PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL OF ARTS AND LITERATURE (PRJAL)
ISSN Online :
Open Access Scholarly Journal

Street Art As Political Resistance In The Global Digital Age

Annette Treesa Benny

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Marian College Kuttikkanam (Autonomous), India.

Article information

Received: 2nd April 2026
Received in revised form: 15th April 2026
Accepted: 21st April 2026
Available online: 3rd May 2026

Volume: 1
Issue: 2
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20046754

Abstract

Street art has undergone a profound transformation in the twenty-first century, evolving from a marginalized form of urban expression into a globally networked medium of political resistance and cultural commentary. This paper examines the intersection of street art and digital culture, analyzing how social media platforms, mobile photography, and viral circulation have amplified the political impact of murals, graffiti, and public installations while simultaneously altering their aesthetic strategies, audiences, and modes of reception. Through analysis of the work of Banksy, JR, and activist street art movements in Chile, Hong Kong, and Iran, the article argues that contemporary street art operates as a hybrid medium that is simultaneously local and global, ephemeral and permanent, anonymous and iconic. Drawing upon theories of public space, visual culture, and digital activism, this paper demonstrates that street art in the digital age constitutes a uniquely powerful form of political expression that exploits the tension between the materiality of the wall and the immateriality of the network.

Keywords: - Street Art, Political Resistance, Digital Culture, Public Space, Visual Activism, Social Media

I. INTRODUCTION

On the night of October 5, 2018, a painting by the anonymous street artist Banksy self-destructed moments after selling for 1.4 million pounds at Sotheby's auction house in London. A shredder concealed within the frame activated as the gavel fell, partially destroying the work—now retitled Love Is in the Bin—in what was widely interpreted as a commentary on the commodification of art (Goldstein, 2018). The incident captured global attention not because of the physical act of destruction, which was witnessed by only a few dozen people in the auction room, but because of its instantaneous dissemination through social media. Within hours, images and videos of the shredding had been viewed by millions, transforming a localized event into a global spectacle.

This episode encapsulates the paradoxes that define street art in the digital age. Street art originated as a place-specific, ephemeral, and often illegal form of expression, rooted in the material fabric of the city and addressed to the chance passerby. Its power derived from its unauthorized occupation of public space—its capacity to interrupt the visual order of the urban environment with messages, images, and provocations that had not been sanctioned by the authorities who control that space (Young, 2014). Digital technologies have fundamentally altered these dynamics, enabling street art to circulate beyond the wall on which it was painted, reach audiences who will never visit its physical location, and acquire a permanence in the digital archive that contradicts its material ephemerality.

This paper examines how the digitization of street art has transformed its role as a medium of political resistance. The central argument is that digital circulation has not diminished the political potency of street art but has amplified and reconfigured it, creating new possibilities for political expression that exploit the tension between the local specificity of the wall and the global reach of the network. The analysis proceeds through four stages: a theoretical examination of street art's relationship to public space, an analysis of how digital platforms have altered the production and reception of

street art, case studies of politically engaged street art movements in three geopolitical contexts, and a discussion of the tensions between commodification and resistance that characterize street art's position in contemporary culture.

II. STREET ART, PUBLIC SPACE, AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "right to the city" (1968) provides a foundational framework for understanding street art as political practice. Lefebvre argued that urban space is not a neutral container for social activity but a product of power relations—designed, regulated, and policed in ways that serve the interests of capital and the state. The right to the city, for Lefebvre, is the right of urban inhabitants to participate in the production of their own spatial environment, to shape the city according to their needs and desires rather than those of developers, planners, and property owners.

Street art exercises this right in its most direct and confrontational form. By inscribing unauthorized images and messages on the surfaces of the built environment, street artists contest the ownership and meaning of public space. They transform walls, bridges, and buildings from passive elements of urban infrastructure into active sites of communication, debate, and aesthetic experience. This transformation is inherently political, regardless of the content of the work, because it challenges the assumption that public space is the exclusive preserve of commercial advertising and state-sanctioned signage (Iveson, 2007).

The political dimension of street art is further intensified by its relationship to visibility and erasure. Street art is, by definition, public and visible; it cannot be hidden behind gallery walls or filtered through curatorial selection. But it is also vulnerable to destruction—by weather, by property owners, by municipal authorities who classify it as vandalism and remove it. This dialectic of visibility and erasure mirrors the political dynamics of marginalized communities whose presence in public space is simultaneously asserted and contested (Cresswell, 1996). Nancy Fraser (1990) extended Habermas's notion of the public sphere to argue that the exclusion of subordinated groups from dominant public spaces has historically generated "subaltern counterpublics"—alternative arenas of discourse and practice. Street art can be understood as a visual instantiation of such counterpublics, insisting on the presence and voice of communities who are systematically excluded from official channels of communication.

Rosalyn Deutsche (1996) has argued that public art, including unauthorized interventions in urban space, constitutes an inherently democratic practice insofar as it stages what she calls "the conflict of democracy"—the ongoing contestation over the composition and boundaries of the public. On this account, street art is not merely a medium for transmitting pre-formed political messages but a practice that enacts democratic participation through the very act of spatial occupation. The artist who paints on a wall without permission is making a claim not merely about the content of the image but about the right to make visible claims in public—a right that cannot be reduced to the freedoms guaranteed by liberal constitutional order.

Andrea Brighenti (2010) has developed a nuanced account of the territorial logics of graffiti and street art, arguing that these practices involve a complex negotiation between "city" as administrative-bureaucratic formation and "street" as social-relational space. For Brighenti, the territorial transgression of street art is not merely a violation of property law but a performative assertion of belonging—a claim that the street artist and the communities they represent have a right to mark, occupy, and inhabit the city. This territorial dimension becomes particularly significant in urban contexts characterized by rapid gentrification, where street art can serve as both a symptom of and a response to the displacement of communities from their traditional neighborhoods (Lewisohn, 2008).

III. DIGITAL CIRCULATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF STREET ART

The emergence of social media platforms—particularly Instagram, which launched in 2010—has transformed the ecology of street art production and reception. Before the smartphone era, street art was primarily encountered in situ: one had to walk through the neighborhood, follow a particular route, or know where to look. The audience was local, and the encounter was shaped by the physical context—the character of the street, the condition of the wall, the relationship between the artwork and its immediate surroundings.

Instagram and similar platforms introduced a secondary mode of circulation that is fundamentally different from in situ encounter. Photographed and posted online, street art is detached from its physical context and recontextualized within the visual economy of the feed. The image circulates globally, reaching audiences who have no knowledge of the street, neighborhood, or city in which it was created. This decontextualization involves both a loss—the work's site-specificity is diminished—and a gain—its potential audience is expanded by orders of magnitude (MacDowall, 2019).

For politically engaged street art, digital circulation creates new possibilities and new risks. On one hand, social media enables protest art to reach global audiences instantaneously, amplifying its political message and generating international solidarity. The murals painted during Chile's 2019 estallido social, for example, were photographed and shared on Instagram and Twitter within minutes of their creation, bringing global attention to the protest movement and creating a visual archive of resistance that outlasted the physical works, many of which were quickly painted over by authorities (Ryan, 2017). On the other hand, digital circulation can depoliticize street art by assimilating it into the aesthetic economy of social media, where political images coexist with selfies, advertisements, and lifestyle content in an undifferentiated visual flow.

Manuel Castells (2012) has argued that networked social movements of the twenty-first century are characterized by a distinctive spatial logic in which the occupation of physical urban space—squares, streets, walls—is inextricably

RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

connected to the occupation of digital space. The same logic applies to street art as political practice: the wall and the network are not competing channels but complementary dimensions of a single communicative act. A mural painted in protest is directed not merely at those who walk past it but at the global digital audience who will encounter it through screens; the anticipation of digital circulation shapes the aesthetic choices made on the wall.

The algorithmic logics of social media platforms introduce a further dimension of complexity. Instagram's recommendation algorithm prioritizes visually striking, emotionally engaging content that generates high rates of engagement—qualities that politically charged street art often possesses. However, the same algorithm also prioritizes content that conforms to platform norms of taste and acceptability, which can work to suppress images that are genuinely confrontational or disturbing. The result is a filtered version of political street art—one that retains the visual drama of the genre while often neutralizing its most challenging elements. The viral image of JR's toddler on the U.S.-Mexico border was widely circulated precisely because it translated a complex political issue into a visually arresting, emotionally legible form; the more abrasive and ambiguous works of street artists operating in zones of active conflict rarely achieve the same circulation (Schacter, 2013).

IV. CASE STUDY: BANKSY AND THE PARADOX OF ANONYMOUS CELEBRITY

Banksy's career embodies the paradoxes of street art in the digital age more vividly than any other contemporary artist. Operating under conditions of strict anonymity, Banksy has nonetheless become one of the most recognizable and commercially valuable artists in the world, with works selling for millions at auction and attracting pilgrimage-like attention when they appear on city walls. This paradox—anonymous yet iconic, anti-establishment yet market-dominant—reflects the contradictions inherent in the digitization of street art (Blanché, 2015).

Banksy's political art has addressed war, migration, surveillance, and consumer capitalism, consistently positioning itself as a form of dissent against structures of power. Works such as the mural series on the Israeli separation barrier in Bethlehem (2005) and the Dismaland installation (2015) demonstrate a sophisticated engagement with political issues that extends beyond the visual to encompass spatial practice, performance, and institutional critique. The Bethlehem murals are particularly significant for their deployment of street art's spatial logic: by painting images of escape and transcendence directly onto a wall that literally imprisons a population, Banksy mobilized the genre's native vocabulary of spatial transgression for an explicitly political purpose (Groys, 2008).

However, the global circulation and commercial success of Banksy's work raises questions about the relationship between political art and the market. When a Banksy mural appears on a building, the property's value frequently increases, transforming anti-capitalist critique into real estate asset. The Sotheby's shredding incident, intended as a critique of the art market, ultimately doubled the work's value, suggesting that the market possesses an apparently limitless capacity to absorb and monetize even the most explicit acts of resistance (Thompson, 2017). The subsequent conversion of the shredded work into an NFT in 2021 extended this dynamic into the digital economy, demonstrating that the mechanisms of commodification evolve as rapidly as the strategies of resistance.

V. CASE STUDY: JR AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

French artist JR employs large-scale photographic wheat-paste installations to make visible the faces and stories of marginalized communities. His project Inside Out (2011–present), which has been installed in over 140 countries, invites communities to submit photographic portraits that are printed at monumental scale and pasted in public spaces. The project's participatory structure—anyone can submit a portrait and propose an installation site—democratizes both the production and the political messaging of street art.

JR's work is explicitly concerned with the politics of visibility: who is seen in public space, whose face is considered worthy of monumental display, and how the act of making visible can itself be a form of political resistance. His 2017 project on the U.S.-Mexico border, which pasted a massive photograph of a Mexican toddler peering over the border fence, transformed the abstract politics of immigration into a visceral encounter with a human face. The image went viral on social media, generating international media coverage and public debate (Azoulay, 2019).

JR's practice illustrates how digital and physical modes of street art can be mutually reinforcing rather than antagonistic. The physical installations are designed to be encountered in situ, where their monumental scale and site-specificity create a powerful phenomenological impact. But they are also designed to be photographed and circulated digitally, and JR actively cultivates this secondary circulation through his social media presence. The result is a practice that operates simultaneously on the wall and in the network, generating political impact at both the local and global scales.

VI. CASE STUDY: PROTEST MURALS IN CHILE, HONG KONG, AND IRAN

Some of the most politically consequential street art of recent years has emerged from contexts of mass protest and political upheaval. In Chile, the estallido social of October 2019 generated an explosion of street art that transformed Santiago's public spaces into a visual archive of resistance. Murals, stencils, and paste-ups addressed police brutality, economic inequality, constitutional reform, and Indigenous rights, creating a collective visual language that both reflected and amplified the protest movement's demands (Ryan, 2017). The Chilean feminist collective Las Tesis contributed a distinctive genre of street performance—"Un violador en tu camino" (A Rapist in Your Path)—that fused choreographed movement with sloganeering in public squares and spread virally across social media to inspire similar performances in

RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

more than fifty countries. The performance was not conventional street art but shared its logic of unauthorized spatial occupation and viral digital amplification, demonstrating the expanding repertoire of embodied public expression that digital circulation has made possible (Chaffee, 1993).

In Hong Kong, the 2019–2020 pro-democracy protests produced a distinctive visual culture that blended traditional Cantonese aesthetics with internet meme culture. The so-called "Lennon Walls"—public surfaces covered with thousands of handwritten Post-it notes bearing political messages—became iconic images of the movement, circulated globally through social media. The ephemeral materiality of the Post-it note—easily attached, easily removed—made the Lennon Walls a practice that any participant could join, democratizing political expression while acknowledging its vulnerability to state erasure (Lam, 2020).

In Iran, the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement following the death of Mahsa Amini generated street art that defied extreme risks. Artists painted murals and stenciled slogans under conditions in which discovery could result in imprisonment or death. The digital circulation of these works—often photographed quickly and posted anonymously—served a dual function: it preserved images of resistance that the state sought to erase, and it communicated the movement's message to international audiences who might otherwise have no access to unfiltered information from inside the country (Alinejad, 2018).

VII. FEMINIST AND QUEER STREET ART: INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

The political reach of street art has expanded significantly through the work of feminist and queer artists who have used the medium to address the gendered and sexualized dimensions of urban space. Public space has historically been coded as masculine—designed, regulated, and policed in ways that reflect and reinforce the social dominance of men—and feminist street art represents an explicit challenge to this coding. By occupying walls and streets with images that foreground women's experience, feminist artists transform the urban environment from a space of surveillance and exclusion into one of visibility and claim (Deutsche, 1996).

The tradition of feminist street art has deep historical roots. In the 1970s, artists such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer pioneered the use of public text and image to challenge patriarchal ideologies; their influence is visible in the work of contemporary feminist street artists who deploy similar strategies in digital-networked contexts. Feminist muralism has been particularly prominent in Latin America, where collectives such as the Chilean Las Tesis, the Mexican Frida Khalo-inspired muralists, and the Argentine Ni Una Menos movement have used public art to draw attention to femicide, sexual violence, and gender discrimination. These works operate in a cultural context in which the street is itself a site of danger for women—a fact that invests the feminist occupation of street art with a particularly pointed political charge (Mouffe, 2007).

LGBTQ+ communities have similarly mobilized street art as a medium of visibility and resistance. Pride murals, rainbow crosswalks, and queer iconography in public space both celebrate LGBTQ+ identity and assert the right of queer individuals to be present and visible in cities that have historically criminalized and persecuted them. The digital amplification of LGBTQ+ street art has been particularly significant in countries where homosexuality remains illegal or heavily stigmatized, enabling artists to communicate images of queer identity and solidarity to audiences who cannot safely view them in physical public space.

VIII. COMMODIFICATION, AUTHENTICITY, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF RESISTANCE

The relationship between street art and the market remains a source of tension within the movement. As street art has gained cultural legitimacy and commercial value, a growing number of artists have moved between the street and the gallery, producing work for both contexts. This crossover has generated accusations of selling out from purists who view the unauthorized, ephemeral, and gift-economy character of street art as essential to its political meaning (Riggle, 2010).

The commodification of street art is facilitated by digital culture: Instagram functions not only as a platform for circulation but as a marketplace, connecting artists with collectors, brands, and institutions. The result is a complex ecology in which the same image can function simultaneously as political protest, aesthetic object, commercial product, and social media content. Navigating this ecology requires a sophisticated understanding of context, intention, and reception—qualities that resist reduction to simple binaries of resistance versus co-optation (McAuliffe, 2012).

Chantal Mouffe (2007) has argued that critical art practice should aim not to escape the institutions of capitalism but to intervene within them, exploiting the contradictions and fissures that capitalist culture produces in order to articulate alternative visions of social possibility. On this account, the commodification of street art is not necessarily fatal to its political function; what matters is the critical consciousness that artists bring to their navigation of the market, and the extent to which their work maintains the capacity to provoke, challenge, and unsettle the dominant order even as it circulates within it.

The emergence of NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) as a mode of digital commodification has introduced new complexities into this debate. In March 2021, Banksy's team burned an original print of the artist's work Morons (White) while simultaneously minting an NFT of the image—a gesture that seemed to replicate the logic of the Sotheby's

shredding in the digital economy. The burning destroyed the physical object in order to transfer value to the digital token, raising questions about authenticity, ownership, and the relationship between material and virtual works of art. For street art, a medium defined by its material embeddedness in physical space, the NFT represents a particularly radical form of dematerialization—one that simultaneously amplifies the work's commercial value and severs it from the spatial politics that constitute its critical power (Lewisohn, 2008).

IX. CONCLUSION

Street art in the digital age operates at the intersection of materiality and virtuality, locality and globality, ephemerality and permanence. The works examined in this paper—by Banksy, JR, and anonymous artists in Chile, Hong Kong, Iran, and across feminist and queer movements—demonstrate that digital technologies have not diminished the political power of street art but have amplified and reconfigured it, creating new possibilities for political expression that exploit the productive tension between the wall and the network.

The challenge for scholars and practitioners is to develop analytical frameworks adequate to this hybrid condition—frameworks that attend to the materiality of the wall without ignoring the immateriality of the network, that recognize the political significance of physical presence without dismissing the transformative potential of digital circulation, and that engage critically with the tensions between resistance and commodification without reducing street art to either pure politics or pure commerce. Street art, at its best, resists such reductions. It occupies the cracks and contradictions of contemporary culture, turning them into spaces of creative possibility and political imagination.

The intersectional dimensions of street art—its engagements with race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality—remind us that the politics of public space are never singular. Different communities bring different histories, vulnerabilities, and aspirations to their encounters with the urban environment, and the street art they produce reflects these differences. A genuinely adequate account of street art as political resistance must attend to this diversity, refusing the universalization of any single model of practice or any single vision of what political art can and should do. In this refusal of universalism—this insistence on the particularity of the wall, the neighborhood, the community, and the body—street art affirms its deepest political commitment: the right of all people to be present, visible, and heard in the spaces they inhabit.

REFERENCES

Alinejad, M. (2018). *The wind in my hair: My fight for freedom in modern Iran*. Little, Brown.

Azoulay, A. (2019). *Potential history: Unlearning imperialism*. Verso.

Blanché, U. (2015). Street art and related terms. *Street Art and Urban Creativity, 1*(1), 32–39.

Brighenti, A. M. (2010). At the wall: Graffiti writers, urban territoriality, and the public domain. *Space and Culture, 13*(3), 315–332.

Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age*. Polity Press.

Chaffee, L. G. (1993). *Political protest and street art: Popular tools for democratization in Hispanic countries*. Greenwood Press.

Cresswell, T. (1996). *In place/out of place: Geography, ideology, and transgression*. University of Minnesota Press.

Deutsche, R. (1996). *Evictions: Art and spatial politics*. MIT Press.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text, 25/26*, 56–80.

Goldstein, C. (2018, October 6). Banksy painting self-destructs at Sotheby's auction. *ArtNet News*.

Groys, B. (2008). *Art power*. MIT Press.

Iveson, K. (2007). *Publics and the city*. Blackwell.

Lam, J. (2020). *Freedom: Twenty-six Hong Kong stories of the protests*. Blacksmith Books.

Lefebvre, H. (1968). *Le droit à la ville [The right to the city]*. Anthropos.

Lewisohn, C. (2008). *Street art: The graffiti revolution*. Tate Publishing.

MacDowall, L. (2019). *Instafame: Graffiti and street art in the Instagram era*. Intellect.

McAuliffe, C. (2012). Graffiti or street art? Negotiating the moral geographies of the creative city. *Journal of Urban Affairs, 34*(2), 189–206.

Mouffe, C. (2007). Artistic activism and agonistic spaces. *Art & Research, 1*(2), 1–5.

Riggle, N. A. (2010). Street art: The transfiguration of the commonplaces. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 68*(3), 243–257.

Ryan, H. E. (2017). *Political street art: Communication, culture, and resistance in Latin America*. Routledge.

Schacter, R. (2013). *The world atlas of street art and graffiti*. Yale University Press.

Thompson, D. (2017). *The orange balloon dog: Bubbles, turmoil, and avarice in the contemporary art market*. Douglas & McIntyre.

Young, A. (2014). *Street art, public city: Law, crime, and the urban imagination*. Routledge.