Vandals or Visionaries?
The Ethical Criticism of Street Art

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Abstract
To the person unfamiliar with the wide variety of street art, the term “street artist” conjures a young man furtively sneaking around a decaying city block at night, spray paint in hand, defacing concrete structures, ears pricked for police sirens. The possibility of the ethical criticism of street art on such a conception seems hardly worth the time. This has to be an easy question. Street art is vandalism; vandalism is causing the intentional damage or destruction of someone else’s property; causing destruction or damage is wrong. The only remaining question is which of two coarse-grained models of ethical criticism we choose. The ethicist model holds that a work of art that exhibits ethically bad properties is a work that is thereby aesthetically flawed. That is, the work is flawed as a work of art just because of its ethical flaws. Bad ethics make art worse than it otherwise would have been, although it may be aesthetically successful otherwise. The autonomist model, by contrast, holds that the ethical properties of a work of art have no bearing at all on its aesthetic success. One might suppose, therefore, that on either model, a criticism of street art would be relatively easy to undertake. In defacing public property, some street art exhibits and endorses ethically bad attitudes. On the ethicist model, such a work is thereby pro tanto aesthetically flawed because in the process of creating such works, they violate ethical norms concerning the use of public spaces; on the autonomous model, any ethical criticism of the aesthetics of street art would need to be set aside entirely in favor of criticism that focused purely on the aesthetic properties of street art. I will argue in this paper that neither the ethicist nor the autonomist model adequately
captures the moral landscape of street art. Street art may indeed be criticized productively on aesthetic grounds for the destruction it does to public spaces, but the existing models of ethical criticism overlook the complex ethical landscape of street art that results from its use of public spaces. In the interplay of various forms of street art we can see the emergence of an ethical criticism of art that is accomplished by the material properties of related artwork, and consists in the creation of a dialogue over the proper use of contested public spaces.
0. INTRODUCTION

To the person unfamiliar with the wide variety of street art, the term “street artist” conjures a young man furtively sneaking around a decaying city block at night, spray paint in hand, defacing concrete structures, ears pricked for police sirens. The possibility of the ethical criticism of street art on such a conception seems hardly worth the time. This has to be an easy question. Street art is vandalism; vandalism is causing the intentional damage or destruction of someone else’s property; causing destruction or damage is wrong.\footnote{The only remaining question is which of two coarse-grained models of ethical criticism we choose. The ethicist model holds that a work of art that exhibits ethically bad properties is a work that is thereby aesthetically flawed. That is, the work is flawed \textit{as a work of art} just because of its ethical flaws. Bad ethics make art worse than it otherwise would have been, although it may be aesthetically successful otherwise.\footnote{The autonomist model, by contrast, holds that the ethical properties of a work of art have no bearing at all on its aesthetic success.\footnote{One might suppose, therefore, that on either model, a criticism of street art would be relatively easy to undertake. In defacing public property, some street art exhibits and endorses ethically bad attitudes. On the ethicist model, such a work is thereby \textit{pro tanto} aesthetically flawed because in the process of creating such works, they violate ethical norms concerning the use of public spaces; on the autonomous model, any ethical criticism of the aesthetics of street art would need to be set aside entirely in favor of criticism that focused purely on the aesthetic properties of street art.}}

I will argue in this paper that neither the ethicist nor the autonomist model adequately captures the moral landscape
of street art. Street art may indeed be criticized productively on aesthetic grounds for the destruction it does to public spaces, but the existing models of ethical criticism overlook the complex ethical landscape of street art that results from its use of public spaces. In the interplay of various forms of street art we can see the emergence of an ethical criticism of art that is accomplished by the material properties of related artwork, and consists in the creation of a dialogue over the proper use of contested public spaces.

1. ON STREET ART

Riggle provides the definitive analysis of street art, and I will follow him here. Street art is characterized by two commitments:

1. An artwork is street art if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning.
2. Street art is highly ephemeral.

Both commitments require some further explanation for my purposes here. To say that a work of art concerns the street is to make a claim about the content of the work and its relationship to public spaces. Riggle writes, “[…]the street, itself has meaning.[ …] These are shared spaces, ignored spaces, practical spaces, conflicted spaces, political spaces.” Understanding street art requires understanding the significance of how the artwork makes use of the space. A public work that can be understood without considering how its meaning relates to the street is thereby not a work of street art. As a result, not every work of art placed in the street concerns the street; Christo and Jean-Claude’s The Gates (2005) constituted a magnificent display of public art. Yet the art did not concern the street, and so while it was art open to the public that could be presented only along the paths of Central Park, it is not an example of
street art because it does not materially concern the street in its internal meaning. We may therefore understand “internal meaning” counterfactually; the meaning of the street is internal to the work if the work loses its meaning once removed from the street. Likewise, if a work of street art is removed from its urban setting and preserved in a museum, the meaning of the work is diminished, “devoid of its distinctive meaning.”

One might draw an analogy with ceremonial or religious artwork that, when preserved in a museum setting, becomes harder to appreciate without significant efforts to provide context. Riggle’s definition of street art thus implies that to make sense of street art, one must attend to how the artwork makes use of the street.

Street art is also characterized by a commitment to ephemerality. Because street art makes material use of the street, public spaces that are owned civically or privately, street art is often (though not always) illegal. As a result, street art carries with it no expectation that the work has any claim to be preserved. It may last minutes, hours, or years, but ultimately, the street determines the fate of the artwork. By contrast, a public installation like The Gates carries with it the expectation that the work should be protected from destruction, that while the work is presented in a public space, it is not of the street, and that the artist has made provisions for the eventual removal of the work. In such cases, the recognized artworld projects itself from the museums into the street, molding the public space into an outdoor artspace, and the norms of the museum apply.

So conceived, street art is antithetical to the institutionalized artworld. Contemporary street art grew out of the resurgence of graffiti culture in New York and other urban spaces in the 1970s. The institutional artworld erects barriers to universal participation. To exhibit work in a museum requires being recognized by the artworld as an
artist, and to view institutional artwork requires choosing to go to a curated space, perhaps paying a fee. The institutional artworld is thus removed from everyday life, and implicitly claims that its decisions confer artistic status on a work.

Graffiti, in contrast, was not only illegal, regarded as vandalism and in some cases aggressively targeted by civic authorities, but also it was not recognized as a form of art by traditional institutions, nor were the graffiti taggers recognized as artists by the institutional artworld. As a result, graffiti culture and its ethos grew up on the margins. To be of the street meant to be excluded, and liberated, from institutional structures. Roughly, street art may be characterized by its unapologetic use of public space. Anyone can participate in street art; no need to wait for a curator to decide whether a work is an artwork. The street will decide the fate of an art attempt, whether it is lauded, destroyed, or ignored.

As street art matured and became “respectable”, so did its ethos. Not all street art is destructive; some of it is merely illicit, not illegal; and some street artists, like HOTTEA, are recognized by the artworld, working sometimes in street art and sometimes in other institutionally recognized mediums. On Riggle’s model, the ethos of street art lies in its twin commitments to the potential for universal participation and ephemerality.

Note that a work of art need not be illegal, destructive, or damaging in order to qualify as street art. The twin requirements of material use of the street and the commitment to ephemerality suggest that we can expect that much street art will violate the law or damage public property. Public spaces are owned by someone other than the artist, and contemporary street art owes its origins to the resurgence of graffiti culture in the early 1980s, and so
destruction and street are linked historically. But if Riggle’s definition is correct, that link is merely contingent. Street art cannot be sanctioned by the artworld, but street art does not exclude works whose material use of the street is internal to their meaning simply because they inhabit a legal grey area and do not significantly damage the public sphere. For example, Shelley Miller creates intricate murals using edible sugar icing and a pastry bag. Her work *Cargo* (2009), installed in Montreal, depicts the ships that carried slaves and sugar into Montreal ports in a sugar mural designed in the style of the ceramic *azulejo*.

![Figure 1. Shelley Miller, Cargo (2009). © Shelley Miller. Image credit: shelleymillerstudio.com.](image)

Miller is joined by other artists whose work is what I will identify as *non-destructive*. Street art is non-destructive when its removal from the public sphere can be effected
without incurring significant time, effort, or expense to restore the public space. Often, the materiality of the work will determine its non-destructiveness; chalk, sugar, and textiles are much easier to remove than spray paint. But materiality alone is not sufficient as the placement of the artwork (e.g. on an overpass) may make it more difficult to remove. Much more would need to be said to give a complete definition of *non-destructiveness*, but for my purposes here, all I need is to get the seed that some street art does not involve obvious vandalism to germinate.

*Cargo* astounds with its intricacy; it is a work of art. It is also a work of street art. It materially concerns the street, because the work, crafted from sugar, links the port of Montreal with the sugar trade; removed from the street, it would lose much of its meaning. *Cargo* is preserved only in photographs, as the medium of sugar icing itself is particularly ephemeral, subject to the elements, decaying and crumbling with time, as fragile as our historical memory. Yet *Cargo* isn’t clearly illegal (perhaps a form of littering?) but more importantly, the meaning of the work does not depend on the particulars of its legality, but on its violation of tacit norms of how to comport oneself in a public space.

To interact with a public space is to immerse oneself in ethical, political, and social norms. Some norms of the street are established by civic authorities: one should not litter or loiter, nor paint on the walls. Other norms are less often stated, but no less powerful. Women should appear genial in public; men should not follow women with whom they are unfamiliar closely without announcing themselves; groups should not dawdle and block the whole escalator out of the subway; adults should not use the curb as a balance beam or sing loudly to themselves.
The norms of the street, however, are also contested. Feminist scholars will argue that women need not respond to stranger’s requests for smiles; parkour practitioners assert through their movements that they need not treat the urban landscape as anything more than a found obstacle course. We may contest those norms by flouting them, a political act that suggests that what is done does not have to be done. Street art may interact with public spaces by challenging the norms that govern behavior. The poster series Stop Telling Women to Smile (2012) by artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh directly challenges norms concerning women’s behavior in public spaces through pasting direct messages to street harassers on the walls of the city, but even a work like Cargo challenges norms. One does not decorate ports with icing; but why not?

In short, we may distinguish between violating a norm and contesting it. Refusing to smile when a stranger enjoins it violates a norm; but doing so also challenges the norm’s status. The refusal to smile indicates that the norm is unreasonable. Street art likewise may violate norms concerning the use of public space, but it also challenges them.

We can see from this brief discussion that there must be more to an ethical critique of street art than a question of its destructiveness or illegality, for a significant part of what qualifies as street art is not destructive or illegal so much as it simply contests what may be done in a public space. Contemporary philosophical models of the ethical criticism of art, as we’ll see, struggle to make sense of street art because it contests those norms.

2. TWO (AND A HALF) ETHICAL MODELS

At the beginning of the piece, I briefly considered two coarse-grained models for the ethical criticism of art. Let’s
return to them now in more detail. We might wonder if the ethical critique of street art can find any purchase.

A radical ethicist critique of art is hardly defended by anyone these days, but such a critique would say that all works of street art are aesthetically flawed to the extent that they are unethical. As most street art is of questionable legality at best, and destructive at worst, all such works would be fundamentally aesthetically flawed, rotten in root, rotten in fruit. The unfortunate consequence of such a view is that street art could be ranked aesthetically based on nothing more than their ease of removal from the public sphere. Washability may be a great virtue in children’s markers, but it is a lousy method of aesthetic appreciation. So I will set the radical ethicists aside. viii

The autonomist models hold that:

1. Any ethical properties that can be ascribed to a work of art are not aesthetic properties of that work of art.

2. Only aesthetic properties of an artwork are relevant to the aesthetic evaluation of an artwork. ix

The aesthetic properties of a street art would be limited to those that address its form, skill, and execution. It may seem that autonomist critiques would be the most friendly to street art, because by setting aside questions of legality and destruction, the skill of the artwork can be better appreciated, and thus directly compared with artworks who have the imprimatur of the artworld. One can imagine a purely autonomist critique of Cargo that focuses on the astonishing depth of detail and successful mimicry of ceramic azulejo tiles, in which the cultural and political meaning of the work is set to one side. But if Cargo is street art, then an autonomist analysis of Cargo will
inevitably incorporate the defining characteristic of street art, that the material use of the street is constitutive of the internal meaning of the work.

The autonomist can recognize that a given artistic technique is destructive or non-destructive, but the destructiveness of the technique cannot figure in the aesthetic evaluation of the work. Note here, however, that the problem isn’t just that autonomous models of critique will set the ethical properties of street art to one side when evaluating a given example; we should expect that autonomous critiques of art will do that! It is that having done so, an autonomous critique will not be able to make sense at all of street art, because it is intimately integrated with the meaning of shared spaces. Street art interacts with those shared spaces and so challenges how a public space should be used. Recall that street art does not require recognition from the institutionalized artworld, so the case for a given work being street art must involve questions of its internal meaning. Autonomism would set the ethical evaluation of artwork to one side, but in doing so, would give up one of the defining characteristics of street art entirely.

Ethicist critiques of art allow that the ethical attitudes manifested by an artwork figure in any proper aesthetic evaluation of that artwork. Like the autonomist critique, the ethicist models of art criticism distinguish between the aesthetic properties of a work of art and the non-aesthetic properties of a work of art. The difference is that where the autonomist answers “never” to the question “when do the ethical properties of a work of art affect our aesthetic evaluation of the work”, and the radical ethicist says “always”, the ethicist offers a criterion according to which the ethical properties of a work of art may count as aesthetic properties. The ethicist critiques need to provide a bridging condition such that:
1. An ethical property of an artwork affects the aesthetic evaluation of the artwork when the bridging condition is satisfied.

That is, both the ethicist and the autonomist can observe that a given work of art manifests ethical properties. The difference is that the ethicist will need to offer a story according to which manifesting ethical attitudes can be evaluated on aesthetic grounds; he needs to bridge the gap between the ethical properties of the work and the aesthetic properties of the work.

For example, Carroll argues that a morally defective work may be aesthetically flawed in those cases where the moral flaw in the work prevents the consumer of the world from engaging the work, as when a work prescribes mockery when morality prescribes sympathy. The bridging condition is *the ethical flaws in the work prevent the observer from engaging imaginatively with the work.* \(^x\) Gaut offers a similar but stronger theory; a work that invites the observer to hold an unmerited ethical attitude is *pro tanto* aesthetically flawed, and a work that invites the observer to hold a merited ethical attitude is *pro tanto* aesthetically meritorious. The bridging principle is *the ethical attitudes prescribed by the work are unmerited.* \(^xi\) In neither case are ethical attitudes taken to decide the entire aesthetic value of a work; a work that is aesthetically flawed due to its ethical defects may nevertheless be aesthetically successful when taken as a whole. Yet on the ethicist model, an ethical defect counts against the aesthetic success of a work, and an ethically laudable attitude counts toward the aesthetic success of a work.

It seems as if we should have a straightforward algorithm for evaluating street art on ethical grounds. Determine the ethical attitudes endorsed by the work, determine whether
those ethical attitudes are good or bad, determine whether those ethical attitudes meet the proposed bridging condition, and then find a way to balance the other aesthetic qualities of street art with the aestheticized ethical qualities.

Suppose that one finds an otherwise innocuous graffiti tag to be objectionable only because of the damage it does to the public space, and one wishes to argue therefore that the tag is pro tanto aesthetically flawed. Here is how the ethicist might proceed. Street art’s material use of the street is internal to its meaning, by definition. The material use of the street in this case entails vandalism. To commit vandalism is to exhibit an ethical flaw, and by committing audaciously it in a public space, is to endorse it performatively. So the ethicist can extend the concept of endorsement to include performative acts, and bringing a graffiti tag into existence thereby endorses vandalism. Endorsing vandalism is an ethically bad attitude, and because it is endorsed, and that the passersby are invited to share this attitude, it counts against the aesthetic merits of the work.

A quick answer to this objection would distinguish between the circumstances of the creation of the work and the meaning of the work itself. It is far more plausible that the tagger’s audience consists of other taggers, who will judge the merits of the work based on its skill, design, and audacity. The reactions of the general public are not considered in the case of graffiti, because they are incidental. So while illegality is taken as given, the artist does not endorse it. As evidence for this, we might point to places where spray-painted street art has become unofficially sanctioned, such as at 5Pointz, or in São Paulo, and where paint artists and taggers continue to create dazzling colorful artworks. Illegality itself thus does not factor into the meaning of the work; it is incidental to the
ethos of braggadocio that pervades tagging culture. As a result, it does not seem correct to say that the tagger invites the general public to endorse the spray-painting of buildings any more than learning that Hemingway composed most of his great works while drunk invites the public to endorse the overconsumption of alcohol.

I will say more, however, because while the quick answer adequately handles the case of the subculture of graffiti, painted artworks directed more toward attracting the attention of the general public would be vulnerable to the same criticism. Moreover, the strategy of separating the act of creation from the internal meaning of the work will not be successful with respect to street art, as I will argue, because its meaning derives from the use of the street. Arguably, if that use is destructive, it should figure into the meaning of the work.

The problem with the ethicist model is not that works of street art somehow cannot endorse ethically bad attitudes. They can, and it seems reasonable that any such model could criticize artworks for doing so. The problem is rather how the ethicist model develops that criticism. Philosophers of art and critics examine a completed work, judge its ethical merits, and argue about the resulting effects on the aesthetic merits of the work. The models assume that the ethical properties and aesthetic properties of the work can be neatly distinguished, that both are relatively stable, and that then the only question is how to characterize the bridging principle by which ethical flaws become aesthetic flaws.

The bridging conditions suggested by Carroll and Gaut say that ethically bad art becomes aesthetically flawed art when the ethical properties of the work interfere with imaginative engagement with the work. Both bridging conditions can be
fruitfully thought of as cases where the consumer of the work experiences imaginative resistance, finding herself either unable or unwilling to engage imaginatively with the work because of its ethical flaws. When Kipling in “If” exhorts the reader to “take up the white man’s burden”, modern readers will likely recoil because they do not want to countenance racist ideology; and because the work prescribes such an attitude which then prevents the reader from engaging with the story, the work is thereby pro tanto aesthetically flawed.\textsuperscript{xiii} The work would be better if it did not endorse the bad ethical attitude. Were we able to draw Kipling into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century and advise him to improve his poem, we would suggest it would be better to take out that cringeworthy line.

Yet in the case of street art, to fail to engage an artwork because of its putative illegality does not necessarily signify even a pro tanto aesthetic flaw in the artwork. Rather, it signifies a failure on the part of the consumer to recognize that the illegality of the work likely figures into its meaning as a work of street art, and must be engaged in order to make sense of it as street art. That is, part of whether a skillful street painting or ornamentation qualifies as street art rather than a mural lies in how it addresses the contested space of the street. To conclude that a work of street art is aesthetically flawed because it contests how the street might be used is rather to miss the point.

The counterfactual the artwork would be better aesthetically absent this ethical flaw arguably holds in the usual cases of poetry, film, and fiction. In the case of some illegal street art, however, the counterfactual does not hold; the internal meaning of the artwork would be altered by the difference in its material use of the street.\textsuperscript{xiv} The problem generalizes for any proposed bridging condition.
Moreover, the ethicist model will overlook the subtle internal ethics of street art subculture, which often concern the norms of public spaces. The feud between the street artists known as Banksy and King Robbo provides an interesting case. In 1985, King Robbo had created a large, colorful graffiti tag on a wall alongside London’s Regent’s Canal. “Robbo Incorporated”, as the tag was known, was accessible only from the water, and as a result never was removed by London authorities.

![Figure 2. Robbo Incorporated (1985). Image credit: Photographer unknown. Retrieved from: www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/the-gloves-are-off-graffiti-legend-king-robbo-has-resurfaced-to-settle-a-score-with-banksy-2270575.html](image-url)

It was the oldest existing tag in London, until 2009, when an artist, presumed to be Banksy given the work’s characteristic style, stenciled a workman employed in covering up the tag. King Robbo, or outraged artists working on his behalf, responded by making it appear as if Banksy’s workman was
carefully painting a large “KING ROBBO” in homage; the response, a simple “FUC” affixed to the front. The feud escalated, with other works of Banksy’s being altered to include messages praising Robbo.

We may interpret the feud as contesting the norm governing the commitment to ephemerality. Robbo Incorporated had been defaced with numerous small tags before Banksy’s large stencil work, and consistent with the commitment to ephemerality, none of the small tags gave rise to any retaliation. The street decides what art survives; Robbo Incorporated had survived due to its inaccessibility and then, as it aged, as a sort of living monument. The question here seems to be whether Banksy, by 2009 an internationally famous and wealthy street artist, counts as a member of the street who can decide what works succeed; or alternatively, if the commitment to ephemerality may be reconsidered for artworks of a certain historical stature.

The interesting ethical questions posed by the feud between Banksy and King Robbo, while they deeply concern the meaning and use of the street, cannot be wholly explained by an appeal to their endorsement of ethically bad attitudes. Suppose that one holds that committing vandalism is \textit{a pro tanto} aesthetic flaw in a work; then it seems that on the ethicist model has to conclude that King Robbo’s work was aesthetically flawed, but Banksy’s was not because one cannot vandalize an act of vandalism. If the flaw of vandalism consists in the damage done to property, understood as the cost incurred to restore it, Banksy left the wall no worse than when he found it. Such a critique misses the point, and so the changing ethical landscape of street art cannot be adequately captured by ethicism.

Arguably, the limitation of the ethicist model of aesthetic criticism results from its initial focus on institutionally recognized works of art. Without question, many forms of art also possess their ethical dimensions constitutively. As Carroll writes, “…certain kinds of art— for instance, Greek tragedies—possess an ethical dimension, not adventitiously but constitutively.”\textsuperscript{xvi} Yet if an artistic production is recognized by the artworld, it is a work of art, and so we can evaluate its aesthetic merits with reference to the standards of the artworld’s institutions without initially considering its ethical dimensions. Street art, however, has no museums and no curators, and so questions of its aesthetic merit more closely involve questions of its meaning. Given that its meaning concerns the use of the public sphere, ethical considerations are entangled in the work’s very status.
I suggest that the limitations of the existing models of the ethical criticism of art warrant exploration of alternatives, and that one promising candidate is modelling the ethical criticism of street art as a *dialogue* about what norms should prevail in public spaces. Here, I want to return to what I termed earlier *non-destructive art*, and argue that a productive ethical criticism of street art must include attention to the conditions of the materiality of the work.

3. A SOFTER, GENTLER STREET ART

“Urban knitting” also known as “graffiti knitting” or “yarn-bombing” is an artistic practice consisting in affixing knitted or crocheted work to public spaces. Not all
instances of urban-knitting rise to the level of art any more than does every spray-painted tag, but those that do easily meet Riggle’s requirements; they make material use of the street such that the street is internal to the meaning of the work, and the works are committed to ephemerality.

Here I will sketch two ways, or interwoven threads, if you’ll forgive the pun, in which urban knitting is interesting philosophically as an aesthetic phenomenon for its incongruity. It is a street art form that exploits the contrast between its material and the space in which it is displayed, and in so doing creates a dialogue over the ethical use of public spaces.

First, urban knitting is incongruous because it takes a craft, knitting, traditionally done by women and associated with traditional views of women, and injects it into the public sphere by imitating the conventions of graffiti, an art form generally considered to be aggressive, destructive, and associated with masculinity. Second, urban knitting is incongruous because while it adopts the conventions of graffiti, as yarnwork, it cannot fully inhabit the conceptual space cleared by graffiti. The result is that while urban knitting depends on graffiti’s existence for its own, its existence as a kinder, gentler, non-threatening form of street art implicitly criticizes graffiti for its destructive effect on public spaces.

The popular image of a knitter, until recently, is that of an older woman, making a blanket or baby booties for her grandchildren. While the items may be beautiful or ornamental in addition to being functional, they are crafts, not art. Recently, however, knitting has been reclaimed by younger women interested in learning crafts that had somewhat fallen by the wayside in contemporary life. It is significant that the popular image of a knitter until recently
is a *grandmother*; the skills and interest in knitting skipped a generation in the popular imagination (if not in reality), only to be rediscovered by hipsters. As Malia Wollan of the *New York Times* observed: “Yarn bombing takes that most matronly craft (knitting) and that most maternal of gestures (wrapping something cold in a warm blanket) and transfers it to the concrete and steel wilds of the urban streetscape.”xvii Wollan thus suggests that urban knitting’s incongruity lies primarily in the contrast between maternal, warm gestures evoked by baby blankets and booties and the hard public sphere.

Wollan is correct that urban knitting often exploits the incongruity between the cold steel of the street and the softness of the yarn. A piece in Denmark, *Tank Cozy* featured a military tank covered with a form-fitting, bright pink blanket; from the end of the gun dangled a small crocheted cannon ball. Juliana Santacruz Herrera’s *Boulevard Belleville* consists of simple flat knitted cozies designed to fill potholes on a number of Paris streets. The pieces are perfectly shaped to the potholes, bursting out of the street like tiny colorful weeds, suggesting that Paris streets could use a bit of tender loving care. Olek’s *Crocheted Wall Street Bull* (2010) covers the famed Wall Street icon with aggressively cheerful pink and purple yarn that fits it closely, like a stocking. The public space is not supposed to be soft, cuddly, and inviting; by placing knitworks in the public space, the artist makes us aware of that tacit prohibition.

Yet, this contrast alone cannot explain the entirety of their incongruity. An additional observation is that urban knitting presents for public view craftwork that is typically intended for private use. The feminine is associated with the private sphere, safely secured behind closed doors; the masculine, the outside impersonal world of individuals. A baby blanket
might be admired for the skill that produced it but it will be admired in a personal, private setting. Knitwork usually is a private creation, produced in these days of widely available consumer goods as a special hand-made gift, notable because of its individuality. It reflects an ethics of care, of interpersonal relationships and concern.

Practitioners sometimes refer to the purpose of urban knitting as beautifying a public space, by covering a brutish, broken, or dingy urban space with colorful yarn creations, as in Sayeg’s 2010 covering of a hated public art display in Austin. These are all associated with traditional characterizations of feminine roles, and thus opposed to the public sphere. Urban knitting takes what can be conceived as a traditional woman’s craft, and instead of confining it to the nursery or living room, boldly places it into the public sphere for display, a political act. The presentation of the work in the street gives rise to its claim to be art; a pattern that would be unremarkable in a blanket tossed on a sofa aspires to art merely by being presented publicly. xviii

Figure 4. Red Monster. Image credit: Author.
If decorating and knitting are coded as feminine, then in some cases, urban knitting provides a critique of the use of urban space by displaying work akin to those typically reserved for the feminine, private sphere. The meaning internal to the artwork suggests that the street should be a place that welcomes the feminine rather than opposing it. It is internal to such works that they comment on the contested political sphere. The urban-knitting artist brings the indoors outside and so colonizes the public space. Urban-knitting exploits this incongruity to push forward a conversation about the question of who owns public spaces.

Another incongruity of urban knitting and other non-destructive forms of street art lies in their association with graffiti. Knitta (originally Knitta Please), the Houston group founded by Sayeg adopted many tropes associated with graffiti. The name of the group playfully (and perhaps cringeworthily) recalls urban lingo, and some group members adopted personal tags, or nicknames such as AKrylik and PolyCotN, that were inspired by the pseudonyms of hip-hop artists and taggers. Placing a bit of knitwork out in public they dubbed “tagging”; just as a graffiti artist might tag a building or bridge, Knitta would tag public spaces with yarn. The yarn-bombers seem to have worn their urban lingo lightly, tongue-in-cheek, but they did seem to see their work as occupying the same conceptual space as graffiti, rebellious, of the street, but gentler.

Similarly, the artist HOTTEA describes his work on his Instagram page as “interacting non-destructively with public spaces.” HOTTEA creates, among other works, intricate geometric tags out of yarn, usually worked in chain link fences. He explained that his use of yarn stemmed from a desire as a teenager to participate in street art without drawing the attention of the authorities;
recalling the one time that he was detained by authorities, he said that they could not figure out what laws he might have broken and settled on littering as the most likely candidate.xx

Associations with urban knitting seem to be largely positive, and arguably most of the reason for this is that the materiality of the work makes a difference in how it is perceived. First, there is a significant perceptual difference between a painted object and a covered object. Graffiti essentially becomes part of the public space; paint adheres to the surface of a wall, but does not obscure the wall like a yarn covering does. That is, there is no space between the surface of the graffiti and the surface of the wall; the graffiti is unified with the public space. Graffiti is in this sense transparent, and so changes the public space.

Urban knitting, by contrast, obscures the public space. Urban knitters may refer to their projects as tagging, but the pieces function differently. Because they are affixed to the surface instead of altering it, they obscure the surface instead of changing it. The yarn does not damage the surface to which it is attached. At most, its presence is temporary inconvenience. It is also easy to remove a knitwork from the public space with inexpensive, readily available tools; one simply snips away with a pair of scissors, and the space is returned to its former state. Knitta even fastened some of its pieces with buttons, so that if someone objected to the work, it could be easily removed.

Because of this, we may speak of urban knitting as covering the public space, but not altering it. When a graffiti artist tags a building with spray paint, he or she has altered the surface of the building in a way that will require significant time, money, and effort to restore it to its original state. The artwork claims the public space; to spray
a tag is to plant a flag. A graffiti tag seeks to permanently alter the public space. As a result, destruction is arguably constitutive of graffiti.

Urban knitting, by contrast, is presented as friendly to the public space. It inhabits the conceptual space that was cleared by graffiti over time and while incurring risk. The work of graffiti artists established that it was possible to create art by decorating the public space without permission. Urban knitting moves into that space, while rejecting the destructive nature of graffiti.

The result is an implicit critique of graffiti. Why damage someone’s property, it asks, if it is possible to create urban art without harming anything? Urban knitting plays with the perception of edginess; to the extent that it does so, it is rather like a fake tattoo, a bit of rebelliousness that will not significantly challenge the artist or the public space. To become a graffiti artist involves incurring a significant amount of personal risk. Yet without graffiti, almost assuredly urban knitting in its current form would not exist.

One result of this second incongruity is that urban knitting is an exceedingly safe and accessible form of interacting with a public space. One can do it without being a bad influence; HOTTEA has showcased his work on the children’s television show, Sesame Street; it is hard to imagine even an artist as skilled as Banksy being invited to demonstrate how to use spray paint! Knitta was founded by a middle-class business owner, and urban knitting (that may or may not rise to the level of artwork) arguably has become an easy way for comparatively well-off women to participate in street art with minimal risk. For example, in the summer of 2014, the Junior League of Ogden decided to yarn-bomb the historic district in conjunction with the opening of the arts festival. In timing
their work to coincide with the arts festival, they signified that they thought that what they were doing was not a form of guerilla art, working outside the system; they obtained permits from the city.\textsuperscript{xxi} Yet the Junior League is not a group that one would mistake for a rebellious, anti-establishment organization; their other volunteer activities include organizing community yoga and arts events, tending community garden plots, and participating in trail races. By contrast, one cannot imagine a group such as the Junior League deciding to commemorate the arts festival by picking up cans of spray paint and tagging downtown. Nor would they get a permit! Graffiti tags must be done without attracting the attention of the authorities, because even in cases where the tags rise to the level of art, they are still considered to be damage to property unless the property owner has given consent.

Urban knitting’s claim to being street art occupies the conceptual space delineated by graffiti. The success and growing acceptability of artistic graffiti makes it acceptable to think of art as something that can be done to a public space. Yet no one expects that Girl Scout troops and women’s leagues will begin spray painting walls; graffiti is urban art, and it is arguably constitutive of graffiti that it breaks rules and causes some destruction. By contrast, urban knitters take advantage of a paradigm that suggests that ornamenting the public space is daring and artistic, but they do so in a way that incurs no personal risk at all. While their actions are technically illegal, it is difficult to imagine someone being charged with vandalism or littering for placing a cozy on a car antenna. The graffiti artists have defined the space aggressively, implicitly arguing that tagging the public sphere can be art. Urban knitting moves into that conceptual space, while rejecting the destructive nature of graffiti. They attempt to inhabit the space without endorsing what made it possible.
I have been focusing on the critique offered by urban knitting directed toward graffiti and other painted street art, but graffiti similarly makes a case for the use of the public space. Spray painted artwork particularly seems to be characterized by aggressive claiming of the public space; the permanence of the paint, and the great personal risk that artists take work to indicate that using the public space is not something that requires permission; nor is it something that should be done apologetically, with buttons, in case someone objects. It raises the question of the proper attitude toward authority, and answers it with a smash.

There is, of course, much more to be said. Any ethical evaluations of our perceptions of various forms of street art would be incomplete without a discussion of race, class, and the severity of penalties for vandalism, and how society decides how those factors are relevant. The risk inherent in graffiti can challenge those norms; urban knitting is far too genteel to do the same. My aim here is much narrower. The point is to show that urban-knitting and graffiti are participants in a conversation about the ethical use of public spaces, and that the material conditions of the art help to establish their positions.

4. CONCLUSION

I have argued that the classical philosophical models of the ethical criticism of art cannot capture what is ethically interesting about the phenomenon of street art. Ethical models of criticism presuppose the existence of an artworld, and view the central problem of the ethical criticism of art as the development of a bridging condition by which ethically flawed attitudes rise to become aesthetic flaws. Street art, however, has no artworld and no curators beyond the decisions of the street. Thus, works of street art challenge norms concerning the proper use of public space,
so to criticize the works without attention to that conversation overlooks the puzzling and intricate dialogue happening right on the walls.

NOTES

i Thanks to Christy Mag Uidhir, Nick Riggle, Sondra Bacharach, Anthony Chackal, Roy T. Cook, Gregg Horowitz, Alison Lanier, Erich Hatala Matthes, Christiane Merritt, Christopher Nagel, Shelby Moser, Alison Young, and audiences at the Philosophy of Street Art Conference (New York, 2015.) for their perceptive comments and stimulating discussion. Thanks also to Jenny Kokai, Sarah Steimel, Molly Morin, Janine Joseph, and Julia Panko of Weber State University, for their comments on a much earlier draft of this work.

ii I will discuss radical ethicism, according to which the aesthetic merits of a work are wholly determined by its ethical properties, briefly in section 4, as such a view seems to be entirely implausible and defended rarely in the literature.

iii I follow the categorization of forms of ethical criticism outlined by Carroll, Noel. Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research. Ethics, Vol. 110, No. 2 (January 2000), pp. 350-387. I focus on the autonomous and ethical (or moralist) positions because they comprise the largest and most successful models of criticism.

iv Riggle, N.A. Street art: the transfiguration of the commonplaces. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 68:3. Summer 2010, 244-257.

v Ibid, p. 246.

vi Ibid, p. 249.


viii I mention this view only because in my experience, it captures the first reaction of many people to the ethical criticism of street art. Isn’t it vandalism? How can it be art?


I am indebted here to Christopher Nagel’s excellent conference presentation “Signature Counterexamples to Institutional Theories of Art” for insight into the subculture of graffiti.


Carroll’s criterion is quite modest, saying only that a work may be flawed aesthetically if its attitudes prevent the consumer from engaging with the work. So one might think that his model could handle street art, as it is open for him to acknowledge that street art’s illegality often prevents consumers from appreciating the work, but that it nevertheless does not amount to an aesthetic flaw in street art. This would save the view from an initial criticism, but as his weaker criterion will struggle to say anything definitive about the relationship between the attitudes endorsed by street art and the contested nature of public space, I will set it to one side.


Carroll, N. *Art and Ethical Criticism*, p. 357.


This is not to say that all such attempts succeed. As a relatively risk-free way to participate in the creation of street art, urban knitting, or yarn-bombing as it is typically known when referring to works that do not rise to the status of art, has become an activity undertaken by college students, women’s groups, and Girl Scout troops; Riggle’s definition explains when a work of art qualifies as street art, not that everything that meets the criteria of material use of the street and ephemerality qualifies as art.


Recounted during the artist’s panel at The Philosophy of Street Art Conference. Thanks especially to Nick Riggle for asking questions of HOTTEA on my behalf when I was late due to travel difficulties.