanterre. The Enragés declared themselves at war with university authorities. Also, they were sympathetic to the Situationists' cause. In a similarly radical gesture Enragés distributed copies of "On the Poverty of Student Life" at the university of Nanterre. Shortly after this incident, René Riesel and Daniel Cohn-Bendit were expelled and sent to trial.

On May 6, 1968, the day of René Riesel and Daniel Cohn-Bendit's trial, 20,000 students marched on Paris in protest. Their demonstration was met with an army of police attempting to deter their actions with batons, tear gas, and force. Hundreds of students were arrested. Four days later another related riot broke out resulting in more arrested and more brutalized protesters. One week later, on May 13, 1968, over a million people marched in Paris to show their support.

The revolution was spreading beyond the students, beyond the walls of the Sorbonne, and began to affect all of Paris: "From May 13-17, the movement irresistibly advanced to the point of becoming a general revolutionary crisis, with the 16th probably being the crucial day, the day the factories began to declare themselves for a wildcat strike" (Knabb 288). Factory workers collectively shut down 50 factories, grinding production to a halt. As the revolution spread, it was accompanied by an occupation movement during which workers occupied the buildings. When the Sorbonne reopened, it became occupied the by student protesters and the Situationists. The Situationists began collaborating with the students, printing slogans, posters, tracts, and spraying graffiti on city walls. Ken Knabb catalogues the graffiti slogans in his work, Situationist International Anthology: "Some were written by the Situationists or the Enragés, or are quotes from SI writings, but many of the others clearly reflect a more or less Situationist spirit" (Knabb 445). Ken Kanbb mentions the graffiti could have come from the SI. However, the graffiti, like the other writings, while diffused and authorless, was in the spirit of the Situationists. Even though it may not have come directly from Debord himself, the radical gesture had his fingerprints.

Even though the SI didn't exactly take credit for the revolutions, they were certainly responsible for whipping up Paris with their revolutionary ideas. They were able to ignite tense social situations by fanning the flames with their printed pages. The SI distributed incendiary

tracts, used graffiti on city walls, and deformed existing printed material in scandalous *détournement*. The revolutions in May 1968 remind me of an Allen Ginsberg quote: "When the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake" (324). The Situationists changed the mode of rhetoric in the city and shook the walls of Paris with an uprising that began from within.

The revolutions of 1968 demonstrate how an avant-garde can effect change from within. To read this uprising in the most literal sense, the students actually barricaded themselves inside the Sorbonne with the intentions of affecting a change. Through occupying the central space of an institution, the students were also symbolically invading the nucleus of an ideology (physically) as a way to change that ideological structure. This moment actively (literally) demonstrates how avant-gardes can invade institutional structures to intervene with the spectacle and reveal a moment of reality, in this case exposing the hardship of student life.

In this dissertation I argue that such a force comes from within the spectacle, which is a position that refuses existing beliefs that avant-gardes exist and emerge from aesthetic and social margins. To demonstrate this point, "Beyond Visible Cities" investigates instances of twentieth and twenty-first-century activist interventions in language, focusing on a group of writers that derive a particular force from the tensions within of visual and verbal intersections in occasions of public language. We will view these works as an avant-garde because of how they initiating a challenge to the spectacle from within. We will also approach these case studies from the perspective of avant-gardes because of how these language interruptions are engaging a particular forcework, which I argue comes from their language interventions.

Like the *détournements* discussed earlier, the contemporary works covered in this dissertation are also language-based compositions that manipulate the language function in a way that consciously interrupts the viewer's processes of signification. These artists, like the

Situationists, operate in the linguistic and visual vocabulary of the spectacle. They, too, use these linguistic maneuvers to break the spectacle by traveling these messages along the same media channels. However, this mode of language interruption is different than détournements because of the type of work done by these interventions, the intentions of these designs, a higher degree of consciousness of medium and technology, and the power to kinetically engage a city. For these reasons, I will differentiate between visual language (typography), détournements (political visual verbal collisions), and the contemporary works in this study that enact a type of force. I will refer to the contemporary cases as a special case of "materialized words" or "materialized language," a term I develop based on my reading of Johanna Drucker's The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923.

Drucker investigates the visual properties of typography by approaching type designs based on Derridian deconstruction, Saussurian semiotics, and Jakobson's formalism. From this formalist and structural position, she uncovers a convergence of this visual manipulation and language function used to interrupt, hijack, or enrich, processes of signification. We encounter basic forms of such visible words daily, but let me be clear in pointing out that all language is not necessarily "visual language" simply because it appears in print. Written language is inherently visual as it is intended to be read. What separates "visual language" from a printed text is the conscious design that goes into constructing visual language. The "visible word" is a form of language that has a verbal component enriched by the visual properties of the text. We will refer to this type of language as, simply, "visual language," a visual verbal intersection of language that delivers a statement verbally (words), visually (pictures), with a meaning produced from the entanglement of both properties.

For example, let's consider the stop sign. This might have been the first time you stopped to consider the stop sign, but it really is nexus of visual and verbal elements that cooperate to communicate something critical to drivers! The language printed on the sign, "STOP," communicates that a driver must cease going forward, take a minute, and make sure the intersection is clear before proceeding. The style of the lettering, Highway Gothic, is a sans-serif typeface. It's plain. It's white. There isn't much flair. The word, "stop," does not call attention to itself, which is a conscious part of the design that allows the word to function simply as a command without any pizazz. The message is embedded in the sign structure, both visually (print) and symbolically (design). If the driver is not a native speaker, they may be able to intuit the purpose of the sign based on the shouting red color, which is the same red used to signal "stop" in traffic lights. The meaning is derived from a message communicated with equal parts verbal and visual design. Since there is no deeper cultural meaning needed to understand this signifier, and the sign does not call attention to itself as a challenge to ideological structures, the stop sign presents us with an instance of the most basic type of visual language.

However, there are even greater possibilities for visual language when these visual verbal intersections are used to challenge ideological structures and kinetically engage with the flows of capitalism in actual space. Drucker's study focuses on the flamboyant text produced in the early 20th-century avant-garde movements that challenged the sound, shape, and language of that moment. Drucker explains how these texts produced in these movements like F.T. Marinetti's "Zang Tumb Tumb" created in the spirit of Italian Futurism also reflected aspects of the political, technological, and social climate surrounding their publication. Drucker explains that it isn't necessarily the funky font and design that does the heavy lifting in the meaning-making processes. There are other subtextual layers of history, modes of production, and physical

context that converge to inscribe meaning within specific instances visual words, like those of Marinetti. Drucker states: "I believe that the issue of visual materiality pertains in the case of all written forms of language and that acknowledging this is central to placing visual language within the historical context of its production" (3). Here we see the concept of materiality first appear. I see this as a move away from the visible word and towards a holistic understanding of language that accounts for context. To understand the visual materiality of a visible word, one must acknowledge the historical context and the physical location inscribed in the visual/verbal meaning.

Let us continue our drive. We have come to another crossroads and another stop sign. This stop sign is different from the one we first encountered. It looks the same (red), but someone has stuck a "WAR" sticker under the word "STOP." The sign, functioning as a mode of civil communication, is now sending a different message: "STOP WAR." Since we're driving down a city street in the United States, in 2014, we know immediately to what war the sign is referring. Suddenly the meaning of the sign swerves from a utilitarian announcement to a political device. We're confronted with a command: STOP WAR. The materiality of the word is informed by the historical context, the public space, and the détournement to the governmental command that the gesture is actively diverting. This material word presents a personal position that objects the political positions of the institution.

Unfortunately, at this juncture, we can't stop war, so we roll onward to our destination. As we drive away, we may consider the linguistic swerve for a moment, maybe the thought of some young kid printing out stickers and slapping them on any stop sign he passes, but eventually the sticker will fade into the landscape.

We merge onto the highway. Traffic is at a crawl. There are public safety signs up ahead, so we assume it might be roadwork. Then, as we get closer, we see a LED road sign with this message: ZOMBIES AHEAD. I argue that at this point the language on the sign becomes a thing; it becomes "material." This process of materialization happens when we explore the visual language as a text object, a physical construction that changes the way we interact with space in which it appears. The way the viewer discerns meaning in these occasions is derived from a tension among the material location, the history, and the subjectivity of the word that is manifested by the work. These gestures are not simply détourning an ideological structure or psychogeographical location, but physically detouring!

The meaning derived from the text is also created by the experience of interacting with the text within the space. Given the physical nature of these linguistic forms, I argue that materialized language has the potential to evoke a physical or kinaesthetic response in audiences. I will present cases when activist artists materialize language as a way to conjure a critical consciousness by creating situations when, and where, the audience interacts with the text object.

Additionally, the redirection of the viewer through the space is intended to affects a critical consciousness in an urban environment. According to Liz Kotz, materialized language "disassemble(s) and disable(s) the larger systems of publicity and propaganda that are used in words and images" (2). In the case of the zombie road signs, which will be discussed at length later, the signage system is disabled as the public safety displays are no longer displaying information relating to public safety (spoiler: there were no zombies). Materialized words physically represent ideologies by giving ideological structures a physical shape that can be physically experienced, if not simply visually accessible to viewers.

I argue that the materialized word is the manifestation, or the bringing to life, of an ideological structure in a way that intends to evoke a physical or kinaesthetic response in audiences. This dissertation investigates how language not only becomes "materialized," but the ways in which materialized words have the potential to change how people see, feel, imagine, and move through a city, both the public city of streets and neighborhoods, as well as the private city of their kitchens and bedrooms. I illustrate this premise with works from graffiti writers of 1970s New York City, Barbara Kruger's kitschy crap, Shepherd Fairey's cool Obama poster, Jenny Holzer's disturbing xenon displays, the Graffiti Research Lab's light criticism, and Banksy's 2013 residency in New York. I have assembled this group for their use of publicly displayed language-based compositions, which they use to criticize the society of the spectacle as well as the forces of capital and social control in cities. We will explore occurrences of materialized language that cover entire trains, billboards, buildings, and other city spaces with the intention of engaging the viewer, kinetically, and provoking a critical consciousness about the space in which they appear.

Materialized language is language of confrontation. It reaches out to the view and confronts them directly, usually by involving them in the experience, or drawing an audience into the meaning making process. Unlike visual language and the détournement, the materialized word exerts a force upon its reader. My critical approach channels Krzysztof Ziarek's concept of "forcework," a term he elaborates in *The Force of Art* and *The History of Experience.* Ziarek claims that the avant-garde intends to do work, which he calls a force, and this function takes place beyond its aesthetic object. Therefore, motion becomes an integral part of the overall work.

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I consider this motion as "avant-garde performativity," which is different than agitation and different than propaganda because the force physically moves the audience through a clear political message or engages them by a somatic, psychogeographical response. My understanding of performativity also borrows from Mike Sell's book *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*, where he defines performance as "a method that enabled radicals to devise actions that could address simultaneously the structures of language, economics, politics, social institutions, culture history, and the body" (16). Through actions, avant-garde performers could develop works that reached a wider audience and engaged a larger scope of themes while challenging the very institutions that provided the discourse and discipline of the avant-garde. However, what is more important is how the avant-garde performance, or at least the concept of performativity, inverted the structure of performance by "removing the theater" (16) and putting the responsibility to act on the audience to "carry out the action" (16). This mode of performance empowers "the spectator as an active maker of the art event and by calling into question the ability of any one spectator to create sensible, coherent accounts of it" (17). The spectator, the audience, becomes both active and accountable for creating the art. I will extend this, and in the context of the radical, suggest that the spectator then becomes responsible for change, which is how the materialized word can do work from within, and despite, the spectacle.

Picking up on this position in reference to aesthetic objects, I argue that the avant-garde is not a static aesthetic, but a force that extends beyond the art object to redirect the audience. This is clearly illustrated in Banksy's New York residency in the fall of 2013, "Better Out Than In," an exhibit that was displayed throughout the city space instead of in a gallery setting. This exhibition recasts the city as an interactive place of play, where the trek is part of the pleasure. In effect, the contextual spaces become an integral part of the work. In this crude sense, we can

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see how the viewer is set adrift from an expected art experience and sent on a dérive, an unplanned journey through an urban landscape. Therefore, we need to include the viewing experience, action and reaction, as a part of the overall art; this is especially true as we consider the avant-garde as a force. This kinetic component is an integral part to the avant-garde, but it has gone overlooked because critics have fixated on the aesthetic object.

Additionally, the way I'm reconsidering the avant-garde also accounts for the cognitive processes and materialistic encounters that enable a viewer to interpret language and draw meaning from from visual-verbal events. The experience of reading and understanding language changes when the viewer encounters language-based works, such as Graffiti Research Lab's collaboration with the Anti-Advertising Agency. In this series of LED Light Critics, artists place a template over LED video displays that read: "NYC's True Graffiti Problem." The juxtaposition suggests that advertising, not graffiti, is the real problem. The statement, although simple, asks us to redefine the way we know graffiti. The meaning is derived through semiotic collisions, visually colliding graffiti with advertising, both linguistically and through material placement. Meaning is also generated through erasure, the act of laying the message over an existing message to satirize that original statement. The play between erasure and trace structure, leaving behind a trace of the original composition so that it is woven in the new composition to inform the new composition, all lends to the creation of meaning, language, and semiotics. These cognitive acrobatics are all necessary in the type of reading process demanded by these works. Ultimately, the work will interrupt the way that the viewer moves through the city space. The GRL's work invites viewers to pause and reconsider the function of advertisements in the city. I consider this stalling action as an aspect of art functioning as forcework, which in turn diverts the viewer's course of motion in a space.

In this dissertation, I advance Ziarek's position, arguing that we need to think of art as a happening (or event). Ziarek deconstructs the word "artwork," emphasizing "work" to demonstrate art's capacity for action (the capability to DO work). The term, as a compound noun, "brings the notions of force and work together to focus attention on the act or the event of redisposing forces, which constitutes the 'critical' dimension of modern art" (Ziarek 34). The critical function of art is in the event it initiates, and, subsequently, the event's ability to rearrange something else. According to Ziarek, "Forcework might also be called art's nonaesthetic dimension, a field that operates beyond the aesthetic features of the social and subjective inscriptions of artistic objects" (34). This function of art does not rely on aesthetic evaluation, but draws on how the art works to create a transformative rupture. Art has the ability to cause the ideological interruption of social, political, economic, and cultural relations. This point is especially true for the graffiti culture in New York City during the late1970s into the 1980s. These writers who developed language-based art that interrupted sociopolitical dimensions of the city in which they lived and worked.

Art has a distinct potential to radically transform the power structures within a space by destabilizing the existing structures of power, which Ziarek claims are derived from intervening in oppositional binaries: "subject/object, form/content, internal/external" (22). As the work engages culturally accepted truths, it illuminates, provokes, and questions the social forces always already at work in a society. Through breaking the binaries, the work interrupts "those relations and their socially produced and reinforced momentum" (22). The forcework created around the art event is then able to redirect this momentum into a form of action, which becomes apparent within the viewer's reaction.

The artists in this study are a group selected because of how they inspire a similar transformation. New York's graffiti writers from the 1980s illustrate this theory with flamboyant style. By the mid-1980s, the volume of their public writings translated into a forcework of fear that shook New York's community of rail commuters to the point where New Yorkers resisted traveling by the subway. Trains were marred with hand tags inside the cars and their exteriors covered with brilliant pieces. The writers' acts challenged the art/crime divide, for example, because, while their works were criminal, there was something psychologically uplifting about the brilliant pops of color that sailed on the city's elevated platforms, especially during a time of civil unrest, arson, crime, and economic devastation. Graffiti was born from these tough times, yet it spoke up as a voice that resisted hardship. Graffiti highlighted a group of young people who inherited a city in crisis. Through setting their messages in motion, the writers were able to cause a commotion in those who saw their works, which in turn effected a larger social change that I will discuss in chapter one.

The main point I need to emphasize here is that graffiti writers were producing not just self-promoting tags, but culturally meaningful forcework. As Ziarek deconstructs the accepted binary of art and object, he suggests that the art is not necessarily tethered to the actual artifact. Through deconstructing the concept of an artwork into the art object and the work it performs, Ziarek's philosophy conceives art as a function, one that functions beyond aesthetics and beyond its object.

Through taking this position, Ziarek channels Heidegger's critique of aesthetics, rather "a post-aesthetic approach to the work of art," which Heidegger describes in his essay "Art and Objecthood." Heidegger understands art as an event: "a temporal event of unconcealment, which radically departs from the dominant conceptions of modernist art: art for art's sake,

formalism, art as a sector of culture, artwork as commodity" (Ziarek 4). For Heidegger, art is an event. This consideration of art moves away from an aesthetic object and into an experience. The next step Heidegger takes is to point out that the event is a "temporal event of unconcealment," meaning that this event is not an enduring thing, but a momentary experience that has the potential to reveal something that was formerly hidden. A viewer's experience with art will reveal something new, something despectacularized and real, but only briefly. This experience is not a permanent thing and since it is not locked into the art's form, it is possible that it may not be possible to recreate the experience.

I find this idea of a "temporal event" to be most useful in this study for two reasons. Firstly, this position removes the falsehood of "timelessness" from aesthetics, which allows the piece to be considered in a historical, material, transient, even personal context. The "temporal event" is not only a moment, but an experience that exists at a specific space and time. While some may try to recreate this event, or the forcework, they may find it is impossible to do so.

Secondly, the concept of an "unconcealment" is not an enduring moment, but rather a temporary condition, like a performance. This position is most useful when looking at the works in this study because of their ephemeral qualities. The most recent example of this is described in the *New York Times* multimedia piece, "Night Falls, and 5Pointz, a Graffiti Mecca, Is Whited Out in Queens." Author Cara Buckly describes the area as "a decades-old legal haven considered both a "United Nations of Graffiti" and a semi-rebellious statement in a city." This past November, 5Pointz was wiped clean overnight without notice to the artists:

> painters quietly blanketed much of the walls of 5Pointz with whitewash, erasing
> the work of hundreds and seemingly putting the final nail in the long battle
> between the building's owners… and the artists who fought to save it. (Buckley)

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More than a decade of graffiti was wiped out in just one night. While this location was

sentimental, almost sacred ground for writers because it was protected for so long, many other

artists understand that their pieces have a limited life span. The testament to this is the state of

the city in present day. Looking back on the precarious history graffiti writers have had in New

York, one will notice that their marks have all been erased. The ephemerality of the mark, the

self-consuming and ever-changing nature of the city, and the interests of property owners and

law enforcement are part of the craft and testament to the dynamic mobility of the art. This is

also testament to how the forcework art creates exists in this nonaesthetic dimension, which may

come from the work itself, but lingers in how the event impacts consciousness and interrupts the

viewer's psychogeographic connection with that space at a specific moment in time.

Ziarek's exploration of art as a force is complemented by Renato Poggioli's position on

the avant-garde as stated in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde.* In this text, Poggioli urges his

readers: "We shall here examine avant-garde art not under its species as art but through what it

reveals, inside and outside of art itself" (4). For Poggioli, like Ziarek, the avant-garde needs to

be considered apart from aesthetics ("outside of art itself") to permit access to the work aspect of

the composition. Through this separation, we can consider the avant-garde as a force capable of

revealing ideologies and psychologies: "common psychological condition[s], . . .unique

ideological fact[s]" (4). The avant-garde is a force that challenges the psychological conditions

of a society and the assumed cultural truths accepted by these communities through

"psychological revolt to the level of practical and social reform" (27). Poggioli considers this

effect as one of the four moments of the avant-garde, which he refers to as "activism." Poggioli

defines activism as agitation "for no other end than its own self, out of sheer joy of dynamism, a

taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure" (25). He

organizes the avant-garde into four key "moments": activism, antagonism, nihilism, and

agonism. Given our focus on motion (specifically with intention of breaking the spectacle), the

two moments in Poggioli's avant-garde most critical to my theoretical framework are activism

and antagonism.

As explained earlier, activism has a connotation informed by the historical avant-garde.

Activism harkens back to the avant-garde's origin as a military front. Antagonism is a more

focused trajectory for activism, defined as "the movement formed in part or in whole to agitate

against something or someone… More often than not, the someone is that collective individual

called the public" (Poggioli 26). Poggioli describes such challenges as the "permanent tendency

that is characteristic of the avant-garde movement," and these are the tendencies that qualify the

avant-garde as an antagonistic force ("antagonism toward tradition" [30]). Through creating a

hostile relationship with an existing tradition, or a power structure, the avant-garde will begin to

expose that structure as actually "wrong or harmful." Poggioli presents the avant-garde as doing

work, and it is through this presentation that we can begin to see how the avant-garde is

something other than aesthetics; it is a revolutionary force that manifests itself in somatic

responses and comes with a capacity for ideological changes.

Antagonism and activism become especially useful as we survey language based works

outside the canonical avant-garde framework, described by Peter Bürger as the "Historical

Avant-Garde." As stated earlier, we will take up an exploration that considers graffiti, street art,

and publically displayed materialized language as avant-gardes. If we approach these examples

with the theoretical lens provided by Poggioli, we can argue that such movements not only

qualify as avant-garde, but also expand how we conceive the avant-garde, which I argue needs to

be considered in its total effect (including motion).

I have come to understand the avant-garde based on theories constructed by Peter Bürger, Renato Poggioli, Paul Mann, and Călinescu, but also the limits of those theories. While these critics provided what James Harding refers to as "classic studies of avant-garde art and culture" (9), their reference to *the* avant-garde as a definitive, master-theory limited our understanding of the avant-garde to a "single overarching theory "(9). Harding's work *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* is a moment of divergent thinking for avant-garde studies in how he develops a pluralistic approach to the avant-garde. I find this approach to be useful and necessary for my own work because it will allow me to consider works *as* avant-gardes even if they fall outside the parameters set by a unified vision for *the* avant-garde. According to Harding it is

> more accurate to speak of avant-gardes than *the* avant-garde. Such repeated
> acknowledgement of plurality merits much more than the kind of passing
> acknowledgement that ultimately reverts back to a more generalized theory of the
> avant-garde. (9)

Harding encourages a movement towards a multiplicity within the definition of avant-garde instead of such a rigid understanding that outlines specific criteria for the avant-garde. To approach the avant-garde with plurality implies "and a fluid notion of the other that is consciously provisional and tactical with guerilla-like elusiveness" (4) that will evolve and adapt to specific sites and rhetorical occasions.

Harding's work parallels Sell's theories stated in *The Avant-Garde: Race Religion War* and his essay, "Resisting the Question, 'What Is an Avant-Garde?'" in the journal *New Literary History*, which carefully traces the distinction between what is *the* avant-garde and what can be considered as avant-garde as a way to expand the scope of avant-garde studies. Sell writes:

If debate over what *is* avant-garde is to be meaningful, we need criteria to guide

that debate. Such criteria need to be expansive, resisting the question enough to

encompass the "multiple often conflicting implications of possibility" of the

avant-garde's politics of form . . . but also draw our attention to the need for the

kinds of critical self-reflection that I've advocated. (768-69)

Sell suggests criteria made of the following three components: the avant-garde must challenge power, the avant-garde must be a minority or profess minoritarian beliefs, and the avant-garde must be reconsidered as transdiscursive, deconstructive, and multidisciplinary. If the concept, performance, or composition meets these qualifications, we can approach it *as* avant-garde. Through exploring the work as such, we can access these structures within its design.

Sell's approach, like Harding's, "necessitate(s) new and fundamental adjustments in how cultural critics define an avant-garde as such. The choice . . . is between a stagnant, albeit broadly defined notion of the avant-gardes" and neo-avant-garde, a term favored by Bürger, but rejected by critical vanguard studies (Harding 4). Harding urges us toward a conception of the neo-avant-garde, but even with this turn, there emerges a complex new set of problems. However, while we advance our theoretical studies and broaden our consideration for the avant-garde, we don't have to abandon the past entirely.

Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* defines the neo-avant-garde as "art since 1960 that refashions avant-garde devices . . . to contemporary ends" (x). Foster includes both art and theory in this moment. Yet, while newer theoretical models are emerging and new works can be considered as avant-garde, this is not a radical new beginning. Foster, Sell, and Harding all seem to agree that in many ways our understanding of the avant-garde is indebted to early studies. As Sell states in his essay, "Resisting the Question,

'What Is an Avant-Garde?'", "Our understandings of the avant-garde are tethered to perspectives that deplete our efforts to define, theorize, and historicize the avant-garde" (754). While these understandings may have stifling effects, it is important to acknowledge this rhetorical location as the birthplace for newly emergent vanguard studies.

I will examine the case studies selected for this dissertation through the lens of "critical vanguard studies," a term coined by Mike Sell and an approach to the subject that I'll describe below. While I use that approach as a model, I also argue that we need to reconsider the avant-garde beyond current definitions to access the power structures and antagonism within works that have been formerly excluded. In this project, I recast the avant-garde as a forcework, a function beyond aesthetics that directly affects and redirects the audience. Through considering the avant-garde as a force, a kinetic, psychogeographical motion, we can understand that the avant-garde's power resides in the work it accomplishes, and not solely its design.

Further, we can see that, to be effective, these works will need to enter into the commodity spectacle, or simply the society of the spectacle, because it is from these internal positions that language-based artists are able to affect change. This notion contradicts popular beliefs that look at the avant-garde's absorption into the culture industry as a failure, evident in Clement Greenburg and Peter Bürger's writings on avant-gardes.

I think that once we reconsider the avant-garde and introduce a critical vanguard approach to studying the material word, we can see how it functions not only to destabilize language communication, but how it destabilizes vision in the city in a way that reengages the viewers' motion.

Lastly, I draw my interpretations of space, materiality, and aesthetics from visual theory. Visual theory is appropriated here as a most useful method of accessing the politics of vision

within a city space. The theories I use to understand eyesight and visual/verbal interfaces, as well as semiotic/material interfaces, come from Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought.* According to Jay, most common language contains elements expressing aspects of vision—so arguably all theories are either overtly or tacitly coded with a rhetoric of sight. Regardless, I use Jay's theoretical frame to explore the visual measures taken by the Situationists as they sought to undo the rigidity, alienating, capitalist environment. As a way of resisting these forces, the SI redirected elements of eyesight, human vision, to expose ideologies within the landscape. In some cases, like the dérive, the SI articulates this agenda outright. Through the use of Jay's theory, these themes of disrupting patterns of sight become evident in other SI images, manifestos, and drawings. Artists like Fairey, Holzer, and Kruger use the language and imagery of marketing and advertising to hijack these visual forms and in turn spread their own messages of resistance (PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT) or satire (I SHOP THEREFORE I AM). Jay's theories of vision are critical to understanding the depth and resonance of dérive, détournement, collage, and culture jamming initiated by the SI.

The work of graffiti writers functions slightly differently in how it responds to an absence, or a lack, rather than over-stimulated representations.   Their works often respond to visual static or personal erasure; their art brings a sense of presence to urban spaces. One example of visual static that I discuss at length in the second chapter is typography. Through my work with materialized words, I have come to understand that there is more than a sound value in each letterform, shape, and style. There is an entire narrative that unfolds in presence and absences, or the negative and positive use of space. The materiality of type, aesthetic, and visual representation of language mark verbal aspects of a word with an additional semiotic function.

The most useful analysis of technology and type design comes from Johanna Drucker's *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923*. Drucker approaches typography from the perspective of Derridian deconstruction and Sassurean semiotics, providing a glimpse into type design that combines a structuralist and post-structuralist approach. Drucker explores the contours of typography used in Modern art by resituating this conversation within the nexus of technology, politics, and historical influence. Drucker is conscious of her unique frame and the pioneering theoretical position she pursues in this work, especially when she reflects on "the strong prejudice against acknowledgement of the visual component in the literary work" (2). The strong prejudice to which Drucker is referring comes from the binary analysis that divides font into either design or language, but is reluctant to admit that the aesthetic contributes to the language value and the language value speaks to the materiality/physicality of the text. I have been motivated by this lack, as well as the exciting content, to continue Drucker's work. In this project I consider the verbal/visual intersection of type design, a location that exists between aesthetics, materiality, linguistics, and visual/verbal play. This criticism is especially useful when I am working with Holzer, Kruger, and Fairey.

However, when I am working with graffiti, I find that Drucker's approach to experimental typography can be supplemented with a reading from Doreen Piano's article "Writing the Ruins: Rhetorics of Crisis and Uplift after the Flood." According to Piano, the intersection of the verbal and visual that occurs within graffiti converges to create a rhetoric of crisis. Piano investigates "graffiti" in New Orleans after Katrina, explaining that graffiti performs crisis in its "most material and tangible sense," by presenting the elements of life and culture in the city that were previously invisible. Piano observes that graffiti manifests

a narrative of inner-city urban life, one that had always been there but that had

been neglected because the spaces themselves (of poverty, crime, despair) were

invisible. Until Katrina, these rhetorics of crisis could not be articulated in such a

way as to be heard (and seen).

Piano refers to poverty, crime, and despair as locations ("the spaces themselves"), reading these

social conditions as rhetorical places. She argues that graffiti illustrates these rhetorical locations

so they become a visible part of the city.

Although Piano's article concentrates on the graffiti that emerged in the wake of

Hurricane Katrina, I find that her premise is applicable to the graffiti "epidemic" that gripped

New York City decades earlier. There was a similar rhetoric of crisis that emerged in response

to a similar intersection of typography and materialized language in the graffiti that covered New

York from the mid-1970s through the 1980s. For many people who lived in New York during

this time, graffiti became what Piano describes as a "synecdoche for crime, poverty, violence,

disenfranchisement." The public markings became symbols of a strangulating financial crisis

and a spike in crime. There were theories, such as the "Broken Window Theory," that suggested

graffiti behaved like a canary in the coalmine, demarcating crime and violence in a city.

However, if we reread the graffiti that covered New York en masse, we can understand how this

type of public writing behaves like a rhetoric of crisis.

Through considering these three case studies within these multiple frameworks, we can

access the challenges of power and liberation aesthetics practiced by these writers that would not

have formerly qualified for such consideration. I focus on materialized language, word works,

because of how these compositions intervene with communication systems, cognitive processes,

and in effect demand something of the viewer, which I consider a force. If we consider the

avant-garde as a force, we can learn that the works perform work and rely on the physical

engagement of the audience to function.   I argue that these avant-gardes rely on movement to gain that precious ground in the Society of the Spectacle, allowing them to work "with and within a culture."

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I will approach graffiti through Drucker's position on experimental typography and Piano's thought that graffiti is a rhetoric of crisis. Combining these theories will allow me to demonstrate how the graffiti movement that spanned the 1970s through 1980s transformed New York City into a visual battlefield, rife with semiotic salvo. We can see how graffiti functioned as a force and we can understand how this form of materialized language set out to accomplish a particular kind of work, which I consider as a mode of forcework. If we look at these texts as avant-garde (especially from the position of the SI, Poggoli, and Ziarek), we discover a rhetoric of kinetic crisis that began in this community of young, marginalized writers and permeated the city center, literally, and symbolically.

The original community of these writers was a group of marginalized young people that came from parts of the city that were red-lined in the 1980s. These neighborhoods were ignored, segregated, and economically disadvantaged areas. These communities were far from New York's lavish city center of wealth and privilege, both logistically and economically. Graffiti was their way of pushing back against the establishment; it was a counterculture attack that satirized and challenged the mainstream popular culture with materialized words by striking within the heart of the New York.

When considered en masse, a perspective I will use for this project, we can see how the writing was a kind of invasion, a literal and symbolic act of bringing the margins to the center. More than anything, the antagonistic relationship between the young graffiti writers and the city demonstrates how this avant-garde utilizes motion. I will present graffiti as the language of

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motion, where literally and figuratively, artists rise up and say: "This is me. Hello world. I'm fuckin' here," as a writer states so eloquently in *Bomb It!,* a graffiti documentary. Graffiti certainly did rise up; it spread like a tide that eventually engulfed the entire city with materialized words that articulated frustration.

The act of *moving* into the city center relied on a radical gesture, but the style of this rhetoric transforms the gesture into art. The risk involved in this process is also part of the art. According to Norman Mailer's essay, "The Faith of Graffit," graffiti is the language of "getting up" (79) a rhetoric displayed on high by someone who trespassed on grounds where they were not permitted legally, or socially. For example, the writers spread their messages by tagging trains and subway cars to in an effort to "go all city," which was the coveted status of traveling their work through all five boroughs. There was an incredible risk involved when the writers tagged trains. They were breaking into train yards late at night, fending off guard dogs, and scaling barbed wire fences. These acts of defiance became woven into the overall message and impact of the graffiti.

The breach of secure spaces and violated places left many New Yorkers feeling unsafe. I will look at how this reaction caused the citizens in the city to redirect their motion (i.e., their commutes to and from work) until the city launched a counterattack against graffiti. I will explore the antagonistic relationship between graffiti writers and anti-graffiti legislation to access the city's anxieties as well as the more real anxieties of these young writers who were enduring a city during a terrific moment of social, racial, and economic degeneration.

I will draw firsthand accounts of the historical context provided by documentary films. *Bomb It!, Infamy,* and *Style Wars* are especially useful for understanding the position of these young graffiti writers. I will draw contextualizing historical information from Norman Mailer's

The Faith of Graffiti and Jon Naar's *The Birth of Graffiti*.   I will collect their works from art

books such as *Subway Art*, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti, The Art of Getting Over,* and *The Art of*

Rebellion. I am interested in the early taggers, like TAKI183, from the early 1970s and I want to

look into the beginnings of graffiti when writers began by simply writing their names. I will

focus on larger works from the 1980s, such as Fab 5 Freddy's "Soup Train" (1981) and Seen.

　　These young graffiti writers created a culture all their own, a language all their own, a

style all their own. Graffiti was the written part of a larger hip-hop culture that included rap (the

language) and breakdancing (the movement). The wild style of the writing is a radical break not

only from artistic traditions but from communication. Drucker's theory will allow us to interpret

this revolutionary mode of typography and Piano will allow us to understand the crisis of these

young writers, finding a voice in an economically distraught and racially tense city. However,

considering graffiti as avant-garde we illuminate how the movement stood for something larger:

a minority's challenge of power launched in aesthetic vernacular.

　　In the second chapter, I will tell the story of Barbara Kruger and Shepard Fairey during

our current moment of digital revolution. These artists create language-based works for public

display as well as pieces that are intended for art galleries. Through straddling the public and

private spheres, these artists call the public vs. private binary into question as well as the art vs.

life divide. These artists deconstruct the public and commercial spheres to demonstrate that in

our society of the Spectacle the two have merged. This is a condition that Kruger highlights with

her incisive work, proving that even our most intimate lives are always already made public.

They demonstrate how life is always already mediated by the forces of images, especially

advertising by illuminating how we consume images, how we are consumed by images, and how

these forces invade all arenas of everyday life (public and private). This group of artists is

unique in how they take aim at the commodity spectacle by creating works that not only are in

the commodity spectacle, but rely on these same forces to reach their audience.   While they

differ in their processes each engages the culture industry by actively engaging these forces of

commodification through using these forces to reach their audience.   Chapter two looks at how

these artists stage media interventions with language-based compositions, which rupture

(expose) the spectacle by imitating the same modes of manipulation used in the advertisements

they target.

     I will discuss how Fairey manipulates the rhetoric of advertisements and advertising

space to gain critical access to the power structures he challenges. Additionally, there is a

current of motion in Fairey's art, which is expressed in how his works enlist audience

participants to spread their messages, a process facilitated by commodity exchange. Thinking of

how his art relies on audience actions and how their works attack ideological positions, cultural

psychology, and assumed cultural truths (instead of products) will allow us to see avant-garde as

a performative event that relies on motion or forcework. I will look at Fairey's OBEY series and

the "HOPE" image designed for Obama's 2008 campaign.

     In interviews, Fairey credited his style and technique to Kruger. His lettering is homage

to Kruger's earlier work from the 1980s and 1990s. Kruger, like Fairey, is an artist from the age

of mechanical reproduction.   She navigates this moment by sending her messages, or art, in

kitschy forms that are easily reproduced. Therefore, the force of her art reaches her public in

common commodity goods: posters, t-shirts, beach towels, etc. Kruger spreads her subversion

through the most common media channels and she gets away with it because she is so adept at

mimicking the visual rhetoric and clipped language of advertisements (fragmented, recycled

images and clipped, terse language).

Kruger is very aware of what she is doing and the methods/processes she uses to agitate the world with her art. Further, she is also conscious of the mass culture context in which she operates, and she is even more aware of what Adorno and Horkheimer refer to as the "culture industry." Kruger intends for her work to be absorbed by the culture industry, but can her work still function as a subversive force if the elements of this aesthetic are used to sell baseball caps? Can Kruger's work still function as a force if it seems that he work is diluted as it spreads throughout such a large audience?   How can we account for Kruger in our present moment of digital reproduction?

I will answer these questions using the theoretical framework of the Situationists, especially their practice of détournement, or culture jamming. For example, Kruger's "I Shop Therefore I Am" is a version of the SI's détournement because she combines familiar images and accessible language to create a work that has the potential to alienate her audience. Kruger hijacks the banal image of a hand and a familiar statement. She drives these forces, tangling the meaning and pushing the significance into a new direction. To further engage and deconstruct images I will also employ criticism provided by Adorno's *The Culture Industry*, W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, and Lacan's theories of visual pleasure.

In my third and final chapter, I will discuss how Jenny Holzer and the Graffiti Research Lab (GRL) create messages with digital communication technologies to imitate advertising rhetoric used in urban environments. By creating these public works and physically juxtaposing these messages with advertisements, the artists expose modes of media-based propaganda through a dissonance conjured by colliding their verbal and visual images with corporatized messages. In effect, GRL and Holzer achieve an inversion of popular thought, asking their audience to see the corporatization of public space as vandalism and unsanctioned public writing

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as free speech, instead of a criminal act. They support the reclamation of urban environments by creating a dialogue that engages the function of materialized language and use of concrete locations. Further, both Holzer and GRL accomplish these goals by redirecting their audience.

The main way that Holzer and GRL engage their spectators is by designing kinetic LED messages that interact with the community in public spaces; these messages encourage motion in the viewers, if not a specific redirection of their actions. I argue that if we consider these works as an avant-garde, we can understand this energy as a forcework and we can understand how it initiates social changes by physically redirecting its viewers, either by stalling the person or redirecting behavior or attention.

I group GRL and Holzer together because of their similar targets, methods (performance-based LED projections), and critical position (they operate from within the spectacle to criticize it). Holzer and GRL both layer on these discourses by operating within the spectacle, allowing them to reach a wider audience because they are able to spread messages further with the help of the active forces within the culture industry. While critics may theorize that the avant-garde is dead, if we explore cases such as this, we can see that the avant-garde is not only kinetically active, but it is active from within the culture.

In this final chapter, I will consider Jenny Holzer's large scale Xenon projections ("For the City") and her series of LED signs ("Truisims"). "Protect Me from What I Want" is the most famous work of these series; it was displayed on the Times Square Spectacolor Sign in 1986. I will provide contextualizing information form Diane Waldman's 1989 text *Jenny Holzer* and the PBS "Art 21" series to understand the artists' motivation and her historical position. I will also look at the Graffiti Research Lab's LED throwies series and their light criticism campaign, for which they collaborated with the Anti-Advertising Agency (2007).

I approach these digital compositions with works taken from digital media studies like Jay Bolter's *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print* and *Remediation: Understanding New Media.* Bolter's theories of deformance will allow us to see how these activist artists are able to radically revise a rhetorical location to expose new meaning. Works by N. Katherine Hayles, such as *Writing Machines* and *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, explore the analogue/digital interface in rhetorical locations and the implications of these texts within the realm of literary studies.

The most interesting aspect of this dissertation, and this topic, is how it engages implications of texts beyond literary studies. This study has implications within the realm of everyday life. As you can tell, dear reader, this study is personal. It is personal to me, because I'm telling you my stories about the city in which I live, but this narrative isn't only personal to me, it may be personal to you, too. This dissertation will explore how and why people develop personal connections to the places where they live and what a group of activists have done to place a stress on these relationships, changing the way we see the city.

CHAPTER ONE

GRAFFITI IN NEW YORK:

RHETORIC OF PRESENCE, RHETORIC OF ERASURE

When I arrived in Rome, I was confident that I had everything I needed to get through my spring semester abroad, which ran from January 2006 until Mary 2006. I had a big duffle bag packed with plugs that fit international outlets, I had journals, I had cameras, and I had room in my suitcase for all of the new stuff I would buy from the trendy Italian *mercati*. After taking two semesters of introductory Italian I could say things like: *quante sono quelle scarpe?* (How much are those shoes?); *Mi piace il gelato!* (I like ice cream); p*iù vino, per favore!* (More wine, please!); and *sposami!* (Marry me!). I obviously had everything I needed and for the phrases I didn't know, I had my book of Italian phrases, *Hide this Italian Book.*

I was set.

Unfortunately, I was only set to order wine, buy leather shoes, and to marry an Italian racecar driver. While these words were productive on shopping excursions, I was less prepared to navigate the city of Rome. I remember asking for directions one day when I was lost during a run. I convinced myself that I would always find my way if I could get back to the Tiber River. However, any time I asked for directions, the conversation would break down into a game of international *Taboo*. On this particular occasion, when I was asking about the for the river, I could say words like "the water" (*l'acqua*) and "center" (*centro)*, but I didn't know the translation for "river" (*fiume)* or even "please help me because I am totally lost and I have no idea where I am!"

I was not so set.

While learning the language, I realized that I could rely on Rome's system of wayfinding to guide myself from point to point.   I mentally dialed into the architecture, signage, and other visual cues embedded within the city's design. I found that if I focused on the architecture of the urban design, I could find my way easily to city centers, piazzas, parks, fountains. If I followed the trail of advertising, the draw of the commodity spectacle, I could find the places to shop. While training my brain to learn a city, without depending on the language, I sensitized myself to the visual dimension of Rome. Through this process, I became very conscious of the street art on the city walls.

Fortunately, aerosol-based street art was on almost every public wall that was not protected. The London Police posted a tag on the wall outside my favorite café. If I followed a long wall of uncomissioned street art murals, I could find my train station. If I became lost in the trails of Parco Urbano, I would look for another wall with street art that ran along the perimeter and use the pictures to guide me back to the streets. There were other tags that made me uncomfortable for whatever reason; even if I didn't know what these tags communicated, I got the feeling that I should avoid that space and so I did. This was the first time in my life when I really began to appreciate street art for something other than the funky design. I realized the possibilities for the non-aesthetic dimension of the aesthetic designs, because this was the first time I really engaged the forcework of the designs.

My experience with the non-verbal elements of wayfinding helped me to see cities differently and it illuminated the potential for a non-aesthetic dimension of the aesthetic designs. When I returned to New York five months and 20 pounds later, I began saw my own city differently. I dialed into New York's street art culture and paid attention to how I was pushed or pulled by aesthetics, which lead me to wonder about the power, or forcework, of graffiti in NYC.

In this chapter, I will analyze the most notorious moment for graffiti in New York City, the period from 1970s through the 1980s, when writers used trains to move materialized language throughout the five boroughs. I will approach this mode of graffiti writing as a process of kinetic motion that involves the writer's gestures, the circulation of the trains throughout the city space, the general public's resistance to this disruption of public space (manifesting in fear, redirection, legislation, and finally stalling gestures), and the overall process of recuperation. I will show, how and why this group emerged as vanguard, waging a war on the mainstream culture within a city that excluded them. I will follow the lifecycle of their forcework, approaching their mode of interruption as an avant-garde, to understand the recuperation of their aesthetic. In the end, graffiti, an antagonistic movement, found itself positioned squarely in the heart of the culture industry as their works were sprayed onto canvases to be sold in galleries.

This case study lends itself to engage a pressing question within critical vanguard studies: can an aesthetic function as an avant-garde if it is ultimately destined, if not designed, to be recuperated in the culture industry?

I will answer this question in a two-step process. First, by approaching the graffiti movement as a neo-avant-garde I will demonstrate that how an avant-garde can operate within and throughout mainstream culture. Even if the avant-garde has historically been antagonistic to popular culture, neo-avant-gardes are forces that operate within popular culture because they are designed to function in this cultural space. I argue that these avant-gardes are not defeated by recuperation, but somewhat dependent on these processes. Second, I will present neo-avant-gardes as a force that functions beyond an aesthetic design to create change within the visual structures of the city, which has the potential to alter the public's psychographic connection to the city space. I argue that forcework accomplished by this graffiti movement was a

psychogeographic shift that altered the community's relationship with the city in which they lived.   As we approach New York City's revolutionary graffiti writers from the perspective of critical vanguard studies, we can rework our understanding of neo-avant-gardes in a way that will open the possibilities within the discourse to reconsider the cultural location of avant-gardes, the aesthetic component, and the position of the small group initiating the revolt.

This perspective refuses one of the dominant understandings of the avant-garde, which currently views avant-gardes as a mode of interruption emerging from the margins of society and maintaining an unwavering opposition to popular culture. I reject this theory. Even though these graffiti writers are socioeconomically marginalized, we will view their works as an avant-garde operating squarely within the center of society, at least visually. Neo-avant-gardes may be a small group that challenges the mainstream culture, but they have a tendency to operate within the signs and structures of the mainstream culture as a way to disrupt this semiotic system. Also, these writers are operating from within the mainstream culture, which we will consider as the commodity spectacle. These writers operate from within mainstream culture because it is from this internal position that they gain the most advantage.

Also, we can understand an avant-garde very different than canonical movements, historical avant-gardes such as Futurism, Surrealism, Dada, etc. We see a neo-avant-garde that is not based in aesthetics, but based in motion: the motion of the writers, the motion of the trains, and the redirected motion of the public. I see this particular point aligning with avant-garde history that has only recently been unearthed and theorized. From this perspective can see how graffiti functioned as a force and we can see how this writing utilizes a form of visual language, one that I refer to as the materialized word, to express this point.

Before proceeding, I want to clarify the difference between "street art" and "graffiti." I understand that graffiti is different than street art, though both forms are different than vandalism, and within these broad strokes, there are small, but crucial elements, embedded in the variegated writing styles. To avoid future confusion, I want to ground the way I will use "graffiti" by setting clear boundaries around the subject matter that I plan to discuss: graffiti writing on New York City's trains in the 1970s and 1980s. I wish to apply to a set of linguistic boundaries similar to those laid by Craig Castleman's *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York,* the contextual boundaries used in Elisa Bordin's article "Expanding Lines: Negotiating Space, Body, and Language Limits in Train Graffiti," and the discursive distinctions made by Snyder's *Graffiti Lives.* The frameworks established within each text define graffiti within historical context and processes of linguistic signification introduced by the vernacular developed in the graffiti community.

While "graffito[i]" suggests something on a smaller scale, the concept of graffiti is an expansive term that refers to all forms of public, but uncommissioned writing. McCormick traces this heritage in *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art,* defining graffiti as "a crude drawing or inscription scratched into a hard surface, graffiti is the oldest form of unsanctioned public art from which all aesthetic or radical statements made up the geography of public space have evolved" (50). I want to begin tracing the definition at this point as a way to underscore that, for public writing to qualify as graffiti, it must be both unsanctioned and public. Craig Castleman reinforces this same idea in *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York,* as he too traces the graffiti to ancient, origins in Italian, which has been "used to describe many different sorts of wall writings …that have been scratched, painted, and marked on walls throughout history" (xi) . I apply Castleman's broad understanding of graffiti to my work with

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1980s graffiti writers as a way to engage a wide variety of their uncommissioned works created with a variety of media.

Elisa Bordin's investigation in her article, "Expanding Lines: Negotiating Space, Body, and Language Limits in Train Graffiti," takes a granular look at this multi-media form, one that "spans a number of different artistic practices, such as street, stencil, and aerosol art" (Bordin). While the media may be artistic, there is a stark difference between "graffiti" and "street art":

> These practices are usually combined under the wide umbrella term "street art," since they share analogous aesthetics and a similar medium (the spray can) through which a work of art is accomplished.

"Street art" and "graffiti" are used interchangeably because of their medium and mode of creation, but these aesthetics have two different agendas. I avoid using "graffiti" and "street art" interchangeably, as Bordin advises, because they are not interchangeable. I distinguish between "graffiti" and "street art" based on consciousness. The writers who create "graffiti," as we will come to see, have intentions of resisting the mainstream. The artists who compose "street art" are typically working within conventional aesthetics and, sometimes, city funding.

Of course, the line between "street art" and "graffiti" becomes blurred when graffiti assimilates into the mainstream culture, a turn that will be discussed at the end of the chapter as we survey how and why graffiti entered the gallery system. Once graffiti was translated to canvas and packaged, the entire scope changed. We will explore how and why the impact of train graffiti cannot be reproduced in the gallery. Bordain suggests, "This pictorial practice cannot be easily reproduced and sold." The impact of graffiti, the public writing, is that it is public; it is a force derived from the space in which it appeared, the train, and the invasive sensibility it communicated.

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Even though I read graffiti as an invasion of public space, I will move away from looking at graffiti as vandalism. This trajectory is not productive for our conversation. Additionally, I will not consider public gang signs. Given their distinctive semiotic function, gang signs have no place in this discussion, as that mode of rhetoric is distinctly different. While in conversational terms, "graffiti" refers to both types of writing, unfortunately,

> this term does separate name-based writing culture from sloganeering or gang
> writing, the aesthetics of these three forms are easily distinguishable. Political
> writing tends to be spontaneous and lacks a certain calligraphic style, while gang
> writings or "placas," are boxy line signatures that announce gang territory and not
> necessarily the name of the writer. (Snyder 28)

The placas to which Snyder is referring comes from Los Angeles in the 1950s and, as he explains, these are word signs used to carve out territories. The graffiti in New York that I consider here is much different. For gangs, graffiti is not the central unifying element of their culture, though psychogeographical consciousness and intervention is. On the other hand, for the early New York City graffiti writers, graffiti is the core of their culture and the primary method of their invasion.

The early graffiti writers were doing more than just writing their names on the city of New York, they were creating a subculture all their own and, with it, their own language. The graffiti community developed a spoken vernacular accessible only to other writers. They invented new words, or *détourned* definitions of existing words, to describe their radical actions. I will explain some of these critical terms so we can understand the nuances of their meanings as they appear within the chapter. Each of these rhetorical moves has a distinct purpose and communicative function, which I argue is to describe, connect, and at times to alienate.

Early writers referred to the act of graffiti as "getting up," which quite literally is the act of putting a mark on a wall, or a subway system. However, this term was specifically used to describe their success in making marks in New York. "Getting up" is critical to being a successful graffiti writer:

> Since the beginning, writers have understood that recognition and acceptance of their work by other writers (and possibly the public in general) is dependent on their writing their names prolifically. (Castleman 19)

The writer needs to demonstrate their success to the other writers to develop a reputation. Their writing is validated by the graffiti community based on the locations they choose, how many times they "get up", and their individual technique.

One type of "getting up," arguably the most basic, is the "tag." This is the simplest type of graffiti because it is the writer's name, but it is the most critical for the same reason; it establishes a writer's identity. Craig Castleman describes the nature of tagging in his text, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York.*

> A tag generally consists of the writer's name in stylized letters that are gathered together somewhat in the style of a logo or monogram. Tags are written very quickly, often in a single, practiced movement, in a single color of ink or paint. In style, tags are about as individual as the writer's handwriting. (Castleman 26).

The tag is a method through which writers brand themselves *as* writers. Castleman describes the tag as a logo, which is very true. The tag almost takes on a synecdochic function in how it stands in for the writer. Since it is the easiest to write, the tag is the fastest way to establish an individual's presence in the city. Felisbret describes the act of tagging as a way "to increase the visibility and notoriety of a name. Secondly, they function as a formal signature on a more

complicated work such as a throw-up, piece, or production" (110). The tag is basically a

signature, usually done in marker or a homemade pen; it is also referred to as "hand style."

Felisbret defines tagging as "the principal form of writing and the foundation of the other two

major forms" (110). The other two forms, "throwies" and "pieces," are larger and more

complicated, but still rooted in the basic elements of developing a signature.

      "Throw-ups", or "throwies", are a larger form of tagging, as this is a more stylized

method writers use to compose their names. Throw-ups are not only a quick way that a writer

establishes presence, but also a way they can quickly establish style. According to Castleman:

> Throw-ups are the fastest and easiest way to get up on outsides. A throw-up
>
> usually consists of a two or three letter name that is formed, usually rounded, into
>
> a single unit that can be sprayed quickly and with a minimum of paint on the sides
>
> of a train.

The tag and throwie are similar in how they are the writer's name, but they differ in style,

placement, and size. The throw-up is much larger, in size and in scope. As Stephen Powers

explains in *Getting Over*, a throw-up is "a fast-drawn fill-in to cover the most comp in the least

time eventually evolved to be a succinct statement of style" (90). With a very quick glance, the

writing community can get a sense of the writer's style and their presence. Throw-ups

communicate style: "Throw-ups are usually done in a modified bubble letter style consisting of

thick, simplified letters, incompletely painted in one color, and outlined inexactly with a second,

darker color" (Castleman 28-30). The community values how many throw-ups a writer will post

on a train. Unlike tags that were used to fill the inside of train cars, throw-ups were sprayed on

the outside of a car.

Graffiti writers use "pieces" to cover the entire outside of the train. The word "piece" is short for "masterpiece," because these were the most elaborate creations in a graffiti writer's oeuvre. These works are bold and complex "stylized letters that are enhanced with color, depth, and a variety of designs" (Feilsbret 120). Pieces are sometimes a writer's name, spelled out in a flourish of colors. The first masterpieces began to appear on New York trains around 1972. Feilsbret explains the evolution of these pieces: "Masterpieces increased in scale and complexity over the years. Writers enhanced their pieces with a variety of graphic elements, including geometric shapes, arrows, polka dots, and stripes" (120). Masterpieces were aesthetically beautiful; they were larger than life and packed with stylistic power. Pieces are one of the more brilliant, colorful, examples of graffiti culture. You might remember these flourishes from TV shows that ran in the mid-1970s, like *Welcome Back Kotter.* The opening credits feature subway cars with pieces by NUT, JESTER, and DIABLO. The bubble letter names bounce on the subway cars with whimsical flashes of color against the grey, gritty city. The pieces that appeared in New York during this time were even more brilliant, diverse, and legendary.

Legends, fame, and mythical status are the difference between toy writers and graffiti masters. Going "all city" is what separates a master writer from someone new. During interviews, especially interviews in Tony Silver's *Style Wars,* both groups of writers make it clear that they are after fame. Their goal is to get fame by going "all city," or getting up in all five boroughs: Queens, Staten Island, Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. The point of going all-city is to have a writer's reputation travel throughout New York's community of graffiti writers and, eventually, to penetrate the sightline of mainstream culture.

Going "all city" is different than "bombing." While both acts are important, "bombing" is most essential to our study, as it indicates an implicit rhetoric of war inherent in the graffiti

that concerns me here. The point of bombing is to cover a lot of space: "Bombing is measured in terms of volume. Qualities such as neatness, originality, and mastery of color hold little merit. Writers are judged solely by their ability to get up" (Felisbret 74). The point of bombing is to deface. It is not to create something aesthetically pleasing, but to draw attention to something aesthetically displeasing by covering it with paint as a way to make the place stand out from the visual static surrounding it.

One agenda of graffiti in the late 1970s and early 1980s was to transform something dull into something beautiful. However, there was a schism in the mid-1980s when the community turned more towards bombing over creating masterpieces as "social, cultural, and spatial configurations changed dramatically" (Austin 229). Joe Austin observes that this turn, the writers' preference for bombing over piecing, was shaped by the MTA's success in taking back their trains: "Before the 1980s, the subway system had served as the central institutional location that tied writers from each borough together into a common writing culture" (229). As the MTA became successful in its clean train campaign, the writers took to the city walls.

Ironically, the moment when the writers lost the trains witnessed a shift that decentered graffiti culture. It may seem that tagging a train is decentralized because the trains are kept on the margins. However, the trains are the blood of New York City. They travel through the city's system of arteries, constantly connecting at least three of the five boroughs. The trains not only move the people of Manhattan, they are visible to both commuters and bystanders on a daily basis. Tagging a train meant making a mark that would be visible to the people of New York on a daily basis, a mark that transgressed vast sociological divides. Also, we will come to see how the trains were a point of connection for the writers in the graffiti community. The tags on the trains, especially the tags that went all city, were part of the language in the community.

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Therefore, while a wall space in a city may seem central because of its fixed position, walls lack the mobility of trains, which slice through spaces and travel deeper into the center of the collective consciousness.

Silver's *Style Wars* provided the first real look into New York's 1980s graffiti culture, which at that time was largely concentrated on the New York transit system. The film presents two sides of the graffiti narrative. On one side, there are the larger-than-life feats of the graffiti writers. The other plot presents disapproving authority figures like law officials, citizens, and moms. Tony Silver illustrates this side of the story by focusing on the relationship between a writer, Skeme, and his mother, Mrs. Andalcio.   Shots of Skeme's stunts (breaking into train yards, scaling walls, slithering under fences, etc.) are punctuated by interviews with shots of his mom (shaking her head, rolling her eyes, throwing up her hands in disgust, etc.).

During one of these interviews, Skeme explains his passion for graffiti as a guerilla form of art: "I didn't start writing to go to Paris; I didn't start writing to do canvases. I started writing to bomb….destroy all lines." He puts extra emphasis on the word "bomb." He is clearly not interested in selling his work. He is, however, passionate about bombing the city. The camera cuts to Mrs. Andalcio shaking her head. She doesn't get it. She doesn't understand her son's passion for graffiti, or his motivation to tag:

> Now that you heard that, you understand what I'm saying to you when I say I don't understand him.   He's out there to "bomb", "destroy all lines"… what have the lines ever done to him? What have the lines ever done to him?

Of course Mrs. Andalcio is being literal; she is talking about the transit lines, the train lines. She emphasizes "lines," repeating the phrase: "destroy all lines… destroy all lines." She asks: "What have the lines ever done to him?" as though it is a rhetorical question.

The dramatic irony here is in how lines have dictated Skeme's whole life. He pushes

back against the transit lines with graffiti, but he is heavily impacted by lines: neighborhood

boundary lines, racial lines in society, and the redlining that devastated upper Manhattan decades

before he was born. His visual resistance, articulated with graffiti, is his way of refusing such

lines by creating his own. Through creating these public works, Skeme makes his mark on a city

that has pushed him, and his community, into the margins. Skeme makes it clear that he is out to

bomb, "destroy all lines."

Graffiti and avant-garde are joined in their imaginative, rhetorical, and practical focus on

warfare, as they both resist power through aesthetic interventions that inspire their visions of

renewal. To establish this parallel, I will engage what James Harding refers to as the

"etymological imperative." I want to briefly explore the historic avant-garde's militaristic past

as a way to draw a parallel to the militaristic moves the graffiti writes will make centuries later.

It is critical to examine the parallels of resistance shared by graffiti writers and avant-gardes,

specifically the parallels embedded in the rhetoric of warfare.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the concept of the avant-garde back to Middle

English, where it refers to the "foremost part of any army." The etymology swerved over the

centuries, from the French "vanguard." A useful unpacking of the early French militaristic

metaphor, which is implicit in the term "avant-garde," comes from Matei Călinescu's *Five Faces

of Modernity*: "As a term of warfare, it dates back to the Middle Ages, and it developed a

figurative meaning at least as early as the Renaissance" (Călinescu 97). When translated

literally, "avant-garde" means the advance-guard, a small group that "fights differently." The

writers engaging in the graffiti movementcan be viewed a vanguard of young people who "fight

differently." Like the military term, this is the group that the front of the change, leading the

charge, but doing so in a way that is "different." For this group, their weapons of choice were aesthetic interventions.

The term begins to transition from a specific militaristic term to a metaphor at the end of the 18th century. David Cottington follows this linguistic migration in *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction*: "The extension of the concept of an avant-garde from military to political discourse was a product of the French Revolution (22)." The linguistic shift happened when the "avant-garde" was used as a journal title at that time. Eventually, this military term, used specifically to describe the tactics of war, evolved into a political term. Still, the ideology of war, the advanced guard, was still embedded in the concept.

The next entomological turn in defining "avant-garde" happened by way of Henri de Saint-Simon, appearing in his 1825 book, *Opinions Littéraires, Philosophiques et Industrielles*. Saint-Simon states: "We, the artists, will be the vanguard of the intellectual revolution. The power of art is indeed most immediate and the quickest" (1). Saint-Simon observes the power that just a small group of artists can have and the capacity they have to inspire a social change. He sees artists as part of a triumvirate that includes art, science, and industry. He sees the potential for change that can come from the joining of these forces, and the avant-garde, as a force powerful enough to change civilization. It is important to note that there was no association with aesthetics at this moment. What made the avant-garde, an avant-garde, was the ability of an invisible force to cause a very visible, radical change. This is important to note as we will eventually account for the non-aesthetic dimension of neo-avant-gardes.

The avant-garde always remained a small, outside group, relative to the larger social group in a given space. Mike Sell elaborates on this idea of exclusivity in his essay, "Resisting the Question, 'What Is an Avant-Garde?'," when he states:

> To be avant-garde, one must be a minority. This criterion anchors our
> understandings of the avant-garde firmly to the avant-garde's historical origins in
> the military, where it designated a small group of soldiers that went in advance of
> the main body. (17)

The avant-garde is a minority, or at least is a group that considers itself a minority. To look back to the military heritage, this was literally a group that came before the larger military advance. In the case of the avant-garde's metaphoric use, in reference to culture, this was the small group that was "different from the majority—an avant-garde painter paints differently, an avant-garde military group fights differently" (17.). As Sell presents the avant-garde in this way, he is making a case about the minority, the small group, capable of functioning as a counterculture group. Through this distinction, Sell "acknowledges the historical contributions of minorities to the avant-garde tradition" (17.). It isn't the larger, mainstream or popular culture that changes all at once, but this smaller group that provokes a change, or a radical break, by creating ruptures.

The graffiti writers in this chapter are a small group of individuals who used aesthetic means to affect a change, both symbolically and literally. As we asked initially: Why did the practice of "bombing" come to be significant for this group of writers? As we come to explore graffiti writers as an avant-garde, we can understand the symbolic war they fight. Approaching them from this theoretical perspective permits an investigation with the "historical and linguistic legacies" imbedded in the word, its history, and the subsequent violence apparent in the meanings. The violence, the war, the elements of suffering present in avant-gardes historical past translate into the way we understand the mission of the graffiti writers in New York during the 1980s. These qualities, this avant-garde, are best applied to the graffiti writers, who also suffer as warriors, defending themselves in a landscape from which they became alienated.

The linguistic heritage of "avant-garde," when examined in reference to their guerrilla aesthetics, opens up the possibilities for our study of these cases, helping us understand their dependence on a rhetoric of violence and their own sense of being a minority under threat. The parallels I find with graffiti are in the size, scope, and symbolic efficacy with which these writers fight their war. The graffiti movement was led by a small group of writers affecting social change with aesthetics that manifest as literally a military assault. The works of these young writers transformed New York City into a symbolic battlefield, one that put the city of New York on defense.

"Bombing" is the most common term in graffiti style. We hear Skeme use this term with conviction in the scene described earlier. Like the avant-garde's own etymological imperative, metaphors of warfare are embedded in the language of the graffiti. Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant define "bombing" in their book, Subway Art as: "prolific painting or marking with ink" (27). Cooper and Chalfant understand bombing as the process of covering an area with tags, stickers, stencils, etc. However, this is not simply the act of putting a sticker on the wall of a public space; there are larger political implications.

The act of bombing is just as political as the term implies outside of graffiti culture. William Upski Wimsatt, author of Chicago's street art manifesto *Bomb the Suburbs*, developed a title for his book that clearly plays with the verb "bomb." While Wimsatt uses the term to indicate the "prolific painting" of a public space, he also accounts for the power within the term and the combativeness in its meaning. For Wimsatt, the verb "bomb" is a rally cry: "I say bomb the suburbs" (11). He goes on to elaborate this decree, stating that the suburbs "have waged an economic, political, and cultural war on life in the city" (11). Wimsatt tells writers to take their "bombing" to the suburbs, where he locates his necessary site of activist intervention. He does

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not want writers to focus on tagging the city, but to move their rhetorical war to the suburbs because of what these spaces represent symbolically: social segregation, cultural corrosiveness, harsh economic disparity, and privatized space.

Graffiti emerged in the city during the late 1970s and remained on display through 1980s. However, in many ways this movement was responding to the lasting effects of a post-WWII Manhattan that was devastated by Robert Moses' Cross Bronx Expressway, redlining, and the urban renewal projects. The neighborhoods were one of the causalities of these modernizing projects, but neighborhoods are more than brick-and-mortar structures; neighborhoods are made up of people, communities, and relationships. The public works projects ripped neighborhoods to shreds and tore the hearts out of the people who lived in them. This was the graffiti writers' New York City, the world that they would inherit.

I want to provide a clear picture of this historic moment, the social and economic factors that shaped the New York City the young graffiti writers would eventually inhabit. I think it is valuable to start with close reading of the demolition of the old Pennsylvania Station (Penn Station) as a turning point for Manhattan in the early 1960s. I believe that there is great symbolism to be found in this demolition job. Penn Station wasn't simply a central point in Manhattan, but a place with a great psychogeographic weight for the public who circulated through New York City at this time. I see the destruction of old Penn Station functioning not only as a literal gesture of destruction of a central New York City artery, but a symbolic blow to the overall morale of the people in New York.

After standing for a half-century, enduring one great depression and two World Wars, Penn Station could not endure the economic struggle and changes in transportation that punctuated the 1960s. The structure was aging badly. As stated so poetically in Jeff Byles'

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Rubble: "The Travertine began to lose its luster with the passage of the Federal Highway Act in 1944, as the whole nation felt a keen upwelling of desire for their Studebakers" (140). The station was losing favor to the automobile. Affluent New Yorkers were driving to their destinations, or traveling by plane. Also, the arterial highways that were being developed during this time moved some of the passengers out of New York permanently, as they chased jobs that moved beyond the city limits. The Pennsylvania Railroad Company was losing revenue.

The station wasn't able to keep up appearances, both literally and functionally. The city didn't have the money to clean the façade. As stated by Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture critic for the *New York Times,* "the tragedy is that our own times not only could not produce such a building, but cannot even maintain it, so that its fate is as inevitable as the Planning Board's decision" (141). In 1955, the Pennsylvania Railroad president, James Symes, signed with William Zeckendorf, real-estate developer, "to sell the air rights to the station and build a new station underground" (141) and suddenly, as Huxtable put it so bluntly, "smashing Pennsylvania Station suddenly became thinkable" (141). Not only was it thinkable, but it was scheduled. The demolition of Pennsylvania Station began on October 28, 1963, at 9:00am with jackhammers hacking at the granite and travertine. Huxtable writes in her *Times* architecture column:

> It's not that easy to knock down nine acres of travertine and granite, 84 Doric columns, a vaulted concourse of extravagant, weighty grandeur, classical splendor modeled after Roman baths, rich detail in solid stone, architectural quality in precious materials that set the stamp of excellence on a city. (Huxtable)

Unfortunately, as New York would come to learn, the destruction of Penn Station was actually quite easy. The job was done in 1963 and the rubble, four-foot wide Doric columns and all, were dumped in the Meadowlands, which made this wasteland, for Huxtable, one "classy dump."

The Old Penn Station, a marble landmark in the center of Manhattan, was destroyed to meet the plastic needs of a changing popular culture, which included the following: a new Penn Station, a major sports arena (Madison Square Garden), and twenty-nine story skyscraper. Steel and glass replaced the pink granite, the travertine, and the Romantic concourse. A Roy Rogers fast-food restaurant replaced the grand waiting room. The glass lattice ceilings were removed to make room for a bland 29-story skyscraper and Madison Square Garden. The bustle of passengers through grand entryways mutated. "One entered the city like a God," Yale historian Vincent Scully wrote of the original station, now "one scuttles in now like a rat." Passengers who take trains into Penn Station disembark to arrive in a gritty, subterranean system of tunnels that unfurls in the bowels of the station.

Huxtable describes the New Penn Station as "pedestrian and dull." It is architectural banality, grey, awkward in shape. The new site, however, lacks the aura present in those Doric columns. Huxtable explains that the "raison d'être was stripped away. This, the publicity value of the landmark is retained, while the landmark itself is destroyed." Penn Station, the real landmark, was wasting away in a garbage dump, coldly discarded, and poised to be rescued only as landfill. Ada Huxtable sealed her critique with one of the most profound lines I've read in journalism: "And we will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed." New York would certainly be judged by the demolition of Penn Station, which at that time could be expressed in the crisis of faith for those who lived in the city. After all, Penn Station was a place that belonged to everybody in the city. Destroying this space made a statement that was loud and clear; public spaces, while accessible to the public, were still the domain of corporations.

The destruction of Penn Station was also a symbolic destruction. A reporter for the

Times describes the sight of watching all 22 eagles being lowered from the top of the building:

> These images of those proud, fifty-seven-hundred pound stone eagles being
>
> hoisted down by crane, their wings chafing against the strapping, are evocative
>
> beyond belief, a moment in demolition history almost more profound than any
>
> imploding building. (147)

The lowering of the eagle represented a sinking of pride, the end of a regal era when train travel

was glamorous and architecture was romantic. The city was changing and these changes were

happening quickly.

The loss of the Penn Station could be interpreted as a comment about the city's belief in

modernity, a testament to the cultural zeitgeist that progress is always better. According to

David Samuels, the city is a

> concise and visually compelling expression of the belief that history is transient,
>
> that a new beginning is always in the cards, that the glories of the past are only a
>
> prelude to an even more glorious, everlasting present. (295)

Therefore, if the city is changing, it is, theoretically, changing for the better. Progress. In this

case, however, the city was vividly reminded that not all progress would push the community or

the infrastructure of New York City into future.   As James Merrill explains in his poems, not all

change is worth the emotional and symbolic toll it will take on the people in the city.

During the time that Penn Station was being torn down, Merrill published *Water Street*

(1962), which opens with the poem "An Urban Convalescence." This poem is told from

Merrill's perspective, as a New Yorker, speaking as the persona narrating the poem. Merrill uses

this speaker to tell the story of the emotional consequence of a city that is being torn down and

built up so routinely that the entire landscape can be rendered unrecognizable in one week's time. The persona in the poem brings us onto the streets of New York, a place he hasn't been in over a week because he was stuck in his apartment with a cold. He describes the scene: "I find them tearing up part of my block." The following lines capture the speaker's apathetic tone as he takes his place to "join the dozen'/ in meek attitudes, watching a huge crane" (Merrill 816). Neither the speaker nor the onlookers seem shocked by this site. The spectators are described as watching the events with "meek attitudes" as a crane devours the street. The point that Merrill makes is that this scene is so common in New York that people become unfazed by the destruction, or they simply accept the inevitability of change in the city.

At this time, New York was enacting incredibly aggressive urban renewal programs that were massive in size and scope. Merrill's speaker comments on these massive changes, noting how the structures were being demolished quickly as they were erected: "As usual in New York, everything is torn down/Before you have had time to care for it" (816). In the following lines the speaker struggles to recall the building that was in the process of being demolished. He can't remember. He asks: "Was there a building at all?" (816). He struggles to remember because everything is torn down so quickly.

The weight of this scene affects the speaker. While he stands observing the street, he realizes that his apartment is in the periphery of the destruction. He imagines what it would look like when his building is torn down: "My walls weathering in the general view." He tries to prepare himself with the reality of losing his home. The speaker understands that there is chance that his apartment could be destroyed at any given moment, especially if the city believes it is in the way of progress.

Merrill tells a story where the vicious cycle of renewal creeps too close for his comfort. As the changes take place on his block, the speaker begins to understand the gravity of the change, commenting: "it is not even as though the new/ Buildings did very much for architecture." The new structures don't bring aesthetic pleasure to the streets. However, the speaker considers the possibility that these changes are able to beatify the neighborhood: "Suppose they did. The sickness of our time requires/ That these as well be blasted in their prime." The person has resigned himself to the ever-changing landscape. He realizes the cyclical nature of the change, where the buildings are destroyed shortly after they have become a part of the neighborhood. The tone of the poem conveys a sense of resigned hopeless in the face of change, rather than hope for a brighter future.

The persona presents change as a sickness that grips the city. The narrative parallels the sickness of the city with the speaker's own conditions. However, while the speaker moves towards recovery, the city continues to suffer from the illness of "our time." This is a sickness of constant change under the idea that newer is better, faster is better, taller is better, etc. The graffiti writers who inherit this city a decade later respond to this landscape. Their aesthetic works are the visual manifestation of their frustration with these manmade spaces. They are symbolically fighting back in terms that match the destructiveness of capital.

The story of radical change that shaped Manhattan would come to disprove the axiom that *change is good*. The projects of urban renewal would only come to further reinforce the social inequities between the classes; the "sickness of our time" would become more apparent. The spread of this epidemic was accelerated with the onset of the automobile, bringing with it a new demand for broad roadways. As World War II ended, the economic landscape of the city shifted from a site of industrial productivity to a post-industrial economy, changing the structure

of New York dramatically. All of the components that made New York a great city before the war, which allowed the city to function as an industrial center, came to work against the city in the years that followed, as New York shifted its purpose to focus on corporations. New York, as a great industrial engine, began to falter.

In the early 1950s, New York transitioned to a post-industrial economy, which marked a painful decline for the city, despite the illusion of progress that included an exponential growth of public works projects. While these changes were afoot decades before the graffiti writers were even born, these are the conditions that would create the anemic city that they would eventually inherit. Historians look at New York after World War II as a city at war with itself. It was the old city of Emma Lazarus battling against Robert Moses's radiant city of tomorrow. If New York wanted to meet the frenetic pace of the future, it had to make the choice to depart from the old city model. The architects and planners who were disturbed by the chaos of this modern city pushed for radical changes; Robert Moses led the charge.

Moses, inspired by the modernist designs of Le Corbusier, was motivated by the bright promises made by the automobile. As Ric Burns states in *New York: A Documentary Film*, the modern city was a place consecrated to the car. Their driving passion for roadways and their lust for the automobile forever change the shape and the economy of the city. If this is true, then Robert Moses was desperately in love with the automobile. Robert Caro biographies Robert Moses in *The Power Broker,* describing Moses as America's greatest road builder: "The most influential single architect of the system over which rolled the wheels of America cars" (Caro 12). Robert Moses' power "was measured in decades" (Caro). Moses shaped all of the city's major roadways over the course of his 44-year career:

With a single exception, the East River Drive, Robert Moses built every one of

those roads. He built the Major Deegan Expressway, the Van Wyck Expressway,

the Sheridan Expressway, the Prospect Expressway, the Whitestone Expressway.

He built the Gowanus Expressway, the Clearview Expressway, the Brooklyn-

Queens Expressway, the Nassau Expressway, and the Staten Island Expressway.

He built the Harlem River Drive and the West Side highway. (Caro 6)

Robert Moses built bridges. He built the Triborough Bridge, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the

Throgs Neck Bridge, the Marine Parkway Bridge, the Henry Hudson, the Cross Bay, and the

Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. "Robert Moses built every one of those bridges" (Caro 6). Robert

Moses shaped the infrastructure of Manhattan more than any other builder and in doing so,

consecrated the city to the car.

By extension, Moses was also one of the most socially influential builders to shape

Manhattan. To accommodate the massive highway program, Robert Moses would first need to

start a massive clearance program, which meant clearing out neighborhoods. As Robert Moses

put it so eloquently, "When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way

with a meat ax" (Burns). Even though he didn't have a political position, as member of the City

Planning Commission, Robert Moses had the city's support to put these programs into place and

he had Title I, which was federal financing for slum clearance integral to urban renewal projects.

Basically, the federal government was going to fund the city to "use its power of eminent domain

to get land from blighted areas to tear down and give to developers to build housing on,

theoretically, for poor people" (Burns). Robert Moses didn't just have the green light to build,

he also had the go-ahead to destroy.

Robert Moses displaced close to a half million New Yorkers in a ten-year period (1946-1956). The majority of the people in that group were minority, low-income families. "Moses threw out of their homes 250,000 persons" (19). Caro writes that Moses:

> tore out the hearts of a score of neighborhoods, communities the size of small
>
> cities themselves, communities that had been lively, friendly places to live, the
>
> vital parts of the city that made New York a home to people. (19)

Whole districts of existing neighborhoods, both in infrastructure and community structures, were demolished to make room for his projects. As Caro points out, these projects mainly displaced the urban poor and low-income residents to make room for middle-income apartments. As their thriving neighborhoods were broken, people scattered, and the sense of community was decentered. Many were relocated to public housing projects. Some moved to the country, leaving the city behind[ii]. Many of these newly disposed low-income residents had nowhere to go but the slums. Those who remained in these poor communities became isolated inside inner cities without any opportunity of social or economic mobility. This narrative is important to the story of the graffiti writers because these were the urban plans that shaped the city (physically and socially) that they would inherit. I want to emphasize the connection between graffiti writers and urban renewal, especially in the Bronx where graffiti originated. The young graffiti writers were born into these tattered, decentered neighborhoods. And in the following decades, graffiti too would be born from the ash heaps of the Bronx.

As a whole, the communities in the Bronx lost their sense of home. The graffiti movement responded to this past in many ways, especially the overwhelming feeling of being unhomed, disconnected from their environment. The visual markings were a way that the young people tried to establish a sense of connection to their place. I read their rhetoric and their

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material practice as an attempt to create a connection between people when they were voiceless, trying to foster a culture when it was in danger of being extinguished, and writing back to a society that was attempting to destroy everything they cared about. They did this by creating elaborate visual markers.

One of Robert Moses' most notorious slum clearance campaigns was in the Bronx; specifically, the neighborhood of East Tremont. This site of destruction is especially critical to the narrative of the graffiti writers because, after all, this was the birthplace of graffiti. Suddenly, the neighborhood of East Tremont found itself standing in the way of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which planned to cut through the center of the Bronx and right through the town's center. In 1948, Robert Moses began construction on this project: "he would run an immense expressway, unprecedented in scale, expense and difficulty of construction, through our neighborhood's heart" (Berman 292). The neighborhood, 60,000 working-class and lower-middle-class people (a diverse group of Jews, Irish, Italians, and Blacks) would need to be removed, as they stood in the way of "progress."

Marshall Berman describes these scenes in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air,* when he recounts these moments from his childhood. He conveys the difficulty of this time: "For ten years, through the late 1950s and early 1960s, the center of the Bronx was pounded and blasted and smashed" (292). Steam shovels and bulldozers consumed the community; the people had to clear out quickly. Just as the speaker and the city in James Merrill's "Urban Convalescence" undergo a same sickness, the people of East Tremont suffered greatly. Berman captures these emotions in his historical account of these events:

> A year after the road came through, what was left went up in smoke. Thus depopulated, economically depleted, emotionally shattered—as bad as the

physical damage had been the inner wounds were worse—the Bronx was ripe for

all the dreaded spirals of urban blight. (293)

Eventually, the Bronx succumbed to the urban blight, such that its name eventually became

synonymous with urban decay and metropolitan nightmares: "drugs, gangs, arson, murder,

terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into garbage, and brick

strewn wilderness" (Berman 290).

Yet, Moses did erect new places to live in these blighted spaces. He was legally

obligated to replace the homes he destroyed. And so, Robert Moses chose to build housing

projects. Caro describes these projects as "bleak, sterile, cheap—expressive of patronizing,

condescension in every line" (20). The element of condescension is apparent in how Robert

Moses's designs made assumptions about the urban poor, specifically in how they didn't require,

or deserve, space for leisure.

The blight in the structures was underscored by the isolation of these areas. The people

in these communities were cut off from one another, interrupted by roadways that one dared not

cross. They were also cut off from the main city. One needs to only look at a current MTA map

of Manhattan to realize that the upper part of Manhattan, the Bronx, is left out. The map reads as

if the 1, A, C, and E trains vanish off to infinity at the North end of the city.   Ultimately, without

any sort of economic stimulation coming into these communities, keeping these communities

thriving, they eventually withered and died. Robert Moses' housing "contributed to the

ghettoization of the city, dividing up the city by color and income (Caro 20).

Ric Burns describes this moment in the Bronx as a projection of America's survivor's

guilt. Since the country had just been though a war without any attacks on our cities, he

sarcastically suggests that we took it upon ourselves to destroy these places. The historian

suggests that the European cities were able to build modern cities up from their ruined, historic spaces. The war provided them a clean slate to make these change. Yet, as New York builders took up a similar blasting campaign to create new buildings, what they really created was an anti-aesthetic in New York, rich only in banality and visual redundancy.

Hal Foster elaborates the idea of the "anti-aesthetic" in his collection of essays by the same title. Foster presents the concept of the "anti-aesthetic": "anti-aesthetic" is the sign not of a modern nihilism which so often transgressed the law only to confirm it but rather of a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them" (xv). Foster is careful to say that the "anti-aesthetic" is not a denial of aesthetics, but the presence of a new aesthetic, the "destructure." "Destructures" are representations used to reinscribe original structures. I'm going to understand this more literally, as I apply the concept of the "anti-aesthetic" to the Bronx, as the destruction of physical structures and the reinscription of the space with new architecture that is actually void of design. This is how I understand "anti-aesthetic," not the absence of concept, but the presence of visual banality, the presence of destruction.

As a result, like the Bronx itself, the housing projects became synonymous with urban decay. Kuntsler explains:

> The rise of America's postwar housing projects—the term *project* itself became a derogatory label—coincided with a mass migration of poor southern rural black to northern cities, where their presence in such large numbers was not warmly welcomed. The *existenzminimum* housing block was just the place to put them, in large, neat, high density stacks, out of the way, occupying a minimum of land. It wasn't the final solution, but it might do as long as the buildings lasted. (79)

The *existenzminimum* (subsistence dwelling) housing, to which Kuntsler is referring, comes from the German New Objectivity movement during the Weimar Construction. Existenzminimum is a minimalist approach to housing in high-density areas. People in these developments had access to cost-effective "healthy dwellings," in exchange for limited access to floor space, fresh air, public transportation, etc. Existenzminimum promoted access to only the bare minimum of necessary resources. When these urban renewal projects were developed on American soil, the visual results were bleak. The city sprouted gaunt towers isolated from the street on isolated tracts of land called "superblocks." John Cheever describes the rectangular tenements in a 1969 journal entry: "Their bleakness is absolute. No man has ever dreamed of a city of such monotonous severity, and there must be some bond between our houses and our dreams" (259). Cheever suggests that the builders took away the lower class' right to dream, to have access to imaginative and sensitive design.

By 1970, the city began to spiral downward in a tailspin brought on by a fiscal crisis. The South Bronx was burning to the extent that it seemed arson was the leading profession. Neighborhoods were abandoned; the only way landlords were able to make money on their property was by burning it down. By 1973, more than 200 city blocks had been burnt to the ground. Two years later, in 1975, New York had an 11 billion dollar debt. The city was bankrupt. In response to submitting a request to the federal government for two million dollars, asking the rest of the country to guarantee it bills, President Ford was clear: the city would enter municipal default. The next day, October 30, 1975, the *Daily News* ran the infamous headline: "Ford to City: Drop Dead!" While Ford didn't say these words exactly, it seemed that New York, one of the greatest cities in the world, was on its deathbed.

This is the city (space and culture) that the graffiti writers were born into: Title I slum clearance, Section VIII housing, a crushing economic recession, and blighted neighborhoods that were burning to the ground because arson was the only way landlords could make money from their properties. Then, by the mid-1970s, this generation of spatially and socially marginalized young people began tagging the trains, adding flashes of color that cut through the cold bleakness like a hot knife. Graffiti was evidence that there was life in these blighted areas and proof that creativity and illumination could come again from this place of suffering and misery. While these young writers were born into ruins and lived in ruins, yet they were about to prove to the city that they were not ruined themselves.

Some legends have it that the first graffiti writer was Cornbread from Philadelphia in the 1970s or Kilroy from the 1940s. According to Joe Austin, JULIO 2014 was New York's first graffiti writer, but it was TAKI 183 who was the first writer to be recognized outside the graffiti communities and in the mainstream culture. This recognition happened in the shape of a *New York Times* piece that ran on July 21, 1971, "Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals." The article tells the story of a 17-year old high school graduate named Demetrius from 183rd Street, between Audubon and Amsterdam Avenues, who began writing his nickname TAKI and 183, his street, all over the city in marker.

Taki's tag was simple. The top line of the tag was the name "TAKI," written in marker. The second line, under his name, was the street where he lived, "183." There were some variations where TAKI 183 was written on the same line. There wasn't any style in the design in this tag, just Taki's handwriting. The most impressive element in Taki's early graffiti writing was in its volume. Randy Kennedy wrote an article for the *New York Times*, "Celebrating Forefather of Graffiti," where he notes that the ubiquity of Taki's tag helped make him into

something of a folk hero for the people of Manhattan. This status was achieved mostly because his tag became visible to many people outside the graffiti community.

As a courier with delivery routes that spanned the city, Taki had access to all of Manhattan, not just Washington Heights (his neighborhood). "He wrote on buildings, buses, subway cars and stations, and even on ice cream trucks" (Austin 49). As the buses, subways, and trucks would travel, they would bring his tag even further, especially as the vehicles left the city. The spots that Taki 183 chose were important to his beginnings because not only were these spaces public, they were high-traffic areas of New York City, mostly traveled by "novelists, journalists, television executives, and other media brokers who might see his tag and mention it to one of the media" (Austin 49).

Since Taki was the first writer to really take on New York City, the public didn't know how to interpret this code –TAKI 183 – that they saw appearing in Manhattan. Before the *New York Times* clarified the writing, TAKI 183 functioned as a source of fear for some residents. Sinking into paranoia and Cold War code cracking, New Yorkers began to read these cryptic messages as terrorist threats. Austin explains:

> Not knowing that the letters and numbers represented a name and a street number when the new writing first appeared, some New Yorkers began to speculate about their meaning. Among these speculations was the suggestion that the letters and numbers were a coded reference to an upcoming terrorist action, a kind of warning for those who could decipher the code. (80)

New Yorkers didn't understand Taki's tag because the majority of the population was excluded from graffiti's verbal of communication, even if they were included in the visual elements that may have piqued their curiosities. While graffiti writing is very public, most of the time the non-

verbal processes of signification of graffiti are not intended for the public at all. In fact, I will

argue that the presence of the language in public places is a tactic initiated by the community of

writers (somewhat unintentionally) to disorient the public from the spaces where they were once

had an intimate, psychogeographic connection.

We can approach this aspect of graffiti as a neo-avant-garde, which will allow us to see

how a small group, a minority, was operating within the physical structures of a space. In this

case, the group redirected the rhetorical structures within a space, using modes of public

language to create a position antagonistic to the main culture. In turn, we will see how

forcework emerged that challenged dominant power structures in the city. As Sell argues in his

book *Race Religion War,* this mode of attack intertwines *"*the symbolic, the performative, the

economic-infrastructural, and the ethical, in a style straight from the rule book of the avant-

garde" (6). These graffiti writers use materialized language to challenge the perception of the

city, the public's psychographic connection to the landscape, as a way to reshape reality in a way

that includes their voices, most of whom have become marginalized by class. Interpreted

symbolically, we can see that there is an invasion, a war, which shifts the marginalized to the

center and decenters the existing center.

There is an initial paradox in this process located in the chance intellectual discomfort,

which graffiti writing has the potential to create in the viewing public. I see this non-aesthetic

dimension of graffiti as a way to develop a break from the dominant modes of communication,

while still operating within mainstream structures of language and space. This is the non-

aesthetic, or social dimension, of graffiti's revolt against dominant power structures.

Even though graffiti writers may not have altered the structures of power in New York

City, as a collective community they challenge these structures. They directly challenge aspects

of public communication: who gets to write publically, who gets to speak publically, and who

gets to be seen publicly. Their rhetoric, graffiti, is a form of materialized language, offers this

challenge as it operates in the visual dimension, the verbal dimension, and forcework of

materialized language. Part of their mode of interference is the visual quality of the writing that

can create a feeling of intellectual discomfort for outsiders, or a moment of inclusion, depending

on the purpose of the rhetoric. Writers could achieve an inclusive mode of rhetoric or something

of an exclusive rhetoric through their style of their designs. There were two dominant styles of

writing that emerged in the mid-1970s: wildstyle and straight letters[iii]. I want to explore each as

a rhetoric of inclusion, or exclusion, respectively.

Straight letters, as the name suggests, are clearly written. These letters may be block

letters, or bubble letters; they are written with great care. These letters are clean. According to

Snyder's *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Underground:* "The straight-letter piece

takes a little longer than a throw-up to complete because of the more technical lettering and the

addition of more colors, usually three or four. The form is also quite legible and is used to get

your name out" (93). Straight letters are clean, but make no mistake, these words have style!

The letters may have elaborate serifs or italics, but the goal here is clarity and the purpose is

communication. Felisbret argues: "writers use straight letters for a variety of reasons, but mainly

for legibility, which is especially important if the general public is the target audience or the

letters are to be read from a distance" (120). While there are different occasions when writers

use straight letters, the main goals for this choice in font is legibility and communication with the

public and visible from great distances.

However, on most occasions, the writers' compositions are intended for other writers

within the community, not the public. In fact, in most cases, the graffiti community cared very

little if the public understands their work, which is a point writers emphasized in interviews with the press (where were there, ironically, to get better insight into this newly emergent aesthetic movement). In another interview, Skeme shares his graffiti wisdom with the audience, this time explaining the exclusivity of the art:

> It's for me, it's not for nobody else to see. I don't care. I don't care about nobody else seeing it or the fact if they can read it or not. It's for me and other graffiti writers that we can read it. All these other people who don't write they're excluded, I don't care about them. They don't matter to me. It's for us.

Skeme makes one thing clear: graffiti is for him and other graffiti writers. While this mode of communication may appear in public spaces, it isn't necessarily a message to the public as much as it is a message to other graffiti writers. This is an interesting position, almost self-contradicting, because writing is, after all, a mode of communication and the writing graffiti writers create are in public spaces. However, the writers felt that their system of language was too complex for the meaning to resonate with the pedestrian population of New York City.

Bordin explains this public/private conflict within graffiti culture, presenting an argument in her multimedia article, "Expanding Lines: Negotiating Space, Body, and Language Limits in Train Graffiti:"

> This mix of letters and image, colors and signs resists easy reading from the viewers; in this way, they create intellectual discomfort in those who are exposed to this practice, since they negotiate the right to intervene in language modifying its long-established code of understanding.

The style of language and the illegal placement on trains bristle up against the "long-established code of understanding" public language. The challenge to what Bordin considers "easy reading"

creates an intellectual discomfort within an area, which I argue could stem from the viewer's psychographic connection to that area. The viewer/reader may have a conception of what the language could mean, but they don't have access to the significance of the code they see because that definition is validated within the speaking/writing community.

The specific style that is designed by writers for writers to achieve this shift is "wild style." Unlike how straight letters are intended for the general public, apparent in their visual and verbal clarity, wild style seems illegible. The letters are abstracted to the point where they are almost unrecognizable. Tracy 168 claims he was the inventor of wild style in the mid-1970s. He explains in an interview with *New York Magazine*: "I started wild style. Wild means untamed, and style means I have class. So I was like an animal but with respect." His style behaved as an untamed, classy animal that was in constant motion.

Another graffiti writer, Lee, explains: "When wild style came around in the mid-seventies, it was sculpture in motion. They broke down the alphabet and turned it into a three-dimensional thing." A photo of Tracy 168, posing next to a freshly painted piece, provides a clear illustration of this style. In this image we can see the train car painted from the windows down. A thick tangle of red lines is sprayed over the white section. There are dabs of red within the amorphous blob that carve out the counter spaces inside of the "R," "A," and "C." However, for the untrained eye the lettering is abstract to the point that there don't seem to be any letters at all. Felisbret describes this lettering quite beautifully: "[The letters] bend, fold, interlock, overlap, twist, and break into a harmonious reinterpretation of letters. The variety of combinations applied to letters is limited only by the artist's imagination" (120). Wild style has a fluid beauty where the letters flow together in a chaotic cacophony of lines.

A writer's wild style is the way they formed a signature presence in the city. According to Felisbret, "Many consider wild style to be the defining arena of a writer's creativity and the aspect of writing that most distinguishes it from other art forms" (120). Wild style is significant in its departure, both from art and from clearly written letter forms. This mode of writing is like no other form of public writing. Earlier forms of graffiti borrowed from advertising and existing visual rhetoric: "Many early styles, such as bubble letters and block letters, were derived from advertising and comic-book art, but unique and original letterforms were continually emerging" (120). Wild style was a sign that the graffiti subculture had truly developed its own visual vernacular because it was radically different, and through this difference, a challenge to mainstream languages in the city[iv].

Graffiti writers developed a style of writing design that was different from all other existing typefaces that came before. The great flourishes of font, the bright design, and the movement captured in the letterforms were all radically new both visually and politically. Graffiti pushed language into the visual realm, and in doing so, inscribed an additional layer of meaning upon the words, one beyond verbal communication. The letters and their functions become performative in what the words are communicating. I argue that graffiti is a mode of writing that conveys the very creation of the mark, the gesture of the writer making the mark, and a larger meaning that moves beyond the communicative language meaning of the word.

Wild style is a deformance of font achieved through the distortion of letter shapes. To me "destructure" is the development of a new structure developed by the deconstruction of the original structures; the results might have an uncanny resemblance, but not a direct reference to the original. The "deformance" is the performance that incorporates undoing of the original concept in the new meaning. I understand the main difference between "destructure" and

"deformance" is in how deformance is based in aesthetic concepts and highly visual. Therefore, I approach graffiti as a deformance of language articulated through the visual distortion of letter shapes. Critics, like Jeff Ferrell, consider graffiti to be "a crime of style" (15). The reason why style was so important was because it gave the graffiti writers a chance to create text in a way that had never been done before. Graffiti writers manipulated the shape and letters into forms that were uniquely their own. They show that this visual object is used as a letter, but also that it doesn't perform as a letter is understood to perform. Not only were the writers changing the representation of the alphabet, they were changing the meaning of the words through visual representation.

As we have discussed previously, wild style was a sure sign that graffiti culture had become its own subversive, counterculture movement, even while operating within the mainstream landscape. The deformance of type translated into a deformance of communication systems, a distortion of verbal/visual meaning, which effectively personalized the meaning of words. Bordin explains:

> From a commonly accepted abstract means of communication for facilitating intra-personal communication, written language becomes a property of each and every writer who can modify, enlarge, or deform written words, using them in troubling and personal ways, grabbing the right to modify alphabet and language in new codes that are not understandable by everyone.

These writers modified the standard system of communication to their individual practices, taking a "commonly accepted" means of communication and making it personal. Therefore, they took language, one of the unifying components of a community, and used it to disconnect the larger speaking community, transforming the language into something for the minority, their

avant-garde, which is not, by definition, the purpose of language, particularly in a society dependent on standard English and universal advertising messages. Bordin explains that the reason why the public is so troubled by graffiti is because "graffiti language . . . troubles the conventional framework by means of which we make sense of communication in the modern world." In this case, graffiti, by contrast, points out the commercialized language in a space. Most public language is advertising rhetoric or utilitarian signage. Graffiti troubles this conventional framework for public language by offering personal messages in public spaces where no such messages exist, only corporate language.

Effectively, graffiti interrupts the language we use to describe the modern world because it hijacks language for personal usage. Instead of usable, clear language in public spaces, the writers are creating codes that are only accessible by those capable of deciphering the system by a set of rules created within, and understood by, the community of writers. These rules demand a different reading style, one that not only accounts for the verbal messages, but a reading style that considers non-aesthetic dimensions or the non-verbal components of language. One critical element of graffiti's nonverbal, non-aesthetic dimension is the assumed gesture and the risk inscribed in the public tags, pieces, throwies, etc. While the public may not have been the intended audience for the verbal communication of graffiti language, they could certainly pick up presumed performativity of the writer. Although the writer's skilled act of writing (And climbing fences) is absent at the time of reading (if all goes well), the precarious placement of the tags imply the effort that went into the making of the mark. The language structures bear with them the mark of the trespass and gesture of the writer, who is invisible, yet looms like a specter within each tag. Graffiti communicates faith, risk, crisis, urgency, and presence. Mostly, it is the communication of trespass and transgression, the non-aesthetic dimension within graffiti.

There is an incredible amount of risk and danger in graffiti writing, mainly in the act of trespass. The writers usually sneak around at night, especially so at the beginning of the movement, when they hadn't yet begun to disguise themselves as painters or transit workers to blend in with the city spectacle and its ongoing maintenance needs. Early writers scaled walls, climbed fences, pushed through barbed-wire boundaries, and fought off dogs (thanks to Mayor Koch). All of these feats were achieved in the treacherous dark of night, which provided the writers a cloak in which to hide from authorities. Norman Mailer highlights the writers' methods in "The Faith of Graffiti," an essay published in *Esquire* magazine*:*

> Sometimes the graffiti writers would set out from their own turf at dark, yet not
>
> begin to paint until two in the morning, hiding for hours in the surest corners of
>
> the yard or in and under the trains. (88)

Graffiti writers would hide in the train yards, moving through the darkness; if they did not want to paint at night, they hid until it was bright enough to tag a train. This was an incredible amount of risk because of the hazards presented in these spaces. One writer, SHARP, explains that he risks his life almost every time he goes out to tag, especially in the train yards. He states:

> You risk your life every time you bomb a train. I've almost been hit by a train,
>
> almost killed by electrocution and, not only do you have to be aware of those
>
> types of inconveniences, you also have to look over your shoulder to see who
>
> doesn't like you this week or whatever this case may be. (Qtd. in Austin 176)

These writers were absolutely risking their lives. Their stories are tales of facing off cops or dogs; breaking into places, or breaking bones, etc. This was dangerous stuff**.**

The large words on the broad sides of fast moving trains communicate this risk. As the trains circulate through cities, the viewers will see these words in precarious positions.

Eventually, the reader may come to realize that this word was not only painted on the train, but it was put there by someone. The decomercialization of the language, the personal use of the space, communicates that the tag was writing was created by someone who was not authorized to write on the train.   The writer's risk is woven into the writing, which is part of the reason why graffiti becomes so intimidating. Someone literally risked his or her life to put some word on the side of a train car so everyone in the city could read this word. Well, why? What is this supposed to mean?

More than the risk, the writing is embedded with the act of the trespass, the violation of space. Carlo McCormick defines this term within the context of "graffiti culture" in *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art:*

> The act of going too far, of crossing the proverbial line, is what we call trespass.
> One of those delightful words for which we can thank the French, from the prefix
> *tres* (beyond) and *passer* (to pass), the original meaning of trespass was all about
> transgression, offense, and sin, as its use in the Bible will remind us. It took until
> the middle of the 15th century for trespass to acquire the meaning of 'unlawful
> entry,' as it was first recorded in the forest laws of the Scottish Parliament. (15)

Graffiti is the ultimate linguistic trespass. To accomplish these compositions, the writer must cross literal (material) barriers, like breaking and entering train lines.   They must also transgress social barriers, writing in spaces that are both legally off limits. Finally, they are writing on surfaces that are socially taboo; graffiti writers were the only persons in the city (aside from corporate entities) who were writing on the trains. Graffiti bears the mark of the act, communicating that not only did someone take a risk to make the mark, but also that they willingly entered an unauthorized space. Graffiti communicates this breach of space, and

conveys this blatant disregard of social norms. There is a fear that is conjured by these acts because of how they demonstrate that the writer has violated those delicate structures that keep the city organized.

This trespass and this mark perform as trace structures, communicating the specter of the graffiti writer. The writer was once there, which we can tell because they left their mark, but they are no longer there because they have completed the work and they have also completed the full expression of their gesture. The concept of the trace structure allows us to understand how the writers become present through their absence. The writer symbolically travels with their mark, communicating with their mark that they broke the rules by placing a loud swath of color on a cold, dull car. While they are not present for each ride, they are the specter within the tag, the youth who violated the fabric of society that disregards the tacit social agreement that keeps everyone organized. These markings communicate that someone was there when we weren't looking, that this act was committed in a public space, but happened undetected.

Thus, the force of this writing functioned in two ways. As discussed above, it was literally present in the gestures of the writer (their actual kinetic energy expending in the act of writing) and the physical motion of the trains as they traveled through the cities. However, the force that I explain reaches its fullest expression in the redirection, or the reaction, which is expressed by the viewing public. In the case of the graffiti movement, the reaction was fear, and this was expressed by changes in ridership on the subways and the legislative reaction of the city.

In March of 1956, Edmond G. Love published an article in *Harpers* by the title "Subways are for Sleeping." In this article, Love profiles a homeless man, Henry Shelby, and the way he lives in New York, struggling, but with dignity intact. One of the most astonishing things about the article is, as the title suggests, that Shelby sleeps on subway trains. This narrative is a sharp

incongruity from the way the public saw the subways a few decades later, which was something closer to Dante's version of hell. The *perception* of the subways changed and people of New York began to fear these tunnels. Slowly, these perceptions of fear redirected the lives of commuters traveling through the city. Historian Jonathan Soffer addresses this phenomenon:

> Bombing drove riders from the subway, and for those who remained graffiti underlined the general neglect and disrepair of the subways. While graffiti on the train exteriors was sometimes good art, most of its target audience loathed it, especially the ugly tagging of the interior trains. (236)

Graffiti became the visual rhetoric to which the passengers were reacting.

Spikes in crime proved that the subways had definitely changed by end of the 1970s; the narrative about these spaces changed, too. There are countless stories about crimes in the subways. There were even tales of riders who would go so far as to change their clothes, disguising themselves on their commute to work so they looked like vagrants, all so they could avoid becoming a target. According to Malcolm Gladwell, "During the 1980s, New York City averaged well over 2,000 murders and 600,000 serious felonies a year" (136). The subways were in a state of crisis and a moment of chaos.

A mythology developed about New York's underground, but the most outstanding, and true, story of this time is that of Bernhard Goetz, the man who came to be known as the subway vigilante. On December 22, 1984, Goetz was riding the number two train downtown. There were twenty-two people on the car and four rowdy young people, who they were all trying to avoid. The youths began to antagonize Goetz. They set him off: "Goetz reached into his pocket and pulled out a chrome-plated five shot Smith and Wesson .38, firing at each of the four youths in turn" (Gladwell 134). Someone pulled the emergency brake on the train. The passengers ran

into the next car. When the conductor confronted Gotez, asking him why he did it, Goetz

declined an answer: "He walked through the doorway at the front on the car, unhooked the

safety chain, and jumped down onto the tracks, disappearing into the dark of the tunnel"

(Gladwell 134). Goetz, known as the subway vigilante, was one New Yorker who fought back.

Koch was fighting a literal war, the war on crime, with a symbolic war, focusing on

erasing graffiti. The mayor was very conscious of these efforts. According to the narrative

presented in Soffer's text, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City,* Koch came across

James Q. Wilson and George Kelling's theory of criminology, published in *The Atlantic* in 1982,

known as "The Broken Window Theory." This theory is as follows:

> Disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental
>
> sequence. Social psychologists and police officers tend to agree that if a window
>
> in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon
>
> be broken. This is as true in nice neighborhoods as in run-down ones. Window-
>
> breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because some areas are
>
> inhabited by determined window-breakers whereas others are populated by
>
> window-lovers; rather, one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one
>
> cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing. (2-3)

The broken windows carry a visual signification, implying that the community does not care

about the disorder.   If the window is unrepaired, this will encourage further transgressions

because since no one repairs the window it sends a signal that the windows are of no value

economically or emotionally, so it isn't offensive if people should come by and break the

windows.   Snyder explains that the theory "argues that petty crime increases the propensity for

more serious criminal activity—and [NYC] quickly enacted 'zero tolerance' policies for many

petty crimes such as graffiti writing, subway umping, and vagrancy" (5). Therefore, if graffiti was left on the subways, it brought with it a visual mark signifying that no one cared. This sent a larger signal of lawlessness that would, theoretically, encourage other crimes. In short, the "Broken Window Theory" suggests graffiti is a visual invitation to commit other crimes.

Empowered by this new theory, the law enforcement in New York City could arm itself against graffiti with powerful legislation. Koch applied this theory to address New York City's petty crimes in the 1980s, with a specific focus on the graffiti problem. Koch attacked graffiti because of what it stood for in New York. Soffer observes that graffiti suddenly became "a greater priority than broken subway doors, cracked undercarriages, or deteriorated tracks and signals, all of which were far more directly related to degraded service" (236). The reason for the emphasis was aesthetic and emotional. If the city could erase the graffiti on the trains, authorities could also eradicate one of the loudest signs of lawlessness.

The subway writers pushed back against the city's crackdown on petty crimes. In doing so, they developed some of the most iconic images on New York's trains, engaging how graffiti was recast as a crime. There are two trains that illustrate the writers' antagonistic relationship with the city: "Crime Don't Pay" and "Crime in the City." The first masterpiece, which is somewhat more famous, is a collaborative piece designed by Skeme and painted by Skeme, Dez, and Mean 3. The group painted two whole cars. Skeme and Dez painted one car, which read "All You See." The second car, completed by Skeme and Mean 3, completed the statement "Crime in the City." The message was written in big block silver letters. The red outline around the block lettering made the letters look like they were popping off the train. The statement was obvious and there was no better method of delivery than the subway car. The people of New York came to find crime not only synonymous with graffiti writing.

A writer who wrote under the name Lee did the second piece, "Crime Don't Pay." This was a whole-car piece that featured two faces on the left of the train, of which we can only see their profiles. One figure is angry, articulated with a clenched jaw. The other face is more subversive, with an eye reaching back to look at the angry expression. It's almost a duality of good and evil. Then, in clear bubble letters, the writer paints: "Crime Don't Pay;" the words are written windows down. The writer scrawled his name, in large white letters, placed above the statement. Lee's larger-than-life police officer is a cartoon figure done in high parody. Since this character is painted on the outside of a train car, he travels throughout the city chasing his badguy. Both Lee's and Skeme's trains engage the anti-graffiti legislation in the most public statement the writers could make, and they broadcasted their messages out to the whole city.

By directly engaging the urban environment, and articulating the paranoia of the time with a sense of humor, the writers create a sharp contrast between the harsh legislation and their works of art. A dissonance is conjured between the bleak spaces where the trains travel, decimated with *real* problems, and the pop of playful color the train cars provide to these areas. The presence of these works certainly questions why/how graffiti became elevated to such a great priority. The works also question the position of the graffiti writers. Are they mocking the anti-graffiti legislation, or are they joining in the city's campaign to fight crime? In many ways, the writers were just as concerned about crime and safety in the city as the rest of the residents; perhaps they were even more concerned because they were traveling untamed parts of the city at night. In addition to largely emerging from downtrodden neighborhoods in upper Manhattan, graffiti writers relied on safety in the city to carry out their works. Maybe they were on the side of the city. After all, "crime don't pay."

Graffiti writers have had a precarious relationship with the city throughout their history.

While from the outside point of view it seems that the writers are trying to fight the city, they are actually fighting to have their voices heard in the city. We realize this when we explore the example provided by the "Freedom Train." In 1976, the nation was celebrating its bicentennial. Members of the graffiti community--Caine, Mad 103, and Flame One--collaborated to create an impressive masterpiece for the city of New York. They worked all night in the Flushing yard, painting an entire number 7 train in patriotic reds, whites, and blues. According to Austin's account, "They worked in the dark to paint all eleven cars, top to bottom, in a coordinated bicentennial theme, anticipating the city's elaborate Fourth of July celebration" (2). All available accounts of the train said it was beautiful. However, very few people saw the "Freedom Train" except for a limited group of MTA workers and the writers who painted the car because the Freedom Train never ran. Austin explains:

> Rather than allow the work to become a legitimate part of the national celebration (thus legitimizing the writers as participants in the civic community), New York City's transit authorities pulled the train out of service, uncoupled the individual cars in the yard, and destroyed all of the paintings. The three writers were arrested at their homes the next day. (2)

There are no known photos of the Freedom Train. It was erased. The graffiti writers not only painted a car, they created a gift that they wanted to share with the people of New York. Even though the style fit in with the moment, the city refused their gift. Had New York allowed the "Freedom Train" to run, it would have been a statement that New York condoned graffiti. Through erasing the train, New York made a bigger statement to the graffiti writers, which was one of refusal.

The only method that worked to stop train graffiti was to discourage the writers on a personal level, which the authorities accomplished by refusing all of their work. The MTA realized that they could accomplish this move simply by denying these writers the fame and acceptance they craved. They assumed that if they stopped the trains, the graffiti too would stop. New York refused to let the trains run if they were painted. This statement was more powerful than cleaning the trains because it sent a message that the city would rather shut down the trains, inconveniencing everyone, than allow a graffiti car run; this was how the city finally won the battle against graffiti on the trains. The victory wasn't in keeping the trains clean; it was in the gesture of stalling the train with a gesture of refusal turned back on graffiti writers, one that acknowledged that the city saw their work, but refused to send it out to the public.

This stalling gesture proves two important concepts. Firstly, graffiti writers weren't fighting a war to erase New York, but they were engaged in a battle to be seen and heard in the social and physical city spaces. When the trains did not run, and their works were not seen, they lost the fight. Secondly, this demonstrated that this type of graffiti needed to be public in order to function, as it drew power from its presence in public spaces. This understanding was reinforced as graffiti slowly began to enter the gallery spaces during 1970-1980, a change encouraged by the city's crackdown on the writing.

Meanwhile, a change in the value of the writing was occurring as graffiti artists began to transition into the gallery system. Of course, the works were easily moved to the canvases, but the aura of the art was lost in the process. The essence of the work wasn't destroyed by the act of reproduction, but through extraction. The forcework of graffiti, which made the form powerful, projected from context and medium more than the message written on the wall. The attempts to bring graffiti to the gallery, and the struggle to carry over the potency of these

compositions, show that when language is materialized it draws meaning from material context, from its physical location. This is how materialized language, especially graffiti, becomes a force. The impact of the train graffiti was different than the graffiti in the galleries in how it connected writing communities throughout the city. The subway cars were kinetic; they were energy, a forcework.

The force expressed with graffiti's aesthetic was in the motion: moving trains, the messages that traveled, and the redirection of the city. The redirection is articulated in New York's harsh anti-graffiti legislation, but there was also a definite psychosocial response that can't be accounted for as easily. In many ways, graffiti redirected the motion of the city, the people, whether it was the graffiti writers who began to travel into different neighborhoods or New Yorkers who saw the rhetoric as something scary, and so avoided specific neighborhoods. There is a clear action, and reaction, with graffiti that transforms the painting into a force.

This is the reason why graffiti doesn't perform in the same way when spectators see these works exhibited in a gallery. It's not about "selling out" per se, but about losing the opportunity to truly destructure the semiotics of the urban space. The forces derived from materialization of language, the same forces that make the audience aware of the space, are lost in translation. Also, the works lose the avant-garde battle with physical city spaces, operating as an expression of reclaiming city spaces.

There is a scene in *Style Wars* that captures one of the first gallery shows featuring New York City graffiti. The scene is told as a collage of interviews that feature patrons, curators, reporters, and artists. The collectors refer to graffiti as the hottest thing since Pop Art. They comment on the excitement expressed in the color and design of these works. One curator states the movement is exciting, but it does not seem exciting at all. The writers seem nervous and out

of place. The movement seems to be bound up and, for the first time, immobilized. Regardless

of the buzz in the scene, it seems clear to me that graffiti lost its movement, quite literally, when

it was installed in galleries.[v]

CHAPTER TWO

SUCCESS OF THE AVANT-GARDE IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

In the fall of 2011, I was asked to teach one section of "Discover New York" at St. John's University. This class is a requirement for all first year and incoming St. John's students, mainly because the university is located in Queens, NY (located only 13 miles outside of Manhattan or ninety minutes by car). As the name implies, "Discover New York" is designed to give St. John's students an opportunity to discover the city for themselves. The course also gives professors an opportunity to try out an interdisciplinary course design dynamic enough to take one New York City as a subject of inquiry.

Each professor is asked to apply their scholarly slant to their section of "Discover New York." Based on my interests, I designed my version of the course around themes of technology and visual studies. I developed a central question to guide the class: *How have turns in technology impacted, and forever changed, how we see New York?* Together, we embarked on a survey of technology that cut across New York's historical, cultural, and geographic divides. We began with a study of medical technologies in the 18th century (yellow fever epidemics), we explored the way electricity helped New York to develop nightlife in the 20th century (Harlem Jazz), and we wrapped up with a look at 21st-century digital culture (the spectacular advertisements in Times Square).

Throughout our discussions, I encouraged my students to think about the city as a rhetorical space (the symbolic function), a physical location (the map function), and as a realm of consciousness (how it functions in our minds: how we know/remember/perceive NYC as a psychogeography). We spoke about the layers of reality in the city and the simulation that

creates unrealities. We explored how structures of vision are informed by power. We discussed

how sudden ruptures in the continuum of visuality could divert these structures.

To illustrate one of these points, I developed a lesson on visual interruptions in the 21st-

century city. I chose a work from Barbara Kruger, *I Shop Therefore I Am,* and I projected the

image on the smart board at the front of the room. I began the exercise by asking the students to

write down their initial reaction to the piece as a focused free write. I planned to base the

following group discussion on this "Write Now" exercise.

Then, like most classes, the lesson was abruptly derailed by my students' reactions. In

the time it took me to dim the lights and walk to the last row of desks at the back of the room,

one of my students spun around in his chair, calling out excitedly: "I've seen that before!" This

student began typing frenetically on his iPad. He held up his screen once he found what he was

looking for. I could see the image from the back of the room. I immediately recognized the

familiar Futura bold font, the slender italic word, "Supreme," leaning against a red background.

The image looked exactly like Kruger's work, but I knew that this other image wasn't hers. This

was something else. This was a rip off. This was a designer using Kruger's techniques, the

same ones she uses to subvert power structures of the spectacle, to sell t-shirts.

I took the class' reaction as a point of entry into a conversation about how artists can be

subversive by manipulating and imitating power structures in the city instead of simply creating

a shocking statement that stands out to make a point. I will explore this mode of activism as an

avant-garde here in my second chapter. I argue that works of Barbara Kruger demonstrate that

neo-avant-gardes are not only possible, but also active because of the ways they navigate this

cycle of recuperation and not in spite of the ways they manipulate the culture industry. This

position is a turn against Bürger's dominant claim in avant-garde studies, suggesting that a neo-

avant-garde is impossible for these same reasons I argue that it is possible: proximity to mass culture. I don't believe these avant-gardes are located on the outside of culture, on the margins, but suggest that they are actively operating within the center and consciously using processes of recuperation to accomplish their agendas. I will tell this story in this chapter with case studies provided by Kruger and Shepard Fairey.

Also, I resist Bürger's inclination to locate avant-gardes in aesthetic structures. Instead, I suggest that the avant-garde is a function and I argue that this function exists beyond aesthetics, even if visual works initiates these functions.   Yes, we are going to survey works that are based in aesthetics, but I argue that it is the forcework generated from these points where we find an avant-garde gesture in the form of a forcework. Again, I consider forcework to be a critical component, if not a defining component, of neo-avant-gardes. I argue that the language-based compositions in this study, while aesthetic in nature, are active in the sense of how they achieve their goals by traveling (quite literally) through the culture industry to redirect the spectator (physically). The examples provided by visual language provide a vivid example of how a visual structure can travel beyond the aesthetic function, or in these cases, the language function.

I follow the work done by these compositions to their final expression, which I argue is recuperation, a process where these agitational works are absorbed by the popular culture. Hal Foster explains this process, relative to neo-avnat-gardes, in *Return of the Real,* where he explains that the function of the neo-avant-garde is "to recuperate and review moments, themes, and questions, and so on, of the historical avant-garde" (Harding 268). I agree with Harding's analysis of this concept, when he suggests that "in most cases the avant-garde is privileged, and neo-avant-gardes are described as merely commercial and competitive with the original avant-garde"(268). However, I argue that these neo-avant-gardes have the power to displace, revise,

and open "new discursive frameworks"(268) beyond historic avant-gardes; I argue that these movements are able to do so with the same processes of recuperation, which repeat and reconstruct the social structures as a way to refuse and displace a particular aspect of a political institution. In the cases we survey here, we will see how Kruger and Fairey design their works to become absorbed by the culture industry.

Again, this position resists dominant claims that recuperation renders counter culture movements useless. While many critics, like Bürger, believe this gesture evacuates an avant-garde of its dynamism, I argue the opposite. I believe that a centralized critical position within mainstream culture gives these neo-avant-gardes an advantage as it allows them deeper access to the culture industry. In effect, these forces interact with the kinetic, continuum of the consumer as a way to divert them from their daily routine. The final step, the cultural assimilation, collapses the art/life divide, bringing the force into the lived experience of the consumer.

Examining the forcework of a composition is an approach that opens the possibilities of critical vanguard studies. As proposed by Mike Sell, this theoretical shift allows us to consider radical gestures, or performative interventions, for deeper review. Only when we open our study to think of avant-gardes as a mode of performativity can we begin to understand the aspects of forcework engaged. Only then can we begin to understand that avant-gardes are not aesthetic based, but gestures that do work.

This chapter tells the story of Barbara Kruger and Shepard Fairey during the late 1990s and early 2000s, within the context of accelerated capitalism and culture industry. These artists have been grouped accordingly because they are contemporaries and resist similar social, cultural, and political conditions within the same time frame. Further, they also invoke similar strategies to create and to exhibit their language-based works. Both artists take aim at the

commodity spectacle by creating works that not only are in commodity culture but also rely on forces of consumerism to reach their intended audience. Their careful negotiation of the culture industry allows Kruger and Fairey to gain a critical vantage point from which they can invade, rupture, and critique the flow of capital in a city; they operate from within. In fact, Barbara Kruger, who would influence Shepard Fairey's work, developed a visual campaign that came to unsettle the biggest commodity spectacle of all: New York's Times Square. Years later, Fairey would develop a similar campaign that used materialized words to unsettle a presidential election.

In this chapter, I will discuss the strategies that Kruger and Fairey use to unsettle city spaces with intentions of rupturing the commodity spectacle. I will demonstrate that they enact an avant-garde material strategy and thus create a forcework that relies on audience engagement and processes of recuperation. Each of these artists accomplishes media interventions, which are large-scale public works that imitate the same modes of manipulation used in the advertisements and propaganda they target.

Much of Kruger and Fairey's works look very similar to bombastic propaganda, specifically the techniques used by Russian Constructivists, which we will discuss later in this chapter. Kruger's works, more than Fairey's, can be described as photomontage in that her compositions make use of stock images and fonts. These photo collages appropriate American iconography from the 1940s and 1950s, recognizable black and white images of seemingly familiar Americana/American nostalgia. Her careful cropping of these photographs works to defamiliarize, and sometimes to disembody, the subjects in the collages. Kruger lays banners of red, containing white lettering, over these photographs to deliver icy statements in the clipped language of advertising rhetoric. The overall effect is a cacophony of semiotics, a collision of

signs and signifiers, which destabilize the way the viewer would typically derive meaning from the picture, language, and the ideological structures engaged by the work.

I Shop is one of Kruger's best-known works. The composition is a black and white image of a hand cropped off at the wrist. The hand is a photograph that has been collaged onto a non-descript grey background. The hand itself is banal and anonymous. However, through this anonymity, it gains the illusion of recognizable sort of everywhereness. It seems plain. Kruger distorts this hand by manipulating the contrast and skew of the image. The way the hand inserts itself in the frame is intrusive and disembodied, as it enters from the lower right corner. Kruger imposes a red rectangle over the fingertips of the hand. The figure is presented to the view much in the same way a shopper presents a credit card to a cashier. Through this gesture and the shape of the red rectangle, the object takes on the symbolic efficacy of a credit card.

The red rectangle contains bold white letters (Futura Bold Italic font). The statement written on the card is the structure of the familiar Cartesian aphorism: "I think therefore I am" (Cogito ergo sum)[vi]. Kruger reworks this statement, revising it to read: "I shop therefore I am." At first glance, the audience may confuse these slogans or anticipate the trajectory of the sentence to be the original "I think therefore I am"; the confusion is part of the statement. This cultural assumption plays with our social programming. However, Kruger's use and representation of this philosophical proposition takes on a whole new meaning, informed by the subject, the font, design, and advertising format of the picture. All of these elements work together to give the proclamation a more emphatic weight. Kruger derails the aphorism, but co-opts the aphoristic ring of the Cartesian expression.

The original philosophical proposition, "I think therefore I am," was used to prove one's existence through systematic doubt. The act of thinking proves that the being exists. If the

person doubts that they exist, and this doubt is conjured in the shape of a thought, this still means that the person exists because simply because they are thinking. This proposition is one of the foundational elements of Western philosophy; it is the foundation of all existence and knowledge.

When Kruger hijacks this message, she repurposes the nature of human existence—and undermines the very idea of philosophy. She writes: "I shop therefore I am." In this syllogism, a person's existence is predicated on shopping. If you shop, you exist, or to exist we must shop. We are only validated through our purchases. In his book, *Unnatural Wonders: Essays from the Gap Between Art and Life,* critic Arthur Danto explains the teeth in Kruger's statement: "There is a certain dignity in being an entity whose essence is thought, but something frivolous in being one whose essence is shopping" (64). To think of oneself as a thinking being is fulfilling, while to reimagine oneself as a being whose sole purpose is to consume, and therefore be consumed, is a troubling thought. In this expression, Kruger points out how we are recast as consumers within the realm of capitalism. We are only viewed as consumers.

Actually, some of us are viewed as consumers more than others…

While the hand is ambiguous, rather androgynous, the presence is undeniably female. As the subject is validated as a consumer—she shops to exist—we begin to speculate the subject is female, making this assumption based on cultural conditioning. Since this subject is validated by trivialities, the existence of woman is trivialized. Danto expands his reading of Kruger's "I Shop Therefore I am":

> There is a certain dignity in being an entity whose essence is thought, but
> something frivolous in being one whose essence is shopping. The later can be
> seen as an identity that has been thrust upon women as part of the social

construction of gender. Women have internalized a role, essential to the

operations of society as a mechanism, of consumption. (64)

Kruger is offering a feminist critique of representation in how women are stereotypically

portrayed in American culture as consumers, shoppers, shopaholics, etc. Kruger challenges the

construction of feminine identity, which is culturally established by acts of consumption. In *I*

Shop Therefore I Am, Kruger creates this message by weaving the language into the idiomatic,

Cartesian structure and overlaying this statement on the gesture, image, and disembodied subject

of consumerism.

Kruger often phrases her statements in the second-person point of view, forcing the

viewer into the role of the recipient of the message to whom Kruger is addressing. In this

position, Kruger's work is effective because she pushes the audience into the role of the subject.

Danto explains: "Text and image together give a pretty fair picture of the relationship between

'I' and 'You' if I am Barbara Kruger and You are anyone within range of her voice. It is

relationship of 'I' getting under Your skin" (62). In this example, *I Shop Therefore I Am*, the "I"

pronoun refers to the individuals looking at the work. In this move where the image forces the

viewer into the subject role, the composition begins to act as an articulation of the viewer's inner

monologue, or a performance of the viewer's thoughts where they predicate their own existence

on shopping.

Pretty harsh, huh?

The overall effect of Kruger's work puts the recipient on edge. The audience is forced to

face the facts, confront their personal irony, and deal with who they are and how they relate to

the world and others. I argue that this affective response (the feeling of being freaked out,

insulted, or annoyed) is the personal, contingent space from where the forcework emerges and

from where any possible political effect can be found. The way Kruger pushes her audience into the subject role initiates the forcework processes that I define as an integral part of this kind of avant-garde work because, suddenly, the composition becomes about them and they might need to do something about it.

I have explained this concept at length in the introduction, but to summarize, I consider forcework as a mode of work that the composition accomplishes, which manifests in the kinetic redirection of the viewer. I consider the full expression of Kruger's forcework as a three-step process. These gestures, focused on in this study, include stalling the spectator, redirecting their movement in a space, and the act of purchasing a work designed for retail. The final step initiates processes of recuperation, which will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

Kruger's work in Times Square demonstrates the first two of these described gestures where the spectator is stalled and redirected, as a result of discovering they had been pushed into a subject role. When I say that the subject is "redirected," I mean that they are brought to a different place in the city, psychogeographically, as a result of the work. The "stalling gesture" is when the spectator is stopped in their tracks when they discover the composition. Part of the stalling gesture is that somatic feeling of being overwhelmed. Being emotionally and spatially overwhelmed is part of the strategies used to accomplish forcework. What better space to use as a mechanism for overwhelming than Times Square?

It is important to underscore that Kruger chose to engage Times Square as a spatial medium and a psychogeographical node. The work is site specific; the rhetorical location informs the meaning of the work. Times Square is an integral part of New York City, geographically (sitting smack in the center of Midtown) and psychogeographically (lingering in America's consciousness and a site of historical events and forgetting). As explained by James

Traub in *The Devil's Playground: A Century of Pleasure and Profit in Times Square,* the location

of the space made Times Square a center of amusement for the entire nation:

> Times Square, that is, became New York's Zone of popular culture and
>
> entertainment because it was so readily accessible to the millions who lived and
>
> worked in the city, or who were visiting from out of town; and because this
>
> pleasure district occupied the center of the city that was itself the center of the
>
> nation's culture, Times Square came to be seen as the capital of fun, the place that
>
> instructed the nation in the fine art of play and furnished the dreams of young
>
> people . . . (xvi)

Times Square is the center of New York City. To emphasize Traub's point, this space functions

as the nucleus of New York's popular culture, and by extension, the center of the nation's

popular culture. And, of course, it is central to the nation's sense of time, apparent every New

Year's Eve.

The psychological significance of this space was especially apparent when Times Square,

like the city itself, went through a socioeconomic shift. In the 1950's, Times Square represented

a city booming with potential; it overflowed with advertising. However, by the 1970s, Times

Square had changed. Traub explains: "In the seventies, Times Square still stood for something,

though what it stood for was the collapse of the urban core" (xvii). Times Square in the 1970s

was the bile duct collecting New York's social ills. By the 1980s, according to Kruger, "all the

smoke and mirrors in the world can't dim the harsh realities facing us in this time of AIDS,

urban crisis, and collapsing infrastructure" (19). It was bad.

As Kruger explains, in 1984, the Municipal Art Society launched a campaign to "'Keep

Times Square Alive'. The group emphasized the importance as an entertainment district, [The

Municipal Art Society] pushed for the continuance of blatant advertising, illuminated signage, and semi-bawdy indulgence" (17). Times Square was brash, gaudy, loud, and unapologetic. Yet, while the city allowed the signage to stay, the other social problems needed to disappear. Instead of attending to the causes of these social issues (homelessness, disease, prostitution, illicit drug use, etc.), the city solved the problem by making these symptomatic issues invisible:

> The reclamation of Times Square, while relieving the area of some of its most apparent difficulties, is engaged in the militant removal of all that is 'unsightly,' sweeping out of sight and under the rug the complex problems of an intense urban culture showered with both extraordinarily lustrous wealth and systemic poverty and disease. (17-18)

The Times Square reclamation was an expression of the divide between the glitzy spectacle of the city and the harsh realities of a struggling economy and an urban space in cultural crisis. The initiatives didn't solve these problems of poverty and disease, but it removed the people from the area. In effect, the flourishing commodity spectacle was used to widen the gulch between the vulgar realities of the space with flashing neon and promises of personal fulfillment.

The signage in Times Square (symbolically) heightened the contradiction between the glitzy dream of capitalist accumulation and the realities of high-finance jerkdom. Kruger's incisive criticism targets the clash between reality and the Spectacle. Kruger's media interventions, especially her language based compositions, took aim at this spectacle with intentions of rupturing the illusion to bring Times Square's visitors into the realities of the space, the "collapse of the urban core." Kruger uses vernacular surfaces, mainly billboards and posters, to interject and interfere with the signage in Times Square. I am specifically interested in a banner Kruger created for Times Square, which drew heavily from the contextual situation to

directly engage the commodity spectacle into question the most public way possible: an advertisement.

Kruger's *It's a Small World but Not if You have to Clean It*, is a 115 by 50 foot mesh banner that was hung on the 8th Avenue side of the Hilton Times Square Hotel, located on 41st street in Times Square, sponsored by The Public Art Fund. The composition features a photo of a woman printed in black in white. The woman in the photo is wearing a simple cardigan over an eyelet blouse, a style that is evocative of 1950s fashion in America. Her whole look, her clothes, her hair, and the format of the black and white photograph harkens back to the iconography of 1940s/1950s Americana. Given the position of the composition, and the posture of the woman in the photo, it seems like the figure is staring out over the city, looking through a large magnifying glass, which she holds up to her eye. We get the feeling that not only is the woman looking out on us, down on us, but that she is examining us the same way a myrmecologist looks at ants. Kruger's signature red banners of text slice through the frame. One ribbon is at the top of the composition, another in the middle, and the last at the bottom of the frame. The following message is printed in white type: "It's a small/ world/ but not if you have to clean it." "World" is written in the largest font of the all three banners, which plays with the meaning of the message stating that the world is small.

At first glance, the banner looks like an advertisement for a cleaning agency. All of the rhetorical elements of advertisements are present: the slogan, the language, and the shocked woman obsessively looking for a dirty space to clean. It seems that the only missing piece is a telephone number to contact the company. Also, since the viewer encountered *It's a Small World* in Times Square, a place where all images are advertisements, they might be led to assume that this image is an advertisement, too, simply based on the spatial context.

Unfortunately, this is most definitely not an advertisement. In fact, Kruger is creating an anti-advertisement with this work. However, and this is a key difference for us to consider, the function of this composition is not to resist advertisements, but to impersonate the shape of marketing to lampoon the form and content and appropriate the forcework of conventional advertising.   Through doing so, Kruger uses this image to call into consideration how we read these images, especially how these readings are informed by space.   In this case, the viewer might read this image as an advertisement initially because the spatial context in which the image appears.

The other assumption Kruger engages is how women are read in modern society. Again, the image features a woman holding a magnifying glass. Even though this woman is using a scientific instrument we assume she is using this tool to inspect the surfaces of the city for dirt; we assume she wants to clean the city. In the narrative context provided by the red banners, this woman is inscribed as a symbol of domesticity. Since the text states: "It's a small world if you have to clean it," we might assume *this* woman is going to clean the city. However, the piece isn't celebrating domesticity, or trying to reconfigure domesticity in any way, but engaging the viewer in a critique about the roles of women in society. Albero explains: "Much of Kruger's work implies that the denigration of domestic labor and of women's voices is a social construct, not a natural inevitability that has remained the same in all historical periods and meant the same thing in all cultures" (297). Kruger's work goes after the way women are represented in domestic roles and how these domestic roles are subsequently diminished as insignificant. Kruger confronts us with a female stereotype, "manipulating mass cultural imagery so that the hidden ideological agendas are supposedly exposed" (Owens 203). Through engaging the stereotype, existing in the idyllic 1950s and our current moment, Kruger creates dissonance that

asks the audience to think about their role in the city and their role in society. Have they really made social progress towards gender equality since this period in America? Kruger "brings women's lives and voices into popular discourse, and generate[s] new perspectives in the process" (Albero 197).

This perspective is initiated when the viewers, whether male or female, are transformed into the subject role as the second person pronoun begins to draw them in. Once that transference occurs (psychologically), the meaning of the text begins to shift. The statement, again: "It's a small world but not if you have to clean it." As a literal reading, the second person subject "you" refers to the woman in the composition. It seems that the text refers to the woman, suggesting that she has to clean the city. However, as the viewer reads the work critically, the "you" begins to refer to the subject. This disembodied authorial voice is speaking to the audience below, leaving it to them to clean up the city. The forcework in this case is the potential transformation of the viewer into the subject role. Kruger creates a situation where the reader can find themselves as the subject of inquiry. Her language disposes the subject, the audience, from a position of power. I argue that this manifests in the stall, which Hal Foster explains a strategy used to "stun our thinking," I argue that this translates into stalling the audience, as in physically stopping (arresting) the viewer.

Craig Owens observes the stall affected by Kruger's work, which he approaches though Lacan's psychoanalysis. Owens refers to this impact as "a terminal moment of arrest," drawing a parallel to the gaze of Medusa:

> In placing the moment of arrest prior to the moment of seeing, Lacan is, of course,
> simply describing what happens when we look at a picture, any picture—first an

arrested gesture (painting, photograph)l then the act of viewing which completes

the gesture. But he simultaneously describing the mechanism of pose. (207)

According to Owens' reading of Lacan, the audience experiences the arrested gesture in the

composition, the subject of the painting. He explains that this act of viewing is a two-step

process that includes the initial gesture in the image and the subsequent gaze.

I think that this reading of vision misses the kinetic energy within the gaze. Firstly, I

need to specify that I understand the gaze as the act of looking. I understand the properties of the

reciprocal gaze where the spectator is viewing the painting and the painting is showing the

viewer something back about herself. While I do agree that there is a stalled moment captured in

the frame, a slice of time frozen in a photograph, there is a second stall integral to Lacan's

mechanism: the stall of the viewer. Quite simply put, to see and engage an image, the viewer

must stop. In the case of Barbara Kruger's work, she inserts these texts into the fabric of an

urban space, New York City, which is already super-saturated with images to the point where the

advertisements fade into the background static. Yet, she designs works that pop out from the

visual cacophony. To make Kruger's work effective, she needs to stall the viewer with an

arresting gesture.

Owens explains the "arresting gesture" as a property of art "mimicking the immobility

induced by the gaze, reflecting its power back on itself, pose forces it to surrender" (207). While

viewing the work, the audience is striking a pose back at the work. Therefore, the audience is

immobilized in the gaze in front of the immobile object. I disagree with Owens in how he

describes the stall as an endpoint. I don't think that the audience is left at a standstill, but rather

experiences a dynamic redirection (or at least the potential for a dynamic redetection is present).

Owens observes this as well: "Against the immobility of the pose, Kruger proposes the

mobilization of the spectator" (208). On this point, I couldn't agree more. The point of Kruger's work is to engage the viewer by causing them to take pause, but her gesture reaches its fullest expression with the redirection of the spectator.

In this sense, we can see that Kruger's language functions as a forcework because of the way that the compositions ask the audience to stop, urging the viewer into a new direction, outside the grooves of their daily travels (physically and/or socially). Foster sums up this property as "Active Language," which he proposes is the core of Kruger's art, set in motion to trouble the common sense as well as legibility.   Her smaller works, which are intended for processes of recuperation, are especially disturbing. These works move through popular culture, quite literally travling on coffee cups, tote bags, and beach towels. These products are accessible by all, and because of that quality, they have the potential to trouble a greater sense of legibility for a wider audience. Again, I emphasize that Kruger's smaller works are designed with the intention of being immediately absorbed by the culture industry. This access allows Kruger's ideologies to travel further because she uses common surfaces to which a greater number of people have access and, for whom, the irony of purchasing an item with anti-capitalist agenda is all the deeper.

The summarize, the majority of Kruger's works are a departure from the art gallery system because they are intended for display in urban spaces. Showing these images within a public sphere, either for resale or presenting billboards in open areas, allows Kruger access to even more agitation and provocation. From this engagement with viewer and city space we see a form of forcework take shape: the somatic response.   Kruger's works somatically engage the viewers; this is one of the strategies Kruger uses to directly interfere with the visual spectacle by redirecting the viewer's gaze in the city. Previously in this chapter we have discussed other

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strategies that stall and/or overwhelm viewers. The final step in this gesture, what I argue is the full expression of Kruger's forcework, is how Kruger sends her works into the commodity spectacle to be bought and sold.

The last step in Kruger's forcework happens when she translates her ideological statements into commodities, mass-produced products. This step is the most precarious part of this gesture because Kruger relies on processes of recuperation. Critics argue that being absorbed into popular culture will neutralize a radical gesture, such as Kruger's forcework, as it becomes co-opted by bourgeois society. I disagree. Instead, I argue that this forcework strategy, operating on the terrain that Clement Greenberg calls "kitsch," gives Kruger a critical advantage from which she can leverage her claim. The advantage of operating in kitsch is the location: the heart of commodity culture.

Kruger's small-scale works are self-consciously kitschy. Over the decades, she has developed work on "mouse pads and T-Shirts, tote bags and coffee mugs, wristwatches and umbrellas, as well as posters, postcards, book jackets, magazine covers, and matchbooks" (Danto 61). Kruger has also collaborated with the GAP to make T-Shirts. Danto considers Kruger the "absolute artist of the age of mechanical reproduction in its late capitalist phase" (61). This is a strong statement that can apply to Worhol or Duchamp, but Kruger is definitely in the pantheon reserved for artists in the age of mechanical reproduction. There is no doubt, Kruger operates in the medium of kitsch. Danto goes on:

> [Kruger's works] are as much or even more at home in the museum gift shop as in the galleries upstairs, and since the objects there are purchased and carted away, they enter the stream of life and carry her messages into precincts far from the centers of high culture. (61)

Kruger designs her pieces to travel through the channels of mechanical circulation and reception, embedded in the commodity spectacle, and spread their messages by way of consumption. In doing so, Kruger can deeply "interrogate the mechanisms of power and social exchange that organize our daily lives" (Alberro 195) by operating on vernacular surfaces. This strategy allows Kruger to infiltrate the realm of capitalism she is criticizing as her compositions travel through the same media structures she calls into question: mass production and consumerism. For example, when the consumer purchases Kruger's t-shirt, *Plenty Should be Enough*, they carry the message through their daily lives whenever they wear the shirt. Making the purchase and wearing the shirt initiates Kruger's criticism. The irony is that the person has purchased this t-shirt, when they likely have plenty of t-shirts. Again, "plenty should be enough," but it clearly isn't enough, not for the person wearing the shirt and not for us either.

As the consumer wears the shirt, sharing Kruger's message with the public in their personal realm, the irony persists. There is a layer of contextual juxtaposition imposed by Kruger's compositions when they appear in the urban landscape in these situations. Her t-shirts and magazines not only provide a statement that travels through the structures of capital, but the statement directly engages with the lived environment where the ironies become even more pointed as they are experienced in context. Kruger's point is reinforced when the person wears the shirt in their private and public life. Her kinetic forcework is a process that begins with the purchase and then travels outside the store wherever the person wears their t-shirt, sunglasses, hat, etc. Even though her messages are deeply ironic, urging the consumer to take pause and realize that they have enough of stuff, the gesture relies on the person to make the purchase; if they do not purchase the item, the artwork cannot begin to perform and the piece does not work. *Plenty Should be Enough* only has a chance to function when a person wears this shirt in their

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daily life, weaving their message into the everyday, collapsing the art/life divide. *Plenty Should be Enough* only works when the consumer purchases this shirt despite having enough.

Kruger's collaboration with *W* magazine provides another example of how she collapses the art/life divide to initiate a forcework through recuperation. In November, 2010, Kruger created the front cover of *W* magazine's artist issue. Kruger's cover, "Untitled, 2010," was a *détournement* featuring Kim Kardashian.

Again, the détournement, to which I refer, comes from the Situationist International. I understand this process as a mode of hijacking images to distort the meaning of the original image. Most, or some, of the original image is preserved so it is recognizable enough to provide a contrast, or at least a comparison to the message delivered. According to Debord, there are two types of *détournements:*

> minor *détournements* and deceptive détournements. Minor détournements are détournements of elements that in themselves are of no real importance such as a snapshot, a press clipping, an everyday object which draw all their meaning from being placed in a new context. Deceptive détournements are when already significant elements such as a major political or philosophical text, great artwork or work of literature take on new meanings or scope by being placed in a new context. (Knabb 14).

For example, in Debord's early, minor *détournements,* he used a popular comic strip and altered the character's speech bubbles of the characters. A *détournement* is a visual and linguistic mash up where visual/verbal elements are combined to create a semeiotic dissonance that reveals something new about ideological positions of the element(s). Readers would understand the nature of the original comic strip and they would get the bristling commentary in the collage.

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The overall effect of the *détournements* is achieved by ultimately collaging words/pictures with this image to create semantic dissonance. The *détournement* is a gesture where the slogans are turned against the advertisers, or the language of propaganda is turned against the power structures. As Martin Kast explains this process in a contemporary context on an *NPR* broadcast*, détournement* is "when slogans and logos are turned against their advertisers or the political status quo." Kruger's November cover for *W* magazine provides an excellent example of how *détournement* can make language materialize into forcework by turning slogans, and celebrity images, against advertisers and the status quo. I will to use this specific case as a way to trace out how the materialization of language is used to engage the viewer, shifting them into a subject position, and initiating a forcework that relies on their interaction with the work.

Kruger designed the cover of *W* magazines as follows: Kim Kardashian is naked, posing with her hair pushed behind her shoulders and her hands on her hips. She looks directly at the camera, effectively creating a gaze that locks with the audience. Kruger places three red banners over Kim's body: one across her chest, another across her tummy, and the last one over her waist. Since the original image of Kim (the photograph from the cover shoot) is preserved, the banners function as a censor bars that keep Kim from completely revealing herself. The text banners are designed to take the shape of magazine headlines, appearing strategically on the cover in the same spot a reader would expect to find a headline. Through arranging the text in this way, readers first approach the language as such. After a second reading, it becomes clear that the content of the message is clearly not a headline. In fact, the message is a bit unsettling, if not nauseating.

The banners covering Kim display the following message: "It's all about me / I mean you / I mean me." The sentence provides us with what appears to be Kim's internal monologue; we

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are lead to believe that she thinks everything revolves around her: "It's all about me." Yet, for a brief moment, she recognizes the audience, "I mean you," but then she is pulled back into her own gravity: "I mean me." The language in this case breaks the spectacle of print culture to cue us into the cult of celebrity narcissism as Kim shouts out to the world that it's all about her. She is breaking the anticipated illusion that somehow, this magazine is for the readers. Instead of the magazine pretending to be concerned with the audience, it is blatantly stating that it's all about the model. However, if the model represents the industry, and the industry is stating that it's "all about me," then we can understand how Kruger is making a point that the magazines are all about the profit, not about helping the readers with "what not to wear." In this gesture, the language breaks that tacit agreement between magazine reader and editor: it tells the truth. The readers are told that the magazine really isn't interested in them. This magazine isn't for the readers, it's not for their betterment, and it's a business.

Nothing personal . . .

The words Kruger uses pose as advertising rhetoric and the images move like advertisements, but Kruger uses advertising against itself. Kruger uses these red bands of text, in this case the red bands laid over Kim Kardashian, to directly address the audience with inflammatory statements. In this way, the language functions the same way as advertising because the words on the page address their audience. However, the difference is how the language is talking to and about the audience, again putting the reader in the subject position; Kruger is talking right to the reader with striking declarations. In doing so, Kruger's language moves as a forcework that disposes the audience form a passive position as a reader and turns them into a subject of inquiry as Kruger's pictures talk back to us with blazoned admonishment. The language disposes the subject, the audience, from a position of power as a consumer

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purchasing the magazine. Instead, they are reading language that reminds them of powerlessness.

It is also important to note how the audience is reading the images that Kruger uses, in this case Kim Kardashian. While some may argue that Kim, as a person, is the epitome of cultural vacuity, she still functions as a dynamic symbol; Kim is a cultural signifier inscribed with an assigned meaning. At face value, she represents the commodification of the American celebrity. For this reason, Kardashian is the perfect specimen for this magazine cover, especially to illustrate the point that Kruger is making about commodities masquerading as good intentions. Kardashian provides a clear illustration of what the culture industry can do to a person, commodifying them to the point that they become a product. Kruger makes us conscious about how we are consumers of these celebrity products, and as consumers of culture we are not privy to an authentic culture, but one that is manufactured for resale. The representation of Kim on the cover, in conjunction with the language, is a loud statement about this position. Kruger's work with *W* magazine provides an example of the kind of avant-garde forcework that depends on recuperation. I argue that this case allows us to see this process happen in different steps, which begins with the initial stall where the magazine arrests the spectator, drawing them in from the visual static. The next step is the decision to purchase the item. The final step in Kruger's forcework is the processes of recuperation that are initiated by the spectator, turned consumer, when they physically transport the item into the home, even though the magazine is telling the reader: "It's not about you!" The harsh irony is that the subject still makes the purchase. In fact, they need to make the purchase for this whole exchange, both commodity exchange and critical exchange, to work. Kruger needs the spectator to become a consumer to make her forcework come alive. While this might not happen, it is the contingency that makes the work matter.

Ironically—and against everything that critics like Greenberg and Bürger would argue – the completion of Kruger's avant-garde interruptions, the fullest expression of this radical gesture, is this process of recuperation. Recuperation is the movement of Kruger's antagonistic ideology into mainstream culture. Unlike the graffiti writers from the 1980s, Kruger designs her works to be appropriated in this way. Her larger pieces use the materialized language in rhetorical spaces to visually represent specific ideological forces in those public areas. However, her smaller pieces, on the other hand, use materialized language as a way to invade private spheres where their ideological signification stands the risk of becoming unfixed, swerving, and even vulnerable to failure. Some of her kitschy crap can be defeated by a simple spring-cleaning sweep! Regardless, I argue that Kruger uses this movement to gain a critical vantage point.

According to Karen Kurczynski's interpretation of recuperation, stated in her article "Expression as Vandalism: Asger Jorn's 'Modifications'," recuperation is:

> the process by which those who control the spectacular culture, embodied most
> obviously in the mass media, co-opt all revolutionary ideas by publicizing a
> neutralized version of them, literally turning oppositional tactics into ideology.
> (293)

Kurczynski explains this process as the culture industry churning out revolutionary ideas in the shape of kitsch. While these products may seem revolutionary, they are more likely just a t-shirt. My understanding of recuperation, as defined previously, is different. As we approach recuperation in reference to Kruger and Fairey, we see this move function in the inverse: the artists are designing kitsch to send their ideas into the center of the culture industry where it can then become revolutionary. The usual course of action is when an artist develops a revolutionary concept, which becomes recuperated, and subsequently neutralized. For example, Kruger

deliberately designs revolutionary ideas in kitschy formats: cups, towels, tote bags, stickers.

However, even in these shapes, the items still have Kruger's inflammatory statements, like a pair

of sunglasses that read "your gaze hits the side of my face." This is a powerful statement about

the objectification of women, but when printed on a pair of sunglasses, it's just a cool style.

Kruger designs these products to enter into the world of consumerism. I find that this

central position allows Kruger to make a point with her work. Moving to the central location of

the culture industry gives Kruger an opportunity to weave meaning from capitalist and power

structures into the point she is making with her criticism. In this case she is *literally* weaving her

message into this world; people will buy and wear these products and literally walk around with

Kruger's messages printed on what they are wearing, or carrying, or drinking. Her works, while

they may not ignite a revolution, may unsettle the ideological neutrality of the consumer's

private space. Processes of recuperation allow Kruger to place her work in a privatized space.

Karen Kurczynski makes another point, drawing from the Situationist International's

position on recuperation, stating:

> The SI [Situationist International] identified the threat of revolutionary tactics
>
> being absorbed and defused as reformist elements. The SI pinpointed the
>
> increasingly evident problem of capitalist institutions subverting the terms of
>
> oppositional movements for their own uses recuperation operated on all fronts: in
>
> advertising, in academics, in public political discourse, in the marginal discourses
>
> of leftist factions, and so on.

I want to emphasize how the SI understood processes of recuperation as a group. They saw the

process happening where recuperation brought outside ideology into advertising, academics, and

into public political discourse. I argue that both Barbara Kruger and Shepard Fairey understand

this flow and they navigate processes of recuperation by developing images that seem to come from inside the culture industry, even though they are antagonistic to the culture industry, and by counting on the consumer to place their works into spaces of their own choosing.

Propaganda is often a merger between past and present, forcing the nostalgia from an idealized past into the current political situation. This is a strategy that both Barbara Kruger and Shepard Fairey use to achieve their interruptions. I want to look at Kruger and Fairey's work with propaganda, especially the materialization of language in this format, and I want to focus on the forcework they draw from means of propaganda. I will approach this from the point of view of Russian Constructivism, a group of artists from the turn of the 19th century who adopted propaganda techniques, language, and media for agitating and mobilizing the masses. Kruger and Fairey derive many of their techniques for agitating from this mode of distribution and from the aesthetics developed by this group.

At this point in our discussion, we have surveyed how Kruger distributes mass commodities, but it is important to note that she also works in the medium of mass communication. Her stickers, posters, and magazine work are prime examples of the way she uses existing mass media formats for her own manipulation. I want to look at Kruger and Fairey's work with propaganda strategies –especially the materialization of language in this format— and I want to focus on the forcework they draw from imitating propaganda. I will approach this study from the point of view of Russian Constructivism, a group that also used propaganda techniques to integrate art in everyday life. In fact, I argue that Kruger and Fairey derive many of their techniques for agitating from this mode of distribution and from the aesthetics developed by the Russian Constructivists.

Constructivism grew from Russian Futurism, emerging just after WWI, but turned away from the abstraction and dynamism of Futurism. Constructivism rejected the independent social function of art and, instead, embraced the ideology that art has a place in everyday life. Naum Gabo outlines the ideologies of constructivism in the "Realistic Manifesto," Constructivism's seminal text: "Art will be erected on the real laws of Life." Gabo understood that art needed to exist in a four dimensional world, real life, which induced space, time, mass, etc. According to Stephan Bann, Constructivism "embodied the determination of the artists and the theorist to pursue the implications of a marriage between art and social revolution, even if this investigation meant a revision, or indeed a reversal, of existing conceptions (4). Russian Constructivists moved beyond the concept of an autonomous art object by incorporating ordinary language into design. As Gabo states in the manifesto, the Constructivists saw it possible to collapse the art/life divide.

The constructivists found a need for their designs in 1917 when the October Revolution erupted in Russia. These events provoked artists to reconsider the visual environment and to create a new mode of design that would embody the social needs articulated by the new Communist order. The Russian constructivists began developing pieces visual propaganda with thick black or white fonts. The images were saturated in reds and partial towards black, white, and red shading. While each work is unique, there was a definite constructivist style that appeared in these posters: screaming reds, oppressive fonts, thumping bold black lettering, sharp angles, geometrical shapes, and collages . . . lots of collages!

Buchloh describes the Russian constructivist collage as a merger between past and present. This dichotomy is apparent in the materials an artist uses in these compositions, elements that transgress historical boundaries as they are taken from different historical

moments. Buchloch explains that this technique is used to create a unified statement of propaganda:

> Soviet artists invested in photomontage as a means not only to produce new images that could adequately address a growing mass audience, but also to transform existing systems of representation and communication, that is, institutions of production, distribution, and representation. (89)

The collages Buchloh references bring together the iconic images of the past, stock photos that seem to come from a more idealized time, with images from the present moment. The comfort in these stock images, just as the stock Americana Kruger uses, comes from how they are so recognizable.   As such, these pictures can "address a growing mass audience" because they are programed with semiotics that the "mass audience" can understand. However, through weaving together old images with the new, or presenting these images in a new format, works to "transform existing systems of representation and communication." The artist is able to manipulate the communicative function, hijack the meaning, and communicate a new message.

One example of a constructivist form of propaganda comes from Gustav Klutis, *Worker Men and Women: Everyone Vote in the Soviet Elections*, from 1930. The poster features one large hand in black and white; the hand is cropped off at the top of the forearm. The fingers of the hand are pressed together, like a knifepoint, and the hand is gesturing upward as it cuts across the center of the frame. Klutis lays medium-sized hands over the wrist, all of which are making the same gesture. There are smaller hands laid over those hands and a few faces looking back at the spectator as though they were peering out form the chaos of a crowd. The symbolic imagery is lost on no one: there can only be a unified Russia if the masses unify. Klutis posts text in Russian, placed on either side of the hand, which encourages the people to vote.   Klutis is able

to reach, and hopefully mobilize the masses, because he designs a poster, which is accessible as an everyday format.

Klutis uses his poster as a mode of mass communication. The visual elements within the poster, such as the type and iconography, also draw from popular forms of language and design. Buchloh explains that

> [i]ncorporating tools of mass communication, such as typography, graphic design, exhibition design, advertising, and propaganda, Soviet artists embraced technology and media in an attempt to establish an operative aesthetic framework that could focus attention simultaneously on the existing needs of mass audiences… and on the available techniques and standards of the means of artistic production. (89)

Again, we can see the point of Klutis' work as one of mobilizing the masses to vote, in that case. However, the point that Buchloh emphasizes is that Klutis is able to make this point, as are the other constructivists, because they incorporate tools of mass communication. Since they are using these existing semiotic codes, they are able to collapse the art/life divide to reach their audience in a semiotic form that is recognizable to the masses.

We can see a similar style with Kruger, as she too uses montage techniques. Kruger draws aesthetics developed within Russian Constructivism, elements of propaganda, and sloganeering to create her messages. We can see the constructivist style in her red backgrounds sharply contrasting her white text. Craig Owens provides an inventory of Kruger's montage techniques: "She juxtaposes, superimposes, interposes texts and images—and of the ends to which these techniques are put—she exposes, opposed, disposes stereotypes and clichés. (204)." Fairey and Kruger imitate Russian constructivist propaganda not only for design, but also for

mobilizing strategies. They also use constructions of word, image, and materialized language as a way to mobilize their viewers, reaching their viewers by bringing these compositions into everyday life. In an online article simply titled "Russian Avant-Garde," Stephen Marks describes this mode of Russian Avant-Garde as endeavoring to "subliminally alter the mentality of the people, infusing in them the values of both artistic movements and, relatedly, Communism." The goal was to mobilize the people by changing their psychology through aesthetic forces, which would ultimately translate into action. Kruger and Fairey accomplish their redirections, their forceworks, with similar aesthetic trajectories. The aesthetics in this movement were definitely a source of inspiration for Barbara Kruger and Shepard Fairey.

As we transition into a discussion of Shepherd Fairey's works, we will begin to see how Kruger influenced his practice. In a 2012 interview with *JUXTAPOZ* magazine, Fairey explains: "I owe my red, black, and white color palette to Russian Constructivism and Barbara Kruger." Kruger's influence on Fairey is evident in his color choices and the bristling language he uses. However, Fairey makes this style his own. Fairey's signature style is most visible in his tag: OBEY, which became his own visual shorthand. However, Fairey is best known for his Obama logo; he is the artist who designed the red, white, and blue stencil portrait of Barack Obama[vii] with the word "Hope" on the bottom of the image. *Art for Obama* declares Shepard Fairey's *Hope* poster as "the most recognizable image associated with the campaign to elect Barack Obama president of the United States" (13). Fairey's *Hope* poster not only entered the mainstream culture, it could be argued that his grassroots art campaign may have even helped the president win the election with its visual shorthand. The image came to function as a logo for Obama, and a symbol of his journey to the presidency with promises of hope, change, and progress. This case study will tell the story of how Shepard Fairey created a work of activist art

and successfully traveled this image squarely in the center of mainstream culture: a presidential campaign.

Fairey said that he felt a connection to Obama because of the message he was delivering during the 2004 Democratic National convention (Obama delivered the keynote address). Fairey was moved by the candidate's sincerity and his idealism. "He spoke about combating the politics of cynicism and despair with a new kind of politics- politics of hop and progress" (Fairey 7). Fairey felt like Obama spoke about how the country *could* be, which he found inspiring. He wanted to do something to support the candidate, so he designed a poster that would articulate these qualities in visual shorthand.

After the campaign, Fairey created *Hope*, a statement, of what Fairey describes as "an opportunity to engage in democracy and use art as a tool of communication" (9). *Hope* captures Obama's vision, his hope for the country that he expressed at that time. He designs the poster to "capture [Obama's] idealism, vision, and his contemplative nature" (Fairey 7). The poster has a red, white, and blue patriotic color scheme. The colors divide the face: "the red shadow side and the blue highlight side, they convey the idea of blue and red states, Democrats and Republicans" (Fairey 7). The blending of the red, white, and blue lends the sense of unity and balance between the colors. Symbolically, the balance articulates Obama's hope that parties, which the colors represent, will also achieve a balance. In this context, Fairey portrays Obama as the force capable of joining and blending the blue and red states.

The posture of Obama's face is also significant. The portrait of Obama is contemplative. His head is tilted slightly upward, away from center, with his gaze vanishing far beyond the viewer; it seems as though he is looking off into the distance. Fairey explains that Obama's expression is used to convey his vision: "I wanted to convey that Obama had vision—his eyes

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sharply focused on the future—and compassion, that he would use his leadership qualities for the greater good of America in a very patriotic way" (7). The textuality, color schemes, and imagery perform Fairey's statement.

The writing on the bottom of the poster is simple: "Hope*"viii* Since the visual rhetoric is so powerful, the language in the poster can afford to be minimalistic. Yet, there is a synergy where the language reinforces the visual elements. In effect, a symbolic shift takes place where the image seems to take on the presence of a logo, one that stands for the Obama campaign, embroidered with the element of hope. This is true. However, a deeper semiotic translation is at work where Obama, signified, and hope, signifier, blend together and the poster becomes a synecdoche for hope, change, and progress. The merger of the visual and verbal reprograms the way that the popular culture came to understand, or define, "hope" in linguistic terms. As a result, at that cultural moment, Obama became hope.

Ultimately, the reaction was realized in the success of Fairey's grassroots campaign. According to Fairey's website: "In order to do our part to help Obama get elected, we started a grassroots campaign on a street pestering level." Fairey went about circulating his image like he would any of his other works: "I made the image, posted it online (including a high-resolution download), and printed up posters and stickers, which I started putting up around L.A. and sending out to other parts of the country" (Fairey 7). While Fairey created the poster, he left it to his audience to circulate the print. The legions of followers went on the website to print the image, to post the stickers on any available surface, and to carry the icon around the country. This is how *Hope* traveled. The message and the image spread because of the public. The public mobilized *Hope* like a force.

The *Guardian* compares the power of the poster to Jim Fitzpatrick's Che Guevara poster. The comparison is apt as both images function as visual shorthand. The *Guardian* predicted that the image would "surely set to grace t-shirts, coffee mugs and the walls of student bedrooms in years to come." These predictions proved to be correct, in spite of all legal issues around copyright infringement. Since Fairey created this work, intending it to be circulated by the people, it easily transformed into posters, buttons, notebooks, and other forms of kitsch. Instead of defanging the overall impact of *Hope;* the culture industry spread *Hope* further.

The Obama poster demonstrates the power of materialized language when linked to powerful art traditions, clear political messages, and massive appropriation. We can see this as an example of a composition functioning as a symbolic tool, or doing work. Fairey, no doubt, tapped into the properties used by Russian constructivists to mobilize the masses by altering their psychology. In this case, he was able to articulate the hope of a country in visual shorthand, translating visceral feelings about Obama a logo of the campaign, a metonymy of his promise. The *Hope* poster campaign is an example of how art has been used as a tool for social activism made possible by aesthetic forcework.

Fairey's forcework is different from the other two cases discussed previously. Kruger's was a forcework of semiotic disruption and a stall in a realm of advanced commodity circulation. The graffiti artists I discussed in chapter one engage a forcework of semiotic insularity and spatial reclamation in an environment of urban reconstruction. Fairey's work relies on propaganda strategies and, almost immediately, a mass-recuperation processes, because he uses the public to mobilize his message. Fairey leaves it up to the masses to move the image. In turn, this unique approach may prompt a reader to ask: "Well, how exactly does this count as forcework? After all, wasn't Fairey simply creating a really effective ad campaign whose appeal

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lay precisely in the idea that it felt like a forcework when all it was doing was selling neo-liberalism?" If we approach Fairey's work as an avant-garde strategy, one that operates from the margins to restructure centralized power structures, we can see that the *Hope* poster is more than a really effective ad campaign.

Fairey's image of Obama looks very much like a constructivist design with its sharp angles and warm colors. In doing so, Fairey created Obama as an icon through his artwork. Fairey manufactured the image deliberately as such: "It's amazing what visuals can do. I've always thought they made the best tool for propagandist manipulation because they can project an essence onto someone that they might not really have" (Fairey 9). Fairey believes in Obama, but he is also aware that visual elements can be used to manipulate public opinion. Fairey uses the visceral imagery to project an essence of greatness. Fairey sends this image into the Culture Industry. Though using elements of propaganda, Fairey manufactures Obama as icon.

Fairey's strategies for this type of forcework are even more apparent with his *Andre the Giant Has a Posse* sticker campaign in 1989. I want to next look at Fairey's Andre the Giant image, which also became an iconic image in its own way. Here, again, is another example of how Fairey was able to mobilize his work in a way that relies on the distribution of mass commodities kitsch, strategies of propaganda, forces of the culture industry, and aesthetic forcework derived from the materialization of language. Again, we see a case where Fairey leaves it to the masses to mobilize his art.

The OBEY image is a face done in high contrast black and white. The face has deep shadows around the eyes and nose so that it almost looks like a mask. Michael Dooley describes the face in a 2010 article for *PRINT* magazine: "The face is a stark, flat, stylized image rendered in sinewy blobs with the symmetry and flavor of a Rorschach blot. And in fact, it's intended to

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be open to individual, often conflicting, interpretations." The way the public came to see and know the image was diverse. Dooley elaborates:

> It could be taken as an Orwellian threat, an underground cult, or a sneaky sales ploy. Anyone who recognizes the face as that of the late obey giant, a seven-foot-four, 520 pound pro wrestler, might think it has something to do with the recent upsurge in popularity of the World Wrestling Federation.

The "actual meaning" of the image was a mystery when the wheat paste posters and stickers began appearing around urban areas, like Providence. It seemed like there was more to it. There are some versions of the giant image without language, but typically the sticker contains the word OBEY, a striking word printed in "heavy capital letters beside a tightly cropped face." The word stretches across the entire bottom of the frame. Just as the writing in Kruger's compositions, the bold, high-impact white letters are set against a red background. The red pops against the white and black image. The face stares out at the public with dead eyes, almost like a zombie. As Dooley describes, the eyes maintain "a vacant, but ominous, stare."

The "Andre the Giant" image began as a sticker campaign in the northeastern United States. Fairey tells the story of the giant image in *Beautiful Losers*, a documentary about a group of visual artists that emerged from skateboarding, graffiti, punk, and hip-hop subcultures in the early 1990s. Fairey, a part of this subculture, became known for his stickers. As he explains on the OBEY GIANT website, he designed stickers for a local Providence, Rhode Island, skate shop in 1988-1989. When a friend asked Fairey to show him how to make paper cut stencils, Fairey opened a newspaper and "stumbled upon a funny picture of Andre the Giant." After his friend tried to cut the image with an x-acto knife, he gave up. Fairey finished the job and wrote: "Andre the Giant Has a Posse*"* on one side with his height and weight, 7'4″, 520 lbs., on the

other side. Fairey printed the first black-and-white image of Andre the Giant at a local Kinkos in 1989. The print was a "grungy photocopy swiped from a newspaper ad;" it was no more than three inches. In the documentary, Fairey tells the story from his perspective:

> The Andre stickers started as a joke, but I became obsessed with sticking them everywhere both as a way to be mischievous and also put something out in the world anonymously but that I could call my own. Just as I had been made curious by many of the many stickers I'd seen, I now had my own sticker to taunt and/or stimulate the public.

Fairey definitely stimulated the public, even referring to that summer as the "sticker takeover of Providence." The local newspaper offered a reward "to the person who could reveal its source and meaning." Fairey brought his sticker to Boston and New York. He states: "once the first domino fell, I was addicted and had my sights set on world domination through stickers." Just like that, the face of Andre the Giant began to appear in cities.

The OBEY design used in the giant campaign is taken from a different pop culture text, John Carpenter's 1988 film, *They Live.* This sci-fi narrative is the story of Nada**,** played by Roddy Piper (another pro wrestler), a drifter. During the film, Nada comes across a box of sunglasses, but unbeknownst to him, they are magic! While he is wearing them, Nada begins to see strange things. For example, when he looks at certain people, particularly rich people outfitted in garish baubles, he sees that they are, in fact, aliens who have disgusted themselves to look like humans. These aliens have ascended to positions of power to manipulate the humans to spend money, conform, and obey.

The scene when Nada walks out to the street with the glasses for the first time is a pivotal scene for the film—and for our understanding of Fairey's sticker. At first, when Nada puts on

the glasses, he is startled how the lenses turn the city to black and white. Shocked, he takes off

the shades. He puts the glasses on again and scans the city landscape. Nada looks at a billboard

advertising technology, but the only thing he can see is the word: "OBEY." "Come to the

Caribbean becomes "Marry and Reproduce." "Men's Apparel" becomes "No Independent

Thought." The dollar becomes "This is Your God." Nada walks down the avenue and sees the

true messages: "Consume," watch TV conform, "BUY," "STAY ASLEEP," "SUBMIT," "NO

THOUGHT," "DO NOT QUESTION AUTHORITY." The glasses expose the subliminal

messages embedded in the advertising rhetoric.

The legend goes that in 1993 Fairey rented *They Live* on a whim. While watching the

film with friends, he found that the plot was goofy, but conveyed a profound message: people

don't realize they are being manipulated because they are so caught up in consumption. The film

presents a narrative with aliens and subliminal messages woven into signs. Words like

"consume" and "obey" appear in advertisements when viewed through the cheap shades. The

people in the film "don't realize they're being controlled by aliens, who are the authoritarians."

Symbolically, the commands are advertising and the nasty aliens are the wealthy capitalists.

Even though the film is a goof, it does have some critical trajectory. The film is obviously

making a point about how people are controlled as consumers in a capitalist society.

The stylistic choices the director makes in this film, or the strategies he uses to make a

point about these subliminal marketing messages, are interesting because they are similar to the

aesthetics used by propagandists and Russian constructivists. While watching *They Live,* Fairey

noticed that the subliminal messages in the film were delivered in a graphic style similar to artist

Barbara Kruger's work. Fairey discussed the connection in an interview with *Wired* magazine:

I am a big fan of the artist Barbara Kruger who always used Futura Type over

Found photography. I noticed that in *They Live* all of the ads were in the same

type that Barbara Kruger used….Not only did the film impact me conceptually...

but also graphically.

The graphic and linguistic elements of OBEY had the most resonance with Fairey. He discusses

the hostility in the word, because OBEY is "what people do subconsciously the most, but resist

most consciously if they are confronted with it directly." Seeing the word OBEY on a billboard,

acting as a command, has a specific visual/linguistic presence because it seems that this word is

being shouted out at the public as a command. Fairey uses the word "OBEY" to confront

audiences directly with the message other advertisements are inflicting them with indirectly.

In another interview with *WIRED,* Fairey confirms that he is not necessarily opposing

advertising, but his hope is to engage a dialogue about control and power by shifting the balance

of control and power:

I was never trying to say advertising in and of itself is wrong. What I was saying

was, I don't like the way advertising tries to manipulate, to make people insecure.

It's very, very competitive psychological warfare with no rules of combat. It's

definitely fair game for vandalizing and critiquing, especially the national

campaigns. But everybody makes their own decisions. Nobody twists your arm to

smoke or drink. Nobody's making you puke your lunch up to be like women in

fashion magazines. (56)

Fairey is astute to the idea that images have the power to manipulate, but his intention is not

necessarily to combat advertising, but to invade advertising rhetoric with powerful images of his

own. The strategies he uses to accomplish these goals are more recuperative than radical. There

isn't anything inherently undermining about the work he produces; Fairey recycles the face of a pro wrestler. His pieces aren't necessarily shocking, either. However, Fairey's goal is to wake people up to their surrounding environment. The point of the resulting image, stencil and word, is to empower the public by restoring them to their own judgment. OBEY became a rally cry to WAKE UP and see the advertising! However, Fairey didn't want to critique and preach a message with a tone of self-righteousness. Fairey wanted to capture the viewer's imagination and to become provocative: "Fairey feels he's exposing and subverting consumer culture's susceptibility to propaganda….Rather than subject people to sloganeering, he wants them to have their own epiphany" (Dooley). Fairey hoped to awaken the skateboarders, and his viewers, to their own euphonic conclusions.

In the beginning of the OBEY campaign, Fairey was making a statement about the skateboarder subculture, which he was immersed in at the time. He noticed that the youths who skate were covering their boards with stickers, usually brand names. In an interview, Dooley describes this culture as "unthinkingly decorat[ing] their boards with corporate logos." Yet, this same skateboarder subculture was a counter culture movement; these very same youths positioned themselves as anti-corporate outsiders. Initially, Fairey used the OBEY stickers to satirize the self-branding within the skate. The gesture of putting an amorphous logo on a board commented about the unthinking nature of the community. The blatant command, OBEY, challenged their counter culture conviction. However, Fairey's interventionist position relied on the skaters to cover their boards with his stickers; like Kruger's gestures, it seems that everything about this design warns the audience about absorbing these products, but the gesture relies on recuperation processes and, most importantly, the consumer's choices about placing the work in a space, creating a forcework with diverse possible effects, from the decorative to militarizing.

Fairey leaves the mobilization of his mission up to the public. The OBEY sticker campaign engaged processes of recuperation in two ways. Fiarey explains these strategies in his mission statement. The following is the opening statement from Fairey's manifesto:

> The OBEY sticker campaign can be explained as an experiment in Phenomenology. Heidegger describes Phenomenology as "the process of letting things manifest themselves." Phenomenology attempts to enable people to see clearly something that is right before their eyes but obscured; things that are so taken for granted that they are muted by abstract observation.

Firstly, Fairey consciously relied on aspects of phenomenology, which allows the public to make discoveries of their own. His hope was that, as the people begin to realize the invisible power structures that are shaping their lives, they were also becoming empowered since they make these discoveries for themselves. Fairey's approach in this sense is different that Kruger's didactic tone of being an icy critic because he leaves it to the viewer to make a choice, rather than pushing the audience into the subject position.

More than anything, Fairey and the sticker campaign worked to restore the public's agency in a space--they could take back the city one sticker at a time, one altered space at a time. In the span of time from 1989 to 1996, Fairey created over a million hand-printed and cut stickers. Since then, the movement has spread past the Northeast. The public became more involved in the movement. People were slapping OBEY GIANT stickers on their cities all over the world. According to Michael Dooley's *Print* magazine article, "There have been 'Giant' sightings in Singapore, Russia, and on the Paris gravesite of Doors singer Jim Morrison." Fairey's movement relies on movement! He relies on the public to mobilize his message, making it possible for him to send his ideologies across the globe.

Another way that Fairey mobilizes the public is with his clothing line. Shepard Fairey is the artist behind OBEY clothing. According to the company's statement posted on their business website:

> OBEY Clothing was formed in 2001 as an extension of Shepard's range of work. Aligned with his populist views, clothing became another canvas to spread his art and message to the people. The clothing is heavily inspired by classic military design, work wear basics, as well as the elements and cultural movements Shepard has based his art career on.

OBEY Clothing translates Fairey's designs into fashion. The statement elaborates that this strategy allows Fairey to spread his message even further: "Through designers Mike Ternosky and Erin Wignall, Shepard works to create designs that represent his influences, ideals and philosophy." The consumers can purchase a t-shirt and wear some of Fairey's philosophies.

This transition is a precarious one. Like the graffiti artists surveyed in the first chapter, there was a switch made when individuals and companies with wealth and power became interested in these works. In the first chapter, I argued that removing the materialized language of graffiti artists from its contextual location defanged the messages. The ideologies that Fairey proposes arguably fare better upon the sea of consumerism, but it isn't exactly simple. For example, Fairey's mission statement (posted on his website) continues, stating:

> The OBEY campaign is rooted in the *Do It Yourself* counterculture of punk rock and skateboarding, but it has also taken cues from popular culture, commercial marketing and political messaging. Fairey steeps his ideology and iconography in self-empowerment. With biting sarcasm verging on reverse psychology, he goads viewers, using the imperative "obey," to take heed of the propagandists...

The undercutting irony is in how the shoppers need to "obey" Fairey to buy his clothing. Even though the push behind the clothing is empowerment, the consumers buy the hoodies or t-shirts because they want to take a stand against obeying power structures, the exchange still relies on the initial purchase (relying on engaging the consumerism). Therefore, even though the forcework relies on shopping as a way to resist capital and power, it still would seem that these structures win in a way. However, unlike the defanged graffiti, the mass-produced and diversely placed works of Fairey arguably retain their power, altering in ways big or small the psychogeographical qualities of their spaces.

The processes of recuperation become even more precarious for Fairey because of his popularity. Unlike Kruger who uses the culture industry as a mechanism, Fairey is positioned squarely in this world with his mass-produced goods, his clothing, and his work with advertisements and political campaigns. Over the years, it seems that he has slid from an outsider, an antagonistic artist, to someone who is a part of this system—not unlike the graffiti artists who entered the gallery system in the 1970s and 80. To gain a fuller sense of this difficult dynamic, I want to explore Fairey's work with the OBEY image on the billboards in Los Angeles. I argue that, through manipulating a vernacular surface like a billboard, a space that sends a message across a distance, Fairey stalls the commodity spectacle to insert his own voice to the public, in a public space. However, these projects have a downside in how they articulate that voice, often at the cost of looking like a product placement and lacking the clear messaging of Kruger's works.

Fairey began transitioning his OBEY tag to billboards after the sticker campaign in the 1990s. Working on these spaces required a lot more planning and courage than what it may seem. Michael Dooley explains what it takes for Fairey to accomplish these missions: "He

brings along a 16-foot fold-up ladder to allow him access to pole tops, roofs of abandoned

buildings, and other hard-to-reach spots that provide dramatic exposure for his larger pieces.

Billboards are a favorite location" (Dooley). These scenes are captured in *Exit Through the Gift*

Shop, a documentary film. As the film focuses on Fairey's methods, we are treated to shots of

him scaling walls, climbing signs, slithering under fences on his belly, and performing all types

of questionable acrobatics to break and enter. Also, remember, Fairey is not only pushing

himself over walls and on rooftops, but he is also hauling his supplies: wheat paste, paint,

brushes, buckets, ropes, ladders, rollers, and, of course, the prints. In an ultimate move of culture

jamming, Fairey's image communicates the risk and the physical gesture in its completion; the

risk and passion of the application (art on the street) translates to the viewer. This gesture also

communicates the invasion, the guerrilla takeover of a public place.

Typically, Fairey prefers blank spaces, especially the blank canvases where billboards are

hung, however there was an occasion when "he once hijacked a dozen Sprite 'Obey Your Thirst'

boards up and down the California coast, obliterating everything but "obey" and pasting them

into "Giant" boards" (Dooley). In this gesture of détournement, Fairey imposes his message

over the existing –and very recognizable—advertising rhetoric used in Sprite's marketing. Just as

with Kruger's work, the tangling of agitational word and image with corporate word and image

creates a direct parallel that calls into questions Sprite's commanding OBEY. Through isolating

the word "obey," Fairey calls attention to marketing rhetoric, which clearly uses the command

"obey" to persuade consumers.

Ironically, as a result of this composition (and presumably the attention he gained from

fans), Fairey was later asked to design advertisements for Sprite. However, this was not his first

corporate collaboration. In 1997 Fairey teamed up with Kinsey and Philip DeWolff to create

Blk/Mrkt. The firm has a reputation for in-your-face-graphics and "similar lifestyle interests in art, street culture and music." Blk/Mrkt operates a small label with which they create "lifestyle items." Fairey comments on this in his mission statement posted to the his website:

> Once upon a time, Giant was anti-advertising, a silent spokesperson without a product. Now it's become its own brand, with Fairey negotiating licensing deals for T-shirts, hats, and backpacks. He figures it still has enough street credibility to last a while longer. When he began his project, he fantasized it could be taken pretty far, but he never imagined it would be as big as it is now.

This bigness is what brings OBEY trouble—and troubles my own claims for its avant-garde status. Initially, Fairey maintained the position of an outsider, an activist, and a guerrilla. How can we understand Shepard Fairey as a renegade if he has a design company?

The polite critics say that Fairey walks a fine line between art and commerce, which puts him in a precarious position because he isn't quite an outsider artist, yet he's not really a "Mad Man" complicit with advertising strategies. Robert Walker published a multimedia article for *JUZTAPOZ* magazine, describing Fairey's work as a link that bridges a seemingly impossible gulch "between the underground world of graffiti culture and the very mainstream world of selling products to consumers." Other critics, the critics with teeth, just call Fairey a "sellout" because he turned his radical works into stuff for easy consumption. However, I would argue that Fairey's avant-garde gesture is a self-conscious gesture that relies on elements of conspicuous consumption as a mode of breaking, entering, and stalling the powerful psychogeographical forces of capital and power.

Fairey defends his position to his not-so-adoring fans, publishing the following disclaimer on the OBEY GIANT website: "The campaign exists in harmony with, not contrary

to, conspicuous consumption (the giant project could not exist within a social climate that was not susceptible to consumption catalyzed by image repetition)." I especially like how Fairey uses the words "in harmony with" to underscore how he implants his messages in the same structures of capital and power that mass produced goods travel; his messages are resonating on the same wavelength. He uses conspicuous consumption to deliver messages to a consuming public. This strategy is effective because it allows Fairey to reach his target audience, a legion of followers supporting this movement, while developing brand appeal to other shoppers who purchase his items because they are trendy, thus conspicuous consumption.

Fairey also consciously taps into elements of propaganda to make his point, which is an effective way to send radical messages through grooved media channels. He elaborates: "The Giant campaign simply pokes fun at the process by teasing the consumer with propaganda for a product which is merely more propaganda for the campaign; very reflexive… the propaganda and the product are the same." While using the process, Fairey is also critiquing the process. The message that Fairey sends is the product; the product and the propaganda are the very same. The idea presented here is the same principle as Marshall McLuhan's axiom: "the medium is the message." Fairey blends the propaganda and the product into one medium.

Through using, or manipulating consumer culture, Fairey is able to reach a wider audience. Fairey, again: "Only if the campaign reaches a level of visibility and interaction that exceeds the underground "cool" ceiling will it have a chance to make a profound statement about the societal tendency to jump on the bandwagon." Fairey realized that an outsider art movement would never work because it didn't have a presence in mainstream culture. Fairey's forces work only if these ideologies are placed in the mainstream culture, situated in rhetorical locations with the same cultural structures they critique.

One of the elements that this juxtaposition exposes is the culture industry mechanism identified by Greenberg and Bürger, which soaks up counter culture movements. Fairey states: "The dialogue the project can start about the process of imagery absorption is the most important aspect." The point of using this mode of absorption is to spread a message through the media channels, thus becoming a pervasive part of mainstream culture. Fairey continues: "This dialogue is most meaningful if the giant campaign becomes pervasive enough to become a trend psychology driven feeding frenzy like some silly crap such as the Rubik's cube or the Spice Girls." He depends on popular culture to spread his messages.

Fairey uses his force to mobilize the public, rousing them to take back their independent thought and, by extension, public spaces. For example, when the people hang Fairey's stickers in cities they are reclaiming a piece of public space. Further, they are executing a gesture that breaks the psychogeographical continuum of power and capital, which prevents the public from directly interfering with public spaces. In performing these gestures, the enlightened, empowered viewer is able to reconnect to their environment directly, not mitigating the spectacle, but actually interacting with the authentic environment. Fairey's move to mobilize a message through a grass roots consumer movement as a way to demonstrate visual difference has beginnings the Situationist International strategies and ideologies.

To recall, the Situationist International emphasized the importance of space and one's connection to the city. This was the whole point behind psychogeography, exploring one's own personal connection to a space based on how they perceive and experience the space on an emotional level. Thus, there is a specific resonance, if not force, that is derived from the placement of an aesthetic work in a contextualizing environment. Over time, these visual components that seem to be accents on a space actually come to shape the space as we will later

see with Times Square. Fairey taps into this shift sticker campaigns, but he restores the agency to the people to enact this shift. He explains: "The art of stickers isn't just about what is on them, but also how they are integrated into the environment." The public needs to place the stickers on surfaces, and in doing so needs to interact with the space in a different way. Fairey describes the sticker placement:

> The most common placement is poles and crosswalk boxes at eye level. These are also the fastest places to be cleaned. Climbing a couple feet higher really weeds out the city workers and vigilante citizens who aren't dedicated to their jobs. Slightly bigger stickers are great for these high spots.

Weaving stickers into the city changes the way that we see the city. We begin to notice elements that we normally would ignore: poles, newspaper stands, mailboxes, crosswalks, etc. Suddenly these elements stand out from the visual static because they are changed, ever so slightly, by these subtle gestures that jam the visual rhetoric. These changes have the potential to interrupt the way we connect with the space on a psychographic level because they interrupt how we remember the space. The break in memory makes way for the possibility that viewers can begin to see aspects of the environment that we would otherwise miss because we have either tuned these spaces out or because they have vanished into the visual banality of an urban space.

In this chapter we reviewed language-based implanted in structures of popular culture, which rely on popular culture to circulate messages with a deeper meaning drawn from existing power structures. We can see that Kruger and Fairey's avant-gardes are not outside popular culture, but inside popular culture and negotiating this sphere reach greater depths in society. Fairey and Kruger show us that an avant-garde always must exist in relation to popular culture, not beyond these structures, but relative to popular culture as an antagonistic mode.

CHAPTER THREE

READING ZOMBIES: THE DEFORMANCE OF SIGNS

On January 19, 2009, an anonymous hacker interfered with the morning commute in Austin, Texas, by altering the LED public safety display of two road signs. Instead of warning commuters about roadwork, the signs cautioned drivers, "The End is Near!!!," "Zombies in Area – Run!," and "Nazi Zombies, Run!" A local NBC News affiliate in Austin broke the story and eventually the incident made the national news.

An article published on the *WIRED* magazine website reported that authorities took a harsh view on the activities. The view the authorities settled on was that this type of incident qualifies as a class-C misdemeanor, a sentence with penalties ranging from $500 fines up to jail time. The justification for these charges was that switching the message on the LED Public Safety display signs could have been harmful to drivers. As stated by the Associated Press, "the rewritten signs distract motorists from heeding legitimate hazards down the road." Drivers could potentially tune out other signs, real hazard signs, because they could think those notifications are also in on the joke.

Fortunately, no drivers were harmed in the hack. However, the stunt succeeded in violating safety in a different way: the rewritten messages demonstrated the vulnerability of a seemingly closed system. The gesture of hacking publicizes the holes in security and alerts us to the forcework strategies of infrastructural language like waysigns. An Associated Press article, "Pranks with Electronic Road Signs Stir Worry," published a quote from journalist Ray Wert, the editor-in-chief of *Jalopnik*, stating, "Hacking generally is about showing where there are holes in security systems…" Hacking publically exposes the holes in the security as a way to visually represent to the public just how insecure they are. I think that the legal response is so stern not

only due to concerns about safety, but because it is a reaction to fear. In a way, one could read this prank as a direct challenge to public security systems.

In many ways the penalty speaks to the *perceived* gravity of this transgression and not the literal performative act, the playful act of changing a message on a road sign. I argue that the legal position is in response to the *symbolic* effect of the gesture, which demonstrates the malleability of public information and, by extension, the malleability of realities. This gesture is not simply a harmless alteration of language, but a public display of how an anonymous hacker can break into and distort "truths."

This chapter will explore similar case studies of artists who interfere with electronic information displays and public perceptions of security and truth. I tell this story with examples from Jenny Holzer and the Graffiti Research Lab (GRL) to demonstrate how interferences in visual language can rupture the commodity spectacle and refuse power. I focus on how these artists hijack language in public signage, particularly electric signs, as a way to divert and reveal public knowledge, which they accomplish with a forcework that pushes the audience into the realm of the unknown. These interventions set the audience member adrift in the urban space. As the signifiers are shifted, the audience that used those signs to orient themselves in a public space is suddenly pushed off the logical and logistical grid.

Through intervening in public visual language the activists intervene with personal orientation within a space, which I will approach through the Situationist concept of Psychogeography, a term I've used several times in previous chapters. Guy Debord defines Psychogeography in his essay, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," published in 1955. Debord defines this term in the following way: "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and

behavior of individuals" (8). Psychogeography is a person's somatic, psychological, and

emotional response to an environment. It is the way a person orients themselves in a physical

place by relying on both the physical and immaterial qualities of the environment to inform their

vision.

Psychogeography is also key to exploring and understanding how a person comes to

understand and explore a city. According to Joseph Hart, Psychogeography is

> playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities. Psychogeography includes just
>
> about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them
>
> into a new awareness of the urban landscape.

The key point that Hart makes is about moving the pedestrians off their usual, predictable paths.

This movement is known as the dérive, or the drift, which is a course of motion without a given

destination, a motion that breaks both the predictable paths of the pedestrian and the predictable

paths laid out by the grid. The playful strategy, as Hart writes, intends to push the audience into

a new mode of exploration, as well as a new area to explore. For example, in the case of the road

signs, the hacked signs may have encouraged commuters to take another route to see the LED

displays. Alternatively, the signage may have caused drivers to avoid the route because they

whole thing seemed suspicious. Of course, I am only speculating, but the point of the altering

the signs is the inherent possibility of change it provides to people traveling down the roads. The

hackers are after this type of deviation from the daily ritual of the commute. At a granular level,

they are breaking the flow of motion by interfering with the language and sign systems we use to

connect linguistically and psychologically to an environment, an environment tuned entirely to

the needs of capitalism.

Aspects of Psychogeography also include the way we interact with the material in space, in this case the sign. For example, when the hackers alter the text on the LED road signs they also change the way the drivers receive information about the road conditions. So, in this case, since the signs are talking about zombies, the drivers no longer could rely on signs to move them along the roadway safely because that is no longer how the signs are performing. The signifying chains have changed, which manifests in the way the drivers move through the space.

As the hackers remove the layer of objective information from the sign, and replace it with play, the primary functions of the signs are rendered useless. Part of the interventionist gesture that is so stalling, or so revealing, is how it exposes to us how we rely on signs to function as objective truths.

For example, the LED displays on a road sign sometimes flash "Roadwork on Bridge." When I drive past this sign, I will probably curse in the car, most likely out loud (I'm probably driving alone, so it is okay), because I know I will be stuck on the bridge in a single lane of traffic. I do not need to perform a close reading of the sign to interpret the information at a greater depth. I will just trust that the sign is telling me accurate information, so I will smolder in anger and I will drive about my day.

The point is that the LED sign, this mode of delivery, doesn't demand critical reading. There isn't anything specific in the LED sign that accomplishes this neutrality. Rather, we may find that we have become socially conditioned to understand that information on LED signs is only functional. Through this understanding, we make a tacit agreement with these screens; we trust these particular apparatuses to facilitate quick communication. We don't consider that the sign blinking at the airport could be tricking us. We don't wonder if the LED dots telling us that the shuttle is in service are actually conspiring against us. We know we are going to sit in traffic

on the bridge when we see the sign advertising roadwork. We accept this media as objective facthood to facilitate efficient reading of electric information; this is how we read electric information and why we read it the way we do.

The way we read electric words is different than the way we read material words. Electric is instantaneous, so we read this format quicker than print because we need to digest the information in a snap. This distinction is important because the examples covered in this chapter are cases of diversions in digital media, which is different than the compositions surveyed in the first and second chapters where artists manipulate material language. I have chosen such examples because of how these texts invite this specific mode of reading.

I agree with Marshall McLuhan's degree: "the medium is the message." Part of the process of reading electric, I argue, is that the medium is imposed onto the meaning of the message. The electronic medium of communication is typically used to quickly display functional information so much that these blinking boxes vanish until we are not conscious of them. However, I don't think we necessarily "tune out" the medium all together because it shapes the overall meaning of message. McLuhan's "the medium is the message" is very much applicable to the variegated ways we read electronic media today in beginning of the twenty-first century.

Katherine Hayles offers another perspective on this issue within the context of our twenty-first century digital moment. She argues that the medium permits an "understanding what is being said without being able to read it. All these associations are structured by the materiality of the artifact and differ significantly from the structuring associations" (23). The structure, material, and overall delivery of the message allow us to understand the information being delivered without even needing to participate in the dominant language of the speaking

community (an important point I will return to later in this conversation). I argue that this process of meaning making actually happens before the spectator reads the words. I believe that the viewer first draws meaning from the format before reading the verbal message. Again, this method of cognition implies that the reader is relying on this type of sign format to function as a producer of objective information.

Since this particular medium imposes a connotation of objective truth, the signs that warned the drivers about zombies became especially confusing to commuters. Just to be clear, there were no zombies on the road. Also, though without fact checking, I'm sure that the drivers did not believe that there were zombies ahead. The point isn't really about believing in the zombies or not believing in the zombies, but how the gesture exposes the way we believe in signs. The unsuspecting audience was struck with a moment of cognitive dissonance because the signs they objectively trusted objectively had become deceitful. As a result, the drivers were not certain if they should believe the information on any of the following public safety displays because the unconditional trust in the screens has been broken. Therefore, in this case, the unsuspecting audience becomes aware of all road signs they will see during their morning commute, even those they would have tuned out. The hackers succeed in creating a confusion that makes drivers acutely aware of the medium and the message. They also create a moment that makes the drivers aware of how the space is organized, or managed, by such signs. I argue that these artists attempt to divorce certain occasions of public language from its functional, indexical role, to draw attention to that role and reveal it as an ideological construction.

I find that Jerome McGann's theory of deformance is most useful in this conversation because of how this critical perspective accounts for digital environments with a methodology that refuses indexical structures. He outlines theories of deformance in *Radiant Textuality:*

Literature after the World Wide Web. I understand "deformance" to be a performance of

undoing. It is a gesture that reveals the deconstruction of the materialized language by asking

the reader to navigate through the text in a way other than how it has been indexed. This gesture

relies on the audience to participate first-hand in these processes of deconstruction, thus making

them an active part of the reading such that this particular version of meaning making could not

be possible without their participation.

In the case of the Texas road signs, the deformance is used to present to readers the

deconstruction of their reading processes and read materials. For example, because they have to

read these signs differently, they potentially become conscious of how they are reading, the

format in which they are reading, and what they are reading. Aspects of deformance allow

hackers to gesture to the public how they have become programmed to public information

messages.

Deformance is a two-step process that is used to break the streaming content that

mitigates their relationships to the environment. The rupture first exposes how we read

(consume) public information and secondly how we read public spaces, bringing us to the final

conclusion through moments of disorientation that break the grid. McGann addresses this

signifying shift in terms of a metaphor that channels Robert Frost's "The Road Less Taken," a

metaphor that I find to be quite apt for this particular case study because of how the interference

we are reviewing is set on a literal road. McGann writes:

> A text is a network for roads taken and not taken. Some of the roads have never
>
> been taken, so far as we know, and of the roads known to have been taken, some
>
> are well traveled and some hardly traveled at all. Who traveled which roads, and
>
> when, and where, are matters of consequence to anyone studying the texts. (152)

McGann presents the text as a series of roads that we travel, as readers, to discover information. He complicates this straightforward image by introducing "roads not taken." McGann uses this swerve in the metaphor to present a non-linear approach to reading a text, one that invites the reader to move away from the sequential mode of reading that follows a focused narrative laid over progressing pages (or sentences or paragraphs). McGann invites the reader to go off the grid, to explore the "roads" that have never been taken in the text by quite literally reading against the grain, moving differently, in non-linear moves. He invites the reader to navigate a text by breaking the imposed method of reading.

McGann encourages this mode of reading, deformance, as a way to discover new meaning in a text, to look for alternative meanings. The goal of deformance is to reorganize textual order as a method of revealing possibilities within that text. Ultimately, this way of reading will lead to variegated meanings. Deformance unlocks the *possibilities* of a text by consciously altering the function of the text beyond the structure. Deformance deliberately interferes with the way we relate to a text, or textual form to accomplish this primary goal. By extension, one can understand how deformance deliberately interferes with the way we relate the contextual location of the form as well.

The hackers in Austin deformed the signs to change the way the drivers relate to the functionality of the sign and the space in which the sign was functioning. For a moment, this road, this commute, is suspended in a state of play that brings the drivers into a new way of seeing the space, and subsequently moving through the space. Jenny Holzer and GRL also use these modes of interference to draw the public into an acute awareness of city spaces, but on a larger and, possibly, more successful scale. Holzer and GRl use the placement of their signs, in

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urban environments like New York's Times Square, to engage tensions within capitalism's psychogeographical power.

In this chapter, I will focus on these types of signs as well as other examples of digital information media to account for the current situation of social media, especially the way we communicate with each other through media. As mentioned above, I will read the way we connect to places through the Situationist theory of psychogeography and dérive. I will also use McGann's theory of deformance to approach interventions in information media as gesture that collapses art and life, sending the audience into a moment of active play that breaks the grid.

As we approach these cases, we see how they rely on a three-part radical gesture that I understand as forcework. The first step in the performance is the initial interference of the sign, which communicates the act of the transformed sign and, in effect, presents the materialization of language (meaning that the public is made very aware of a sign that would normally sink into a sea of advertising). The second step is the audience's reaction, or the stall. The final expression of the forcework, as stated previously, is psychogeographical redirection. I tell this story with confidence because this was my personal experience with materialized language in digital format, especially when I visited the Whitney Museum in the March of 2009 to see PROTECT PROTECT, an exhibit of Jenny Holzer's works that featured her LED light displays. PROTECT PROTECT was on the top floor of the Whitney.

I took the elevator to the top of the building; the doors slid open with great effect. An orange light filled the elevator, leaking in at first, slowly seeping through the cracks, before rushing into the car when the doors opened fully. The elevator car was consumed with orange in a way that was overwhelming. We all lingered in the elevator for a moment, a bunch of us, me and the others who were going to see Holzer's LED projections. We were stunned. A few

people muttered subdued "hmms" or "wows" or "whoas," the only reaction one could have as our senses were drowned in orange. Eventually, we quietly walked into the glowing gallery, moving cautiously into a vast space drenched in light, stepping out of the elevator one by one.

The gallery was saturated in this orange glow. The walls, the ceiling, and the floor were bathed in this orange. The light came from two long rows of long LED tickers, a major floor installation, "For Chicago," that spread across the width of the room. This composition is made up of eleven "48-foot-long LED signs, placed parallel about two feet apart, nearly reduce language to pure light" (Smith). The light was brilliant. It hurt my eyes, but it made my skin brilliant.

Yellow diodes scrolled by on each row of the LED displays. Every single illuminated dot made up a letter, eventually a word, and finally a thought. The statements moved quickly, flowing down the LED board like an endless stream of language. Occasionally there were redacted elements within a particular sentence. In these cases, certain words, or entire sentences, censored with Xs. The flow of the Xs punctuated the dynamic pulsing light. It wasn't necessarily dark in the gallery, these moments when the Xs moved by, but we were presented with a brief respite of shade. It was a visually articulated pause.

"For Chicago" served as a type of retrospective for Holzer. The screens were "programmed with her writings from the late 1970s through the 1990s, such as the Truisms and Survival series" (Voyatzis). The most recognizable of Holzer's words to flash on the screen was her recycled phrase: "Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise." However, the most disturbing came from Holzer's "Survival" series: "Die fast and quiet when they interrogate you or live so long that they are ashamed to hurt you anymore." This chilling dictum flashed every so often along the extended LED signs. The subjects of interrogation tie into the other works in

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PROTECT PROTECT, an exhibit organized around issues of human rights violations in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

The essence of the statement is chilling: "Die fast and quiet when they interrogate you or live so long that they are ashamed to hurt you anymore." Given the context, we understand that the speaker is talking about the prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Gitmo and we can deduce that she is speaking to them directly, as this seems like advice. The objective speaker, taking on the sound of an oracle, encourages the prisoner to die because it is the better option than being tortured. The second part—"or live so long that they are ashamed to hurt you anymore"— encourages an alternative, suggesting that the prisoner should live a long life, spending the rest of their life in captivity. As they age, as the routine torture continues, the inquisitors will eventually find themselves torturing an elderly person. Either option is bleak, but these are the only options that the objective speaker presents.

I stopped in front of "For Chicago," standing at the bottom of the piece so that the words were flowing into my shoes. It seemed that the messages were moving through me before soaking into the floor around me, vanishing like a wave breaking on the beach. I strained to read the words with great effort because as soon as they appeared, they evaporated. The only way a reader can access the message to understand the work is through completely changing the way they read. For example, the reader must string together each letter, then each word, until there is finally a sentence. The audience does not have access to the full text. They cannot see an entire text at once, only part of the message as it is revealed before them, and only for a flash. Holzer's decision to withhold information forces the audience to read the words carefully. Further, it forces the audience to remember the words. Should they forget a word, then they encounter a

gap in meaning. In this sense, the audience must be fully engaged with the reading process; to make meaning, they must become an active reader; they cannot remain passive in this process.

Trying to read "For Chicago," struggling to discern the words against a gallery glowing in neon lights, makes this composition even more somatically impactful. The ocular exertion it takes to read the messages written in blinding light is part of the overall impact of the piece. Also, to see the text moving, cascading down these screens, is dizzying, if not nauseating. Jenny Holzer makes her unsettling point with the way we are physically confronted with language; she makes her point in how we experience language, a point she reinforces quite uncomfortably.

To see this piece in person was to understand, to visually experience, the forcework of Holzer's unsettling portents. The lights transform the language into something tangible, materialized words. The pieces in PROTECT PROTECT present language in a way that the reader can experience words somatically; she transforms language into a source of light you can feel on your skin. Language performing in the medium of light can demonstrate the expansive reach of language, thus depicting the power of language in its scope. This point is reified as the audience leaves the exhibit, into a city of language and light that pushes and pulls them.

Through illuminating the words, and choosing a style where the words themselves shine a light outwardly, Holzer creates a metaphor for the power in information. She proves to us how pervasive ideologies can become by illustrating the reach of such ideologies in overwhelming light that touches our skin, grabs us, and moves us through spaces. We are always already consumed by language, but not just any language, but a militarized, technologically invisible rhetoric that has become inseparable from commercialism, entertainment, and capitalist compulsions.

Holzer's messages reveal a military-commercial-entertainment complex behind apparently simple, utilitarian communications. This story is illustrated with the flow of light throughout the entirety of PROTECT PROTECT. The way in which the light flows from each piece, overlapping with the other, blending together into a combined dizzying amalgamation, is symbolic of how public information has become an amalgam of these variables, such to the extent that these specific power structures are indistinguishable from one another. Holzer's works agitate viewers to make them aware how this stream of media is embedded deeply in their personal lives in a subconscious way. Her public works illustrate how these power structures are embedded in our lives in a very public and blatant way. Holzer's art demonstrates how these forces merge together to create a public and personal life of unreality, the spectacle.

The concept of power structures flowing together in a common stream is evocative of Guy Debord's second thesis in *Society of the Spectacle,* which states:

> The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation. The specialization of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living. (2)

The beginning of the statement is most impactful because Debord describes the same situation that Holzer illustrates, a condition where streaming, mediated images fuse together. The daunting tone of Debord's declaration is in how the images detach from "every aspect of life," and through doing so, lose their inherent meaning. As they "fuse in a common stream," they

merge to form a new meaning, and even though the significance is based on a collection of truths, the new meaning is itself a singular untruth. From this position of untruth, reality "can no longer be reestablished." As people use these images, this media stream, to orient themselves in the world, they only become further removed from an authentic reality. Instead life becomes something devised by "the autonomous movement of the non-living." Debord's premise declares that we are not living a real, authentic reality, but one mediated for us and by us. Debord identifies this untruth, this unreality, as the Spectacle.

Holzer brings this chilling forecast to life by situating her works in public spaces, in the same environment where this public mis/information lives. In doing so, the critique filters through commodity and metropolitan culture to reach her audience in their everyday lives, on a very personal level. This contextual location gives Holzer's visually articulated ideologies even more power because of the direct, contextual comparison. Ultimately, Holzer creates language-based compositions that pose as public information, and in doing so, asks us to reconsider how we read (into) ideologies, and how we absorb information in our everyday lives. These interventions manifest in how Holzer also mitigates the flow of the spectator in an urban environment as a way to reveal the Spectacle that has been created, and sustained, by public information displays in instantaneous, streaming digital formats.

By the time I left PROTECT PROTECT, I was emotionally exhausted. I stepped out onto Madison Avenue, trying to orient myself in New York City. I was dizzy from the moving lights. My eyes hurt. It was even harder to think in the cacophony of the city. I knew I needed to find Lexington Avenue, where I would also find the 6 train, and I needed to take this train down town to 33rd street so I could walk west to Penn Station. I had a solid plan until I realized that I had no idea where the 6 train was, because neither iPhones nor Uber were invented at this

point (yes, there was a time that existed before Google Maps), so I decided to skip the subway all together. After all it was springtime, and it was New York, so why not take a walk downtown? And so I walked downtown.

Eventually, while on my walk to Penn Station, I found myself in Times Square. Suddenly, everything I saw that morning at PROTECT PROTECT started to make sense! I was looking at the LED signs differently. More importantly, for the first time in a long time I actually *saw* the signs pull forward from the visual noise of this infamous space. Not only was I acutely aware of how public information was being delivered, but of the speed and forcefulness of it all. Suddenly, everything clicked: Jenny Holzer wasn't only designing an exhibit for the Whitney… she designed an exhibit for the city of New York. Her audience would fully realize the full impact of her work when they left the gallery, not only while they were in the Whitney.

Holzer implemented a mode of forcework within PROTECT PROTECT that moved the audience through the gallery space, circulating through the seven electronic sculptures. Eventually, the forcework moves the audience from the inside to the outside, where again they would find themselves again being pushed and pulled by illuminated language. As a result of this forcework, this flow that intervened in the flow of the spectacle, they would see New York City differently, as a commodity spectacle of misinformation.

Given its history, placement, and the screaming advertisements jockeying for attention, I consider Times Square, beating in the heart of Ginsberg's Moloch, the epicenter of the Commodity Spectacle. It sits in the center of Manhattan, burning like a hot fire all hours of the night, 365 days a year, supersaturating crowds with over 5,000 advertisements daily. 5,600 securities of the NASDAQ pump through the LED veins of the MarketSite Tower in Times Square. The Branded Cities NASDAQ sign stands over seven stories tall. The electronic

signage climbs high. The Thompson Reuters sign looms 22 stories over the space, consisting of: "11 uniquely-sized, high definition LED screens and state-of-the-art technology capable of full-motion video, simulcast events, mobile interactivity, social media integration and much more" (Times Square Alliance). Then there is the ABC Supersign, a 3,685- square foot electronic ribbon of screens in Times Square. These are only some of the extreme signs in 21st-century Times Square, a space that seems to be ever widening.

Within this world of advertisements and scrolling news tickers, are a set of public information signs, news feeds, broadcasts, or stocks that constantly stream on these LED boards. We rely on these screens for objective, instantaneous information. In 1982, Holzer challenged the visual culture in Times Square. Through doing so she also attacked the relationship we have with these screens as she revises flashing tickers of public information as a medium for misinformation, derailing their expected function, which seems firmly fixed as a location of objective truth. The "Truisims" Holzer presented in Times Square changed the way the space was read at that moment.

Over the years, Times Tower has also become a central point for New Yorkers, at least psychologically, as it is one of the most recognizable landmarks in the 12 block venue that make up Times Square. The Times Tower immediately became a focal point for the city, beginning with the famous ball drop on New Year's Eve on December 31, 1903, two years before the *New York Times* even moved into the building. The reputation and purpose of the space shifted into something even more spectacular when on November 6, 1928, *The New York Times* (for whom the tower gets its name), began broadcasting headlines on an electronic news strip that wrapped around the building. The Times Tower was literally wrapped in *Times* headlines. Tony Long describes this in his *Wired* magazine article, "All That's Lit":

The Motograph News Bulletin, or "zipper" as it was known informally, was a

technological marvel of its day. It extended 380 feet around the Times Tower and,

with a band 5-feet tall, the moving letters were visible from a distance of several

city blocks.

The streaming headlines were new at that time, and they were certainly arresting for the public to

behold. Like most spaces in Times Square, the Times Tower eventually gave way to

commercialism. Long writes, "Modern Times Square gradually vanished into an orgy of

commerce, punctuated by garish neon and LED displays that make midnight feel like high noon,

technology had clearly passed the zipper by." The ticker has been maintained by Dow Jones, but

the function of "Zipper" has become diluted. It, too, has vanished into an orgy of commercial

signs, one of which being the Spectacolor board at the top of the building.

Today, the Times Tower's Spectacolor board is the most prominent signs on one of the

most prominent towers in the city, located in one of the most psychologically centered locations.

It's important. The Times Tower's Spectacolor board is a big deal. Therefore, when Holzer

collaborated with the Public Art Fund to alter this sign, it was highly impactful because "at that

time the ultimate Western center of sensory overload in terms of the production of senseless

information" (Joselit 49). David Joselit describes Holzer's use of signage within a given space,

emphasizing how she places her sign at the highest point in Times Square:

No, not somewhere lost in the midst of it, but right up on top, at the site of the

annunciation, in the pulpit of the global empire and its news, the bands of light

carried Holzer's platitudes across the electronic billboard, in those days the most

advanced technology anywhere. (49)

Symbolically, Holzer placed her work at the top of the pulpit of capitalism. The context of her gesture makes the message on the LED even more powerful.

The message displayed was simple: "Protect me from What I Want." The meaning is accessible; the speaker wants to be saved from the overwhelming ubiquity of desire, especially in the every-hungry, non-stop, insatiable state of capitalist consumption. Michael Auping observes that "the lighted words implored, underscoring the common knowledge that in the city of New York virtually anything is available at any time for the right process" (24). Holzer is problematizing personal desire in a very public way. The placement of the message in Times Square is what gives the statement force. As stated by Jack Amariglio: "The outward display of desire unbound is evidenced here [in Times Square] by an unabashed florescent cry into a public space, one that models the modern city and its sparkling nocturnal urbanity" (37). The location of this piece is not only within a site of feeding-frenzy consumption, but at the very apex of this iconic location. If the crowds of Times Square were to look up, past screaming advertisements, they would find this sign looking down on them from the sky.

Joselit reads this sign as a method Holzer uses to instruct her audience how to feel, how to move them:

> Those who stopped to stare became, unasked, witnesses to a truly initial occurrence: in the guise of electronic letters there appeared an artist from that has since gone on, under the name of Jenny Holzer, to teach people all over the world how to see and feel. (49)

It's hard to say what Holzer wanted the people to feel, but it is easy to see that she is complicating desire, problematizing it in a way the becomes uncomfortable. It is impossible to speak for each of the people who saw the sign, and even more unmanageable interpret each of

their reactions granularly. However, Holzer's intentions are evident; she aims to stall her viewers, to cause them pause, for a brief moment as the sign steps forward out from the visual overload.

Holzer is trying to get the public to *think*. Even if she isn't telling them exactly *what* to think, she wants the public to become aware of their personal politics and political questions. Ironically, or appropriately, she makes her point by directly interrupting the structures of power and capital that *do* tell the public what to think. Daniel Makagon elaborates:

> Holzer's projects possesses the ability to disrupt the viewer's activities and create opportunities for the observer to contemplate existential, political, and cultural questions that are relevant for Times Square as well as for public life more generally. (144).

Holzer's projects are able to disrupt the viewer's activities because they disrupt the visual-ideological continuum of the spectacle. Makagon goes on to point out that Holzer's "approach to public art challenges conventional narrative structures and media presentation" (144). For example, Holzer uses advertising spaces to deliver messages that are anti-consumerist, questioning public information, or highlighting the almost militaristic control of advertising campaigns. In doing so, she challenges the conventional use of that rhetorical form, these rhetorical spaces. While she undercuts this material structure, she also reprograms (literally), or repurposes, the narrative structures delivered by this media. "Holzer's statements achieve their disruptive power because spectators expect the media in which her messages appear to relay official information and authoritative commands" (Makagon 145). Holzer's forcework is initiated when her audiences encounter these messages in public settings that do not behave as they would expect.

Holzer uses "Protect me from What I Want" to critically engage the construction of the space, the material culture, or general cultural makeup of Times Square. Throughout her career, Holzer has been using materialized language to critique cultural inscriptions placed upon physical locations. Holzer has redirected the media in these spaces to expose how public information and visual culture sustain such cultural inscriptions. She, like Kruger, began using vernacular surfaces to embed her points deeply in the public consciousness. While it may seem natural to compare both artists on the dual premises that both are contemporaries, or that both leverage harsh cultural critiques with materialized language, Holzer and Kruger are in fact quite different. They differ in the type of language they work with. For example, Kruger's structures use collisions of typography and familiar images to create cognitive dissonance that lands as bristling invectives. Holzer's statements, as the name suggests ("Truisms"), are uncomfortable in their subtlety and how they brush up against our common sense like a rose bush. Danto explains that the "Truisms express something we already know. Truisms pass for wisdom. But aphorisms hurt." For Danto, Kruger's invectives are harsher than Holzer's truths. Still, nonetheless, Holzer's words are biting, but they just work differently. The *Truisms* are unsettling not in what they say, but what they make us say about ourselves.

Holzer's words seem like obvious statements, so obvious that they are already implied. Yet, when we are encountered with these statements like "Everyone's Work is Equally Important," we may cringe because there is an element within the statement that we resist. For example, when I read "Everyone's Work is Equally Important," I get annoyed. I take it personally. Immediately, I think about my work. I think about all of the hours and days and years I put into my research, into this project. I think about the suffering. I think about the pride I take in this and how I feel that it is important. How is my work as important as someone who

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did not suffer nearly as much? Then, I feel guilty. Maybe I should give other people's work a chance. Who I am I to be so dismissive? Holzer's statements are agitational because they become very personal, very quickly.

Holzer makes her statements even more personal by bringing her *Truisms* to the places where we live, which are always already mediated by public language. In doing so, she shows us how public language invades private spaces. Through this critique we can understand how "public language" is hardly language of the public, from the public, but it is corporate rhetoric, just as "public spaces" have become corporatized as well. In this sense, Holzer's works are very much informed by material construction and rhetorical location. Integrating *Truisms* directly into the urban landscape, like New York's Times Square, allows Holzer to directly engage, question, and critique powers of media and capital.

She began spreading her *Truisms* in New York City from 1979 and 1982. They originally appears as a series of aphorisms that Holzer printed in italic black lettering. She posted these statements to everyday spaces that were linguistically and logistically accessible to a large viewing public. The *Truisms* "appeared on posters, tractor caps, stickers and billboards, on parking meters and store windows and inside telephone booths" (Waldman 9). Holzer presents her critiques on vernacular surfaces to reach a wide audience in personal spaces, not gallery settings. This move allows her to approach these issues directly, within the same media environment she is engaging.

Holzer uses everyday language, which is especially critical to the *Truism* series where all of the statements in the series are designed to have the ring of a common saying, and with that the authoritative trustworthiness of a cliché. The self-assured tone in each claim makes the *Truisms* appear as though the concepts have been around for centuries. During an interview with

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Jenny Holzer, Kiki Smith describes the *Truisms* as: "cogently pared down European and American enlightened thought, co-opted the tone and concision of authority, and disseminated through an endless supply of cultural channels" (Smith). Strangely, it is from this position, and familiar (vernacular) look/sound, that the outrageous claims appear to be acceptable (at least at first).

For example, one of Holzer's *Truisms,* which states, "Abuse of power comes as no surprise." This statement has the punch of a polished cliché with the resonance of a truth that seems to be absolute, as it suggests: *of course* abuse of power should not shock us. The statement proposes an inevitability that abuse of power will happen, no matter what: *of course! Obviously! We should have expected this injustice. Duh!* There is a sense of fatalism, too: *this is just how things work;* so we should neither be surprised, nor should we feel compelled to change this asymmetrical power system. The implication in the phrasing tells us that we should accept that power is going to be abused. By accepting this message as a truth, we are also tacitly agreeing to these elements of power, if not consenting to authoritative control.

The placement of these materials, directly in our own hands in the form of these kitschy products, signals to Holzer's audience that neutrality is not an option. If we do not react, or resist, we are also consenting to the media powers, allowing a disembodied speaking voice narrate our world to us, for us, so we don't have to think as much…or at all! Holzer doesn't present us with methods to follow, or an authoritative *A User's Guide to Everyday Revolutions for Beginners*, but she certainly uses strategies to bring the public back into an empowered consciousness. *She* endeavors to challenge and reveal the structures of repression at work in public spaces of place and language (Breslin).   As these structures spread with the pervasiveness of media, so did Holzer's constructions. In 1993, worked in collaboration with the 42nd St. Art

Project, a public campaign that assembled works from 25 artists, architects, and designers.

According to a statement released by the Creative Time website:

> Participating artists took 42nd Street on its own terms in both form and content,
> creating temporary, site-specific works in, on, and around storefront display
> windows, theater marquees, roll-down security gates, posters, commercial
> billboard spaces, and sidewalks. In many cases, participating artists involved
> passersby and members of the community in the actual making of their pieces.

Each artist created site-specific works that they then displayed in New York City's Times Square (between 7th and 8th avenue). Artists wove these compositions into Times Square's landscape, appearing on storefronts, window displays, billboards, marquees, sidewalks, etc. Their temporary, site-specific installations ran at different intervals from July 1993 to March 1994, transforming the way the public saw this space.

It is critical to note that during this historical moment Times Square wasn't the place of *Wicked* or *Jersey Boys*; this was a place of wicked Jersey boys, or lechery that converged from wide across the tri-state area. According to *Interiors,* "pimps, pushers and prostitutes ruled 42nd Street." This was the Times Square of Robert DeNiro's *Taxi Driver* and Dustin Hoffman's *Midnight Cowboy.* Even though, a shift was just beginning during the time of the 42nd St. Art Project, the transition was still in early stages. The 42nd Street Art Project was responding to these changes, talking back to the space in the most public way possible, by engaging the space directly. Holzer's contribution to the "42nd St. Art Project" was her détournement of movie theater marquees. Right before these theaters and their heralding sign boards were torn down, Holzer filled their empty signboards with her *Truisms* instead of promoting XXX features. This installation featured some of the same claims from the SoHo series and her *Survival Series,* for

example. The marquee series, developed for the 42nd street Art Project, hijacks marquees, and the language on these spaces, intervenes with the way the audience symbolically and literally reads Times Square. The interruptions obscure the visual and rhetorical structures, through which the audience navigates and connects with this area. In doing so, Holzer is making room for new psychological relationship to be formed with the geography.

Before creating linguistic interruptions, Holzer first destabilizes the contextual signifiers; she interferes with the marquees' literal use and signifying functions. The basic purpose of a marquee is to promote events in the theater. The space preforms like a carnival barker, shouting at the public: "*come and see it, folks!*" It continues to perform even in the absence of language when there is nothing written on the marquee. The audience understands the vacant marquee space is still a space that is used for promotion, and even while they are empty the sign is suspended in a moment of pause, they understand that new information may be coming shortly or the theater is closed for good.

When Holzer posted her statements in these spaces, she diverted the function of the marquee. Instead of reading a coming attraction, the public found her *Truisms.* Even though the content of the signs changed, the marquees still perform the same, and the audience reads the medium in the same way.   In this case, even though these messages are not the sort of titles and promotions that would ordinarily be represented on these spaces, the *Truisms* are informed with the spatial significance of the marquee. A dissonance is created from the conflicting message and the spatial construction. Hence, because of the context, it sounds like the *Truisms* are movie title or teasing descriptions.

One example of from this series is: "Laugh hard at the absurdly evil." The format and placement makes the statement seem that it is related to the films. However, this particular

sentence is a bit too long to be a movie title. Still, it seems like the phrase could be a teaser to

attract the audience into the theater: "*come in and laugh hard at the absurdly evil."* How could

something, or someone, be absurdly evil? Isn't evil just wickedness? Why would we laugh at

evil? There is something sinister about the sentence that doesn't seem to quite fit with the

language in the landscape. It seems biting, too, like it's mocking the audience who laughs at the

horribly evil things they see on the movie screen. The statement assumes that the audience

appreciates evil, or will mock it, but be entertained by this evil nonetheless. Based on the

landscape, and all of the other language, it seems that this crowd is drawn in by evil or just moral

decay. I was able to locate photographs of Times Square from this particular place in time.

I found some of the other marquees that displayed movie titles and *teasers* to get the

audience excited for the content in the theater. Some of the messages boasted "the filthiest show

in town." Others simply advertised "Peep Shows and Adult Films." Every film seemed to be

ranked according to a system of X's. Holzer's *Truisms* stand out from this linguistic landscape.

Even her most sinister statements, like murder has its sexual side," does not fit. There is a sense

that Holzer's messages do not belong on the signboards and certainly do not belong in the visual

continuum of Times Square. However, this then begs the question: do any of the other messages

belong there either? Why was the audience (patrons) accepting of the other messages, but

somehow taken aback by Holzer's statements? Again, part of Holzer's point is to demonstrate

how public places don't exist. These open areas, especially major focal points in cities, are

already corporatized spaces and have only interest in the person as consumer.

The power of Holzer's statements comes from their placement: "location is part of its

content" (Waldman 13). I see Holzer's work as an interruption in a particular space that is

capable of imposing new meaning onto the particular space. Part of that work is to comment "on

the nature of society and on the way in which art is perceived and received in a consumer society" (Waldman 9). This display forces the viewer to "experience Holzer's work a as member of a group, on a public level, or interact with it in a more private, intimate way" (Waldman 13). Her works of art intend to involve themselves with acts of everyday life, so she meets them in the public sphere of everyday life.

I like that Holzer's works travel outside of the gallery. Her art meets people in their own cities. Her mission is to stop people in their tracks, to challenge them, to antagonize them by confronting them with their own semiotic structures. While attending RISD, she experimented with developing artistic interruptions intended to interfere, ever so slightly, with a daily routine: "putting things in public and leaving them for people to find, either downtown or at the beach" (Waldman 10). I like considering Holzer's art as a public disruption through the medium of language and vernacular media. She plays with the gesture of the stall, stopping the public to get a reaction. According to the Creative Time website: "You've got a lot of people saying what the fuck is that?"

> The forcework for her art is the stall, the confused exclamation: *huh?* According to Cole:
>
>> She doesn't mind it at all when people come upon the words she has chosen glowing larger in a public space at night and ask, what is this? Is this art? Her response is disarming: "I really want to worry people, to bother people, but I leave it to them what to make of the art. I don't want to be part of the problem, which is telling people what they should think." (29)

Perhaps the point of Holzer's art isn't confusion. Maybe the confusion is just a byproduct because Holzer is introducing image/text into an urban environment that, for the first time, does not tell the viewers what to think. In fact, she creates a narrative about power. In all of her

installations, she uses language to visually, verbally, and somatically represent this story. She

uses spatial relationships to bring this conversation to life, placing language in spaces where

these invisible power structures are present:

> It's about power over words and over their dissemination in writing. For despite
>
> all the scribbling on the anonymous walls of the city, language remained an
>
> instrument of power. Authority over discourse, over the back-and-forth of talk,
>
> lay (and still lies) with those who hold power. It was their domain that Holzer
>
> wanted to infiltrate, to penetrate. (Cole 23)

Holzer intervenes with authority by infiltrating and penetrating these language structures. She

hijacks modes of verbal communication through visual forms of public information media.

While the *Truisms* and *Survival Series* are provocative, her xenon projections are

intended to be unsettling. Holzer uses these projections to change a city space for a single night

by overwhelming the space and viewer with illuminated language articulated in paranoiac prose.

The goal of this project is to expose structures of power by highlighting absences and

constructing presence. She creates architecture with language to demonstrate that language has

always already functioned as architecture; and to represent how we interact with these

ideological structures that construct our world.

These constructions evolve along with the changing media environment in which they are

situated. At this point, we have surveyed her transition from material surfaces (marquees) to

LED screens (digital environments), a period in her career that spans from the 1980s into the

1990s. After this time, Holzer began to transition from using LED boards to large-scale xenon

projections that wrap entire buildings in illuminated language. The xenon projections allow her

to (literally) broadcast invisible power structures upon these institutions. The buildings preform

as screens that outwardly transmit the ideological positions that their brick and mortar have come to encapsulate.

In the fall of 2005, Holzer collaborated with Creative Time, a New York City art coalition to create projections on the city's landmarks. In this series, "For the City," she used her xenon projections to alter the New York Public Library Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. She projected poetry at 30 Rockefeller Center. She also broadcasted "declassified United States government documents released under the Freedom of Information Act" (NYPL) upon the Bobst Library, New York University. These institutions were chosen for their physical construction as well as the significance of their invisible ideological structures. Each of these sites used in this campaign are significant to the city of New York in their own way. I want to focus my conversation on the poetry that Holzer projected onto the New York Public Library, because of all these spaces, this one is the most significant for me. I spent a lot of time in the New York Public Library, especially the main reading room at flagship branch, the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. I have come to this place both as a scholar, taking out books to write a dissertation, and as a tourist, staring at the frescoed ceiling in the main Rose Reading Room. I appreciate libraries as a larger signifier, a place of learning. Ideologically, libraries function as a symbol of free information, accessible to all people, regardless of class. Libraries are the center of a learning exchange, and thus it is the universal symbol of knowledge.

Paradoxically, while the library offers a collection of texts for reading, the library itself is seldom read. Holzer used her projections to transform the library as a space of reading into a space that demanded to be read. She projected poetry by Wislawa Szymborska, Yehuda Amichai, Henri Cole, Mahmoud Darwish, Adam Zagajewski, and other celebrated writers on the main building of the library. In doing so, Holzer's projections fused together the function of the

New York Public Library, its ideological position in culture, and the meaning of the poetry to create a message could only happen from this combination of rhetoric. Among these texts chosen for this site were Juliana Spahr & Stephanie Young's *Megaphone: Some Enactments, Some Numbers, and Some Essays about the Continued Usefulness of Crotchless-pants-and-a-machine-gun Feminism* and Elizabeth Bishop's "Love Lies Sleeping." When one considers the excerpts Holzer used from *Megaphone* and Bishop's "Love Lies Sleeping," we can see how Holzer presents the city as an organism that is objective, but alive in its brick and mortar.

The texts broadcast on the library are used to explicitly state this narrative in words. The image I provide from Spahr & Stephanie Young's *Megaphone: Some Enactments, Some Numbers, and Some Essays about the Continued Usefulness of Crotchless-pants-and-a-machine-gun Feminism* presents the following excerpt from their collection of essays:

> And by this we did not mean anyone had fallen, but rather to say get up, get on
>
> up, stay on the scene, come back if you left, please don't go if you're going
>
> strong, stay if you are just arriving, we see you, the work you are doing, you are
>
> amazing, breathe you, we talk, we smile, we touch your hair, you are the one, you
>
> are the one who did this to us, you are our own, we are crying hard, there was
>
> blood, no one told us, no one knew, mother knows, there is a world love center
>
> inside my ribcage, there is a world hate center inside too, to acquire a political
>
> meaning you don't even have to be human, raw materials will do.

The tone of this essay is childlike, written in a prattle structured in a stream-of-consciousness intonation. In the beginning of the passage addresses the audience, inviting them to stay: "stay if you are just arriving, we see you." Then the tone seems to change, becoming more accusatory

as the speaker states: "you are the one who did this to us." The accusation is unsettling because it is ambiguous who did what, and to whom.

The ending of the passage further problematizes the issue by inviting in a discourse on love and hate, as it exists in a singular space: "there is a world love center inside my ribcage, there is a world hate center inside too." Here we see the speaker developing a metaphor to articulate how they contain both love and hate within themselves. It seems as though the speaker is talking about their own body, as though they are using a metaphor to suggest that there is a world inside of them. However, the very last line of the segment confuses this superficial reading: "to acquire a political meaning you don't even have to be human, raw materials will do." This sentence destabilizes the speaking voice, suggesting that the speaker may not be human, but a compilation of "raw materials." Perhaps the speaker is a building, or the city speaking out to the audience about good and evil. The meaning in the previous line, "there is a world love center inside my ribcage," now begins to swerve. Perhaps this image is not a metaphor, but a literal image of a building full of life where the ribcage are the arches within. It seems that the building is alive, interacting with those that inhabit its chambers. By extension, we see a city filled with love and hate. We see a city that is accusatory, but steadfast.

Elisabeth Bishop's poem, "Love Lies Sleeping," presents similar themes of a city that is a living organism. The image of this text provides the following excerpt:

> an immense city, carefully revealed,
>
> made delicate by over-workmanship,
>
> detail upon detail,
>
> cornice upon façade

This particular stanza presents the city emerging in the first light of morning, where the changing light brings out the details of the buildings as if this cold city of stone and steel were warming, waking up to a brand new day. Bishop uses metaphors of light to bring the space to life. The poem continues, presenting images of the people in the city coming to life. The meaning of the poem and the context tell parallel stories in how Holzer uses light similarly; she uses light to set solid surfaces in motion literally, metaphorically, and semantically. The poetics that Holzer broadcasts on the New York Public Library reveal the hidden life of things that seem lifeless at first glance. Her projections give the NYPL a voice in illuminated language, and by extension, a chance to talk back to the city.

Holzer's projection transforms the walls of the library into a moving screen. "The letters race over the projection screen of a building, of a monument, or over the surface... She recognized Gutenberg's invention for what it really was: mobility of the individual sign" (Kerber). Through creating signs that are set in dynamic motion, Holzer develops a signification process that interacts with the form on which the sign appears. As the poetry slid from bottom to top across the nighttime façade of the New York Public Library, the poets' words mingled with the sign function of the space and the context of the metropolis. The message and the medium fused together until they became one thing, a forcework with potential to interrupt the spectacle.

The moment is fused as well. According to the Creative Time website: "The moving projections, akin to credits scrolling at the end of a film, allow the artist to work demonstratively with the ephemeral. The cityscape and surrounding architecture are involved; spaces, people, and time are included in an affirming gesture." There are brief moments when the projections revealed details of the library were revealed: a lion's snout, a person, an archway, the stairs. The light touches on these elements, and upon the viewers, to demonstrate how they are all connected

at that moment, even time is connected, and all of these forces are connected to the organism which is a city.

Holzer also makes a connection to time, bringing the moment into part of the architectural experience. Peter Wiebel addresses this in his essay, "Textual Rhythms: language as Architecture," stating, "This is Jenny Holzer's true accomplishment: to have made a language of space, an architecture of time" (39). The xenon projections are ephemeral. I know this is obvious because they are made of light, but I want to underscore how this type of installation is temporary. The situation only appears to be destabilized, but in reality the image will be dissolved upon the day break. Holzer's projections suspend the library in a moment where it is captivated and rewritten by language. She is able to transform materialized language into a type of architecture as a way to make the viewer conscious of time and conscious of how that that specific moment is constructed within the city.

Even though its force depends on the contingencies of space and spectator, Holzer's work does have an enduring impact; she engages the continuum of the work beyond the moment, the lifespan of the impact that the work has on the viewer. This point, this movement, provides a clear illustration of forcework and why we will come to see this kind of avant-garde work as something beyond aesthetics, something closer to a forcework that mitigates kinetic interactions between person, space, and social structures that design the space. Avant-gardism isn't an aesthetic, although it can come from an aesthetic. The avant-garde artists and artworks I can describe here can be considered a force at work, a force which breaks these invisible structures of consciousness (economic, social, political, cultural, etc.) as a way to create a new form of consciousness.

In this case, the light doesn't simply deform the library structure; it reconstructs an ideological apparatus upon the site of existing power, challenging the original authority of the space. The meaning that Holzer conjures from this convergence of signifiers is only accomplished by overlaying one ideological position (in text) over another (material structure). She broadcasts internal ideologies on the external structures of the buildings. In effect, she reconstructs the architecture of the building in language as a way to demonstrate how ideologies function as architecture, even if ideologies seem to be invisible things. She uses her xenon projections to create a narrative about power by making anonymous walls an instrument of power, over which she presumes sole authority.

In doing so, Holzer restores the power of the public space to the public. She creates materialized ideological structures that the audience can not only see, but structures that require their participation to function. Cole explains this experience:

> In this sense Jenny is freeing us from the tyranny of art as a two-dimensional retinal image. We still need not stare at the work to 'get it' but now we can also stroll right through it, holding the hand of a beloved, our bodies pushing through the light as a needle pushes through a vein. There is no boundary between the human and the mechanical in Jenny's nighttime projections. (29)

Holzer has created works that are interactive with the viewers. While provocative, the xenon overwhelms the viewer the same was I it overwhelmed me when I saw the works in the gallery space. As the light falls on your skin, you find that you are not simply touched by the installation but that you are a part of it; you cannot stay neutral. You consumed by it as an integral player to the performance; you are a part of the meaning. The New York Public Library describes the illuminated text as "encompassing the reader with the power of language to educate

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and console." The audience is empowered with language, which will in turn give the reader power: education. This concept is reified by placing the messages on the library, which again, is a symbol of a free learning exchange.

Holzer's xenon installations, like the LED signs in the Whitney, rely on this exchange of forcework, a transfer that is initiated by the materialized language. These projections depend on the audience's engagement with the signs as a way to redirect them through city, away from their usual ebb and flow. One way that she motivates the people to "different terrain and the encounters" (Debord) is by creating projections in specific locations around that city that are somewhat off the mental grid. Holzer brings her audiences to places that may have a certain ideological significance, like the New York Public Library for example, but places that aren't gathering points per say.

Holzer uses her art to draw crowds into new psychological contours of the city. Even though she does not call this move a dérive, if we approach her use of redirection through the philosophy of this Situationist strategy, which is a method of psychogeographical mapmarking discussed earlier in this chapter, we can see how the flow of the audience is a turn away from the structural power of the grid, a power that pushes people to specific gathering points in a city. The essence of the dérive is a movement off the grid and away from the ordinary flow of life in the city. Debord outlines this concept in an essay, "Theory of the Dérive," where he defines "dérive" as: "a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiences. Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll." The "rapid passage" he describes result in a new discovery of the geography in the city. This behavior is what he refers to as a "playful-

constructive behavior" because of how this passage builds a new formation of consciousness within the drifter.

The goal of the dérive is to form new connections with space as a way to resist the power governing a specific type of movement within a space. So, as a person in a dérive drops "their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (Debord 62) they are resisting the flow that pulls them through a city. In effect, this means they are resisting the type of flow that would bring them to specific points, usually points of commerce where they can spend money. Therefore, as Holzer brings people in New York to other gathering points, off the grid, she theoretically moves people away from places of consumption.

Debord explains that, "from a dérive point of view, cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones." The dérive defies these vortexes. As the drifter moves through the city, traveling as they please, they could very well gravitate towards these specific nothing zones. The reason why this theory is so important to Holzer is that she uses her projections to bring audiences into these places, "fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones" (62). In doing so, she is able to create new consciousness and narratives within these spaces. The tools that she uses for these large scale interventions allow her access to these places. According to Cole: "With the xenon projections, Holzer utilizes a new tool that affords her maximum mobility while enabling her to show large-scale moving texts in remote locations, independent of the technological network of the city" (12). The xenon projections allow Holzer to engage a variety of structures and variegated surfaces that formerly could not have been accessed in this way.

Although her laser projections are innovative, there are other activist groups using similar methods for interventions. Among this select few is the Graffiti Research Lab, a group of graffiti writers who have taken the next step to adapt their practices to the 21st century digitized city. Evan Roth and James Powderly founded the graffiti research lab during their residency at Eyebean Openlab in 2006. According to their mission statement, the Graffiti Research Lab (GRL) is "an art group dedicated to outfitting graffiti writers, artists and protesters with open source technologies for urban communication." Over the years Roth and Powderly have collaborated with activists, or urban interventionists, that write back to the city's media by using their own media interventions. Two of their projects that we will survey in the remainder of this chapter are the L.A.S.E.R Tag System (LTS), which creates large scale projections, and their LED Light Criticism campaign, which alters digital displays.

The GRL use laser technology in a similar way to Holzer uses her xenon projections and for similar effect. However, since they are using these projections to create throwies that cover an entire building, it is clear that this group is engaging a completely different power structure. Rather than (literally) taking aim at a military-commercial-entertainment complex, this group is satirizing the fear around graffiti culture as they create large-scale gestures that reclaim public space from corporations. In 2007, the GRL developed a pioneering intervention campaign when they debuted the Mobile Broadcast Unit with L.A.S.E.R Tag System (LTS). This tool is a very strong laser that allowed artists to write on "large-scale surfaces and structures from a distance of 100's of meters away." The activists position LTS in front of a building. They set up a digital projector, which looks like an ordinary projector. The artist will aim a laser pointer at the building to write on the façade. With a few flicks of their wrist, the writer begins to tag the entire building with illuminated language. This writing takes place in real-time. As the writer

moves the laser pointer, the light appears on the building façade. The stream of light appears on the surface like ink, even dripping down the front of the building with the same effect. When the composition is done, the writer can leave it up on the building, or clear the display and pass off the laser to the next artist to take a turn.

This tool is a tactical one that restores agency to the public, without putting them in precarious positions with the authorities. According to the GRL, the L.A.S.E.R

> allows any citizen, graff writer, artist or protester to use a projector, camera and laser to write… Citizens can post their art, messages and propaganda on a scale previously monopolized by advertisers, governments, major media, and other cultural tyrants.

The LTS gives artists access to spaces that are typically the sole domain of corporations. They will use public surfaces to display their laser tags.

The projections could empower people "with more interesting voices than advertisers." The LTS was "created as a tool to amplify the voices of everyday citizens … in opposition to the dominant global cultural forces of consumerism, control and oppression." The GRL developed this mechanism to restore power to the public by giving them agency. This mode of intervention answers the questions graffiti writers have always been asking: How can I get up bigger?   How can I get up higher? The lasers provide them with the tools to get their un-curated content into the city. Evan Roth and James Powderly came up with the system as a mode of digital graffiti that could redefine the art of graffiti in the 21st century. During an interview with *Time,* the duo explained: "We look at graffiti as something that has always been interested in materialism and technologies… we are maybe just adding one new twist to it." Roth and Powderly noticed the DIY nature of graffiti culture and wanted to introduce the lasers, LED, and digital projectors into

this mix. Roth and Powderly wanted to give people the tools and knowledge to start making their own signs.

The GRL developed a platform where they could share their materials as open source, meaning that all of their concepts are available with creative licenses.   The public would have access to the design as well as access to an internet forum through which they could share their ideas, works, and community. Although the internet allows the work a longer life span than the time the displays appear on the buildings, the material is often taken down for copyright infringement. Roth and Powderly explain: "we have had a lot of videos yanked by YouTube and these sorts of corporate sites" because someone deems it in appropriate.   "It's hard to get up and stay up, even with a computer."

The ephemerality within the compositions demonstrates something larger about these works. Roth and Powderly explain that significance of these projections is the act: "it's interesting because it is an act, not a visual medium." The internet allows viewers access to the act of how the tag was put on the wall, how someone had to climb onto the roof of a car to get a leg up on a dumpster and then scale a fire escape to the roof.
The messy blob of paint may not be visually interesting, or the LASER interventions may not be beautiful, but the point of these compositions is the act. Essentially, the act is the direct challenge to power that the gesture symbolizes through the visual move to reclaim public space.

The digital component of GRL's graffiti makes these compositions a type of urban hack. The artist hacks urban space in the sense that they are breaking into the architectural structures of these buildings. The laser becomes a system of publically inserting one's self into the corporate spheres of capital and power by directly taping into the visual media used to sustain these structures. This method of intervention is most similar to the LED road signs surveyed at the

beginning of this chapter. The Graffiti Research Lab also hack LED signs, mostly LED

advertising boards, the same way the hackers in Texas took over road signs.

During the winter of 2006-2007, the Graffiti Research Lab collaborated with the Anti-

Advertising Agency to create "Light Criticism," an urban movement where artists deform

advertisements (détournement) as a way to resist the invasion of privacy (by corporations) in a

public sphere. The artists accomplish this move by modifying the existing, backlit screens

around the city with abstractor boards. Steve Lambert explains that the GRL employs elements

of Ji Lee's Abstractor TV, "a simple device that instantly transforms any TV into a beautiful

piece of art." The Abstractor TV is an altered TV that the viewer creates by "attaching two black

boards to any TV screen. These boards cover the screen entirely – except for a small horizontal

gap between them – allowing a narrow beam of light to escape from the TV." The viewer can

only see a sliver of the flickering image behind the board. The point is to transform the TV into

a piece of art.

The statement on the Abstractor TV website encourages audience to apply this same

technique to video billboards: "Video-billboards flashing intrusive ads are proliferating all over

major cities around the world. Abstractor instantly transforms corporate video-billboards into

enjoyable public art." The instructions on the website give detailed instructions about creating

an abstractor board. The point of the intervention, and the instructions, are to restore power to

the public. The goal of this gesture, and the original abstractor, is to allow the people to resist

intrusive ads. This position became clearer when Graffiti Research Lab collaborated with the

Anti-Advertising Agency. They developed abstractor boards with such messages as, "NYC's

TRUE GRAFFITI PROBLEM." Placing this board over the backlit display of the advertisement

allowed the letters to glow in the darkness of the city night. The commentary is clear: the true

graffiti problem in the city isn't the tags or the throwies, but the advertisements that bombard the city with visual noise.

The GRL developed the "Light Criticism" initiative to make a stand against the perception of advertising in the city. This campaign challenges the ubiquity of advertising and the way that the public accepts this visual intrusion, as though we have no other choice but to live in a world of images. According to the statistics produced by GRL: "Between October 2006 and December 2006, the City of New York has removed or obscured 59 illegal banners on sidewalk sheds." As NYC began to crackdown on graffiti writers, members of the organization watched their friends "be detained, arrested, beat, fined, tried, and given real jail sentences." On the other hand, the corporations in volition of the anti-advertising laws in the city received no penalty. It is clear the graffiti is criminalized while advertising is acceptable. GRL points out that even illegal advertising is somewhat permissible even though it might be considered just as offensive as graffiti/street art. They resist this ideology and encourage others to take a stand as well.

A statement on the GRL website gives aspiring artists instructions on how to create their own pieces of foam core boards to recreate these types of interventions: "It can be repeated using any backlit display – bus shelters, display ads, television store windows." The statements ends with the decree: "dream big, act now." Graffiti Research Lab encourages young writers to use the open source material from the website to create more anti-advertising interventions, or to simply use the material to reclaim public space. There are many followers who support the Graffiti Research Lab by implementing innovative, interventionist graffiti strategies around the world. The GRL has a blog page that lists the ongoing projects in the community. However, the reach of these projects far exceeds the graffiti community. Marketing firms have begun using

these same interruptive techniques to break the system, enter the spectacle, stall the viewer, and place their products in such a way that the city will take notice. One of the most successful ad campaigns to utilize these tactics and materials was the Cartoon Network's guerrilla marketing campaign used to promote "Aqua Teen Hunger Force." This example provides an instance when the city, and the nation, stopped to take notice of a very successful marketing campaign.

On January 31, 2007, black LED placards began appearing around the greater Boston area. The battery operated LED signs looked like Lite-Brite boards with a glowing, blinking characters that resembled a pixelated alien making an obscene gesture (basically, he was flipping everyone off!). These devices were created by Interference, Inc., a marketing firm, in collaboration with Cartoon Network. The firm worked with Dana Seaver, Peter Berdovsky, and Sean Stevens to hang these 40 electronic signs around Boston. The team received instructions from Interference, Inc. to place the signs in areas of high visibility like train stations, overpasses, trendy areas in the city, tall buildings, or anywhere else that could be seen from a distance… and they did just that!

There was neither text nor explanation on the sign boards, only LED images of Ignignokt and Err, Mooninite Marauders characters from Adult Swim's *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. "Who?," you may ask… Well, Ignignokt and Err are fictional, two-dimensional alien villains on the show. If you found yourself asking this question, you are not alone. These characters are obscure, known only to the niche group of fans. Therefore, when people began noticing the glowing, battery operated signs, held together with black electrical tape, strategically positioned in Boston's high traffic areas, they responded with panic. Logically, the public mistook the signs for improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Authorities were alerted immediately.

The Boston Police Department received the first call about alleged IEDs the following morning when an MBTA worker noticed a device "affixed to an Interstate 93 ramp near Sullivan Square in Charlestown, MA" (Samlley). The city responded by shutting down the northbound side of the interstate. The state police bomb squad disarmed the object with water cannons, fearing it could have been an explosive device. According to the *Boston Globe's* reports, the guerrilla marketing campaign set off "fears of terrorism and shutting down major roadways and subway lines for parts of the day" (Smalley). Teams worked to locate and disarm (blasting with fire hoses) the devices for much of the day. Then, when the sun began to set and the light dimmed, the boxes began to light up. The images of Ignignokt and Err became clearer, so clear that "a Boston police analyst recognized the image as a cartoon character, and police concluded it was likely a publicity stunt" (Smalley). Obviously they were right.

The guerrilla marketing campaign was part of an ambient marketing blitz. The signs appeared in 10 other cities including Boston, New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, Seattle, Portland, Austin, San Francisco, and Philadelphia. While the public reaction was panicked, and legal action swift (Cartoon Network's GM/EVP, Jim Samples, resigned because of the incident), the signs clearly had great impact on the public. Even if the reaction was nationwide fear, the signs still succeeded. The images were able to break out of the visual static to gain the attention of passersby, authorities, and eventually the nation (the story was covered on the major news syndicates). Ultimately, the interruptive tactics worked.

The devices were created by Interference, Inc. in this marketing campaign resembled LED devices from Graffiti Research Lab projects. "Make Throwies Not Bombs" and "Night Writer," are two such projects which detail the process of making a LED tag that an artist can hang almost anywhere. These initiatives were developed as a way graffiti writers could get their

names up in a city, battling against forms of marketing. Wait a second! Didn't the Cartoon Network use these same interventionist techniques to sell their show? What happens when activist modes of intervention, created with the purpose of breaking and entering the spectacle, invented as a subversive movement to counter capitalist imagery, are used to perpetuate these structures? What happens when corporations adopt avant-garde techniques as a way to further the military-commercial-entertainment complex that avant-gardes refuse?   Does this disarm avant-gardes? Does this undercut the success of avant-gardes? I would say no.

Cartoon Network's marketing stunt demonstrates a moment when avant-garde tactics were used in the mainstream culture. These aesthetic interventions allows us to see the way that avant-gardes negotiate structures of capitalism by maintaining a both an outsider and insider position. It is this push and pull, this struggle between forces, which allows avant-gardes to move closer to positions where they can inject criticism directly into the main vein of the ideologies they resist. Yes, there are occasions when these aesthetics are incorporated within the culture industry, used by the culture industry to sell products, but the antagonistic relationship between avant-gardes and mass culture is the stress that allows 21st century avant-gardes the ability to function by allowing them the ability to position themselves centrally in popular culture and to enact a forcework from within.

AFTERWARD

BANKSY'S RESIDENCY IN NEW YORK CITY

We started our walk around the Chelsea Market and stopped at the Westside Yard, when we came to the end on the High Line Park and could go no more. I only had about an hour for lunch, which quickly turned into two hours that afternoon since my boss was out of the office and the air was just right for being outside. When I became conscious of time again, I suddenly had to hurry back. We took the next staircase off the elevated High Line, down to the street level, where we found ourselves in the Meatpacking district below. It was there that we discovered ourselves bound in another significant moment, a new experience that belonged to us intimately as it was uniquely ours. In the Meatpacking District, just below the subway line, we discovered, for the very first time, a truck filled with screaming, animatronic farm animals.

The cuddly puppets were packed into a military-style vehicle parked under the elevated High Line. Their little cow and sheep and pig heads stuck out from the gaps in the rear cargo compartment. While their plushy faces were adorable —there was even a mamma and baby panda—their expressions were wide eyed with horror. Their soft pink mouths were agape as they screamed in squeaky terror.

We never saw anything like that before in our lives. We knew we would never see anything like that again. I took a picture of the truck with the camera on my phone. We weren't sure what we had stumbled onto. This truck full of muppets was, for a moment, simultaneously the worst advertisement for the meatpacking industry and the best activist intervention for anti-meatpacking (sometimes there is a fine line). It was like Schrödinger's cattle car.

There was a number listed on the side of the truck that viewers could call for more information. The audio guide opens with the song "Old MacDonald." Eventually, a narrator

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speaks: "This is a piece of sculpture art, and I know what you're thinking: Isn't it a bit —

subtle." The narrator goes on to describe how the sculpture is making a comment about the

"casual cruelty of the food industry." The installation piece contains "over 60 cuddly, soft toys

on the road to a swift death." The truck was scheduled to drive around New York every day for

two weeks, transporting its squealing, stuffed animatronic livestock all over the city.

 After further research, I found videos of the truck that had been posted on social media

sites. There were shots of adorable children waving and running up to the cargo bay to see the

cute animals. Without fail, each child starts to cry when the animals begin screaming. Mothers

grabbed the kids by the arm, pulling them away from the "sculpture art." Really, there isn't

anything subtle about this sculpture. This piece, "Sirens of the Lambs," was the 11th installation

in part of Banksy's self-appointed residency in New York City. In October 2013 Banksy took

over Manhattan with his art, launching a 31-day residency in the city. The title of Banksy's

installation series, "Better Out than In," is a reference to a statement by Paul Cézanne: "All

pictures painted inside, in the studio, will never be as good as those done outside." The same is

true for the enclosure of art in a gallery space. I would argue that Banksy's interpretation of this

quote is that all pictures displayed inside, in the gallery, could never be as good as those done

outside, in public spaces. The compositions done outside, as we discussed in this dissertation,

engage public spaces in such a way that the contextual location contributes to meaning of the

work. Banksy proves this point 31 times over with the pieces he creates for "Better Out than In."

 Banksy's "Better Out than In" engages the public so that they, too, may contribute to the

function of the work. Banksy's art not only drew meaning from the city of New York, but he

also drew audiences to New York City, moving them through the city in a flow of motion they

would not typically travel because his compositions brought art seekers away form points of

commerce and into areas that were a bit off the grid. Banksy accomplishes this forcework, this redirection of the spectator, both in a physical sense and on a digital platform. He accomplishes these actions in two ways: with act of seeking and with social media.

Over the course of October, Banksy would produce one new work of art in New York City, every day, for the entire month. Once Banksy completed a composition he would publish an image of the work on his website and on his Instagram. It was up to the public to find each installation without any further clues about the location. When audiences discovered Banksy's pieces, they began uploading images of the work to their own Instagram, or other social media sites, with appropriate hash tags so it could be shared with others. Eventually, "Better Out than In" transformed into a multimedia, interactive exhibition that found a home online. This quality of his residency can be understood as a way graffiti culture is adapting to the millennial generation, or the digital architecture of the real world, or responding to the development of Internet communities on social media websites. Regardless, the hybridity of "Better Out than In" created an online community around Banksy's residency, which also functioned to preserve and distribute his work worldwide. The online sharing component inspired a curiosity around Banksy's work, even beyond niche graffiti communities.

This element of curiosity spread through New York. Banksy's residency became a citywide scavenger hunt that sent people searching through all five boroughs of Manhattan for art. Suddenly, the city became a game and if the public wanted to find the art, they needed to play the game. The act of searching transformed the way people interacted with New York and the way the saw the city. The artist asked the people of New York to see the city differently that month. Since the city was on the lookout for art because he never revealed the location of the work, they needed to approach surfaces, structures, and spaces in the city *as* art. Therefore, they

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needed to change their point of view if they were going to determine what was a Banksy and what was bogus, which was another larger comment he was making about the art market… at least this was my personal experience during October 2013!

I felt lucky! I figured if I could stumble on a piece once, it could happen again for sure! I decided to go looking for another Banksy during my lunch break a few days after I found "Sirens of the Lambs" in the Meatpacking District. I left my office at 2 Penn Plaza and headed downtown, all the way to 14th street. I had my eyes peeled the whole time, hot on the pursuit of art! Somewhere along the way, canvases on the sidewalk caught my attention. As I got closer, I realized that I was looking at a book covers that had been painted and lined up on the sidewalk. Someone had carefully leaned them along the base of a building…but who?! I was overjoyed! I thought: *this had to be it!* Immediately, I snatched up a book with an octopus painted on the cover. I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed this treasure trove, but it seemed like I was the only one. Naturally, I assumed this was because I am so smart! Then, suddenly, a homeless man, who happened to be selling these altered books, approached me. He yelled that I needed to put it down or pay for the book. Reluctantly, I put the book back down on the sidewalk and hurried away. It wasn't Banksy after all.

I felt like a shmuck as I hurried away from the homeless artist (also, just a note, he could have been the most wealthy artist in the city, but there really is no way to tell because it's New York). I felt guilty. I didn't buy the altered book because it was by someone anonymous. Since the pieces weren't Banksy, I wanted no part of the work. I realized, in yet another euphonic moment (it seems like I have a lot of those, right?!), that this could also be the point of the intervention. I began to question the value we place on art, especially in a place like New York where we may roll our eyes when some kid from Juilliard gets into an elevator with a cello at

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Lincoln Center because we think that he's going to play live elevator music. In fact, some of us

may even yell at this poor student: "Hey…. Buddy. Not today." And some of us definitely did

and apologized immediately to this student when we found out he was just going to practice

because really, honestly, I had no way of knowing!

Banksy's residency temporarily changed the perspective we held on art, that it belonged

exclusively in galleries, by transforming our perspective on/within the city. His point was to

encourage us all to see how New York is not only a home to art, but it is art if we look at the

space form a different perspective. The conclusion is that we need to foster new art in urban

spaces and we need to nurture our existing art before it withers away . . . or before some idiot

sand blasts it off the side of a building in Queens, NY.

On the 31st day of the residency, he created balloons that spelled out his name:

"BANKSY!" These letters were bubble letters in the most literal sense (they were made out of

balloons, get it?). He tied this sculpture to an anonymous building in Queens, just alongside the

Long Island Expressway (if you know anything about Queens, you know that this is a sketchy

area made up mostly of dirt, hubcaps, and chop shops). The building was only two miles from

the infamous 5Pointz, a graffiti Mecca in Long Island City, Queens. When Banksy displayed

this image on his website later that day, he included a message about 5Pointz. According to the

Guardian: "Banksy's sign off included his first public statement about 5Pointz: "Thanks for your

patience. It's been fun. Save 5 Pointz. Bye." Banksy was writing to the impending demolition of

5Pointz, scheduled for the following year.

5Pointz is a "block-long industrial complex at Jackson Avenue and Davis Street." For

some, it is the "United Nations of Graffiti" and for others it is a graffiti Mecca. Either way, it is

a neutralized, central gathering point for graffiti writers to share their work (and not their

"beef"). 5Pointz is a space the displays work from the who's-who of 21st century graffiti culture, their tags climb up the walls of five story warehouse. I can see these tags from the train when I pass through the Hunters Point Avenue station. The brilliance of the designs, the vivid colors, are a shock in the gritty industrial neighborhood.

5Pointz is an outdoor gallery where artists can share their works publicly. According to a statement made by the 5 Pointz website:

> 5Pointz Aerosol Art Center, Inc. is an outdoor art exhibit space in Long Island City, New York, considered to be the world's premiere "graffiti Mecca," where aerosol artists from around the globe paint colorful pieces on the walls of a 200,000-square-foot factory building.

Graffiti veteran, Jonathan Cohen (Meres One), is the curator of this space. He hoped to preserve 5Pointz for years to come, turning the entire city block into a graffiti museum, which is especially important because he preserves graffiti in its true environment. Unfortunately, New York made other plans for the space.

According to an article published in *The Guardian,* Jerry Wolkoff, a developer "announced plans to demolish the building to make way for high-rise condos," a $400m development proposal. In November 2013, Wolkoff surprised the artists and fans when crews began whitewashing the walls, including the pieces on the five-story warehouse. I began to notice the changes to 5Pointz when I passed by the building during my morning commute. Over my two years commuting to Manhattan, I began falling in love with Meres' classic light-bulb characters painted on the side of the five story warehouse. Last year, right around November, I began noticing that the light-bulbs were vanishing. The figures were erased from the side of the building, crossed out under a splash of white paint. I found out that structural demolition on

5Pointz was scheduled to begin in August 2014, less than a year later. I still see the warehouse, but I know it is a matter of time before that too vanishes.

Banksy's last piece, which appeared near this site, engaged this impending destruction. The accompanying audio for the work made a broader statement on public art:

> Outside is where art should live, amongst us, and rather than street art being a fad, maybe its the last 1000 years of art history that are the blip, when art came inside, in service of the church and institutions. but art's rightful place is on the cave walls of our communities, where it can act as a public service, provoke debate, voice concerns, forge identities. the world we live in today is run (visually at least) is run by traffic signs, billboards and planning committees… is that it? don't we want to live in a world made of art, not just decorated by it?

The residency took a strong position about creating an inspiring life for the people of New York. Through transforming the city into a playscape, a stimulating and creative place that allows people to engage in the experiential function of art, he took people off the grid, away from the grooves of commerce, and brought even the most seasoned New Yorker them to places they had never been. They began seeing the city differently. Banksy presented the unpresentable, or made visual that which was invisible. He made us see the city as art. Even though the residency was only 31 days, he succeeded in changing the way we saw the city from that point forward.

In the end, Banksy's appeal didn't help to save 5Pointz, but that wasn't really his point. 5Pointz was never going to be saved, regardless, and I argue that 5Pointz is not for saving. I do not think the city should preserve 5Pointz more than any other place because that defeats both the force of graffiti and the motion of Manhattan. It is moments like these when I am reminded of James Merill's poem, "An Urban Convalescence," specifically these lines:

As usual in New York, everything is torn down

Before you have had time to care for it

There is something to be said about the medium of graffiti, which is ephemeral, and the city of New York, which is in a state of perpetual mobility. I loved those little light-bulbs on the 5Pointz warehouse. I miss seeing them along my morning commute. However, the sustaining life for the city is the function of ravenous, unrelenting change. New York's enduring quality is in the city's constant self-renewal.

Interestingly, the function of graffiti parallels this same current of change. Maybe this is why graffiti culture is so at home in New York, a city that is destroyed and reborn over and over again, trying to articulate itself over and over again, too. Graffiti and other agitational modes of materialized rhetoric constantly evolve and always antagonize; nether these structures, nor the structures of New York, can survive if they become stagnant. There are moments, like this example with the 5Pointz, when the city embraces an agitational force, when the intervention moves from the margins to the center. I have argued that this is where the work these artworks perform is strongest—or at least most provocative and problematic—but I also argue that this is where the lifespan of the work is shortened.   As Merill points out, "everything is "torn down before you have had time to care for it." I argue that the life of the forcework depends on the initial work being torn down and expelled from the center. The force survives in punctuated bursts, the certain slant of a peculiar angle, a slight rupture that tears at the tapestry of reality before another forces buttons everything back up to status quo again. The push and pull is constant, always evolving. The agitational force is necessary. The work must be destroyed, used up, or appropriated until it is all together useless. This is how the forcework of contemporary

avant-gardes functions, by moving through mass culture, circulating, and renewing itself, again,

on the margins again.

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i I want to acknowledge that I'm going to use "graffiti" as both a singular and plural noun. The word "graffiti," in its original Latin, is the plural form of the noun "graffito," which means tiny scratch (singular, one tiny scratch). However, in contemporary usage, we ask "graffiti" (plural) to function as a singular noun. Craig Castleman explains this in *Getting Up*: "In common usage, graffiti is used as a singular noun, and I do so as well" (Castleman xi). I, too, will use the word "graffiti" as a singular noun and I will also use "graffiti" to refer the mass movement.

ii John Cheever describes this experience in his story, "Moving Out."

iii Joe Austin describes another example of abstract lettering that graffiti writers use, which he refers to third style, "mechanical style": "Mechanical style incorporates several different innovations from prior styles- twisted, fractured, or crumbled letters as well as interpenetrating arrows, bars, and "extensions"-- into a more or less consistent by abstract pattern of perpetual motion" (Austin 112). Unlike the flowing flamboyance of wild style, mechanical style is industrial, cool, rigid with abrupt corners and sharp edges. It seems to imitate the same industrial steel on which it is sprayed, as if it was born out of the city, the same style of industry, on which it appears.

The overall effect of mechanical style, like wild style, is an illegible typeface that creates public words, but again, is not intended for the public. Austin explains that mechanical lettering is an apparent

> move away from legibility or, rather, is not concerned with legibility at all. It
> requires a very high degree of skill and considerable experience to execute

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successfully, since the letter-shapes often have very little resemblance to those that you see on this page. (Austin 112)

Even though mechanical style seems that it was born out of the city, a writing of twisted and chopped industrial lettering, it too endeavors to exclude and alienate people. While the people in New York have access to these words, they do not have access to their meaning. They don't know what the words are communicating linguistically or symbolically.

It is intimidating to see language, especially in one's home, but not to understand the words or meaning. The presence of these words on the city walls make people keenly aware of an entire conversation that is happening around them, one which they are not a part of. Yet, as the audience struggles to interpret the strange marks, they become keenly aware of the function of language, how the words fit together, how they fit in a space, how the spaces of the city fit into one another, and how they feel disconnected from a space.

[iv] According to Lee, this wasn't an antagonistic style, even if it was exclusive. He tells *New York Magazine:* "I thought it was riveting, but I wanted people to understand and not be confused.

[v] One could also ask if graffiti is effective in subverting the gallery system, what gets put in and what is left out.

[vi] The original formulation of this proposition appeared in Descartes *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and was later translated to Latin in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1944).

[vii] The original image was taken from 2006 AP photograph published by Associate Press photographer Mannie Garcia.

[viii] There are also versions of the print with "Change" and "Progress" written below the portrait of the president.