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Street Art: the Gallery of the City

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STREET ART

The Gallery of the City

Thesis by Mia Pinzelik

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OVERVIEW - 5

RESEARCH - 6

- Street Art vs Graffiti - 6
- Politics of Street Art - 7
- Process and Materials - 8
- Instagram Audit - 10
- Survey - 11
- Artist Interviews - 12
- Street Art Ethnography - 15

CONCLUSION - 16

AUDIENCE - 17

DELIVERABLES - 17

- Rule Booklet - 20
- Street Art Pieces - 22
- Game Board - 24
- Card Deck - 26
- Player Pieces - 27
- Coins - 28

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY - 28

OVERVIEW

Street art has been a foundation of urban landscapes for over half a decade. Beginning in New York during the 1960s, predominant Black and latinx communities began experimenting with this practice of public art associated with hip-hop music and other subcultures of the time. Work was often tagged with the artists' name and street number such as artist Jean-Michel Basquiat who went under the pseudonym SAMO (The Art Story, .n.d.). Since then, street art and graffiti scenes have grown and shifted throughout the world adapting to the culture of the city.

Today, street art is as prominently a part of our culture just as any other type of art. Popular street artists, such as Banksy and Shepherd Fairey, are often recognized as household names. Their pieces have been sold for millions of dollars and their work is shared vastly over the internet (Future-Learn, n.d.). But beyond these often secret celebrities, the many anonymous everyday street artists working in our cities are the ones creating the public galleries observed by the public everyday. Their work is viewed more often than the work in sanctioned art galleries and is done without permission and without recognition. It is these artists that I am interested in learning more about.

As a lifelong Portland resident, I will specifically focus on the culture and community surrounding Portland street art in my research. Secondary research for this project will include the history of street art, the politics surrounding the art form, and the different processes and materials used by street arts. The primary research will include surveying the general public of Portland about their thoughts on street art, studying how social media is used in the street art community, interviews with active Portland street artists, and studying street art in person. This project will look to better understand the culture and community of Portland street art, the unique aspects of the art form, the kinds of people participating in street art culture, the difficulties they face, and what defines this specific Portland subculture in 2020. The goal of this project is to compile this research into a board game illustrating a general overview of the process and experiences of street artists in Portland.

RESEARCH

Street Art vs. Graffiti

During my research, I noticed the terms street art and graffiti did not have clear definitions linked to them both from people in and outside the scene. To combat this, I have formed my own definitions specifically for this project based on my research. When discussing street art and graffiti centered around legality and the public's general opinion, the two terms are used interchangeably referring to unsanctioned art. When discussing the use of the terms in the Portland art scene, the street art scene and graffiti scene are considered by many to be two separate subcultures. For discussion of these scenes, I am defining street art as unsanctioned work done ahead of time and simply installed, and graffiti as work made on the spot. It should be emphasized that these definitions do not speak for all artists in the scene and there are many artists actively creating work that blurs the line between street art and graffiti. However, for this project I am choosing to focus on artists who define themselves as street artists and consider themselves a member of the Portland street art scene.

Politics of Street Art

"The Broken Window Theory," first outlined in 1982 by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling, theorized that locations appearing dirty and unkempt send the message that the location is uncontrolled and unregulated therefore causing an uptick in criminal activity. Despite Wilson and Kelling briefly mentioning graffiti as one of these "symbols of disorder" and the lack of research to back up this theory, "The Broken Window Theory" has had lasting effects on the criminalization of street art and graffiti culture. Many cities have adopted zero-tolerance policies surrounding unsanctioned street art based on this theory resulting in what would be a misdemeanor offense now being considered a felony. (Portland Street Art Alliance , 2017). These zero-tolerance policies can be traced back to the 1990s in New York City during the Giuliani administration and then would eventually be enacted in cities across the country, including Portland.

In 1998, the City of Portland enacted the "Graffiti Nuisance Abatement Trust Fund" aimed to help raise funds

for graffiti removal for the city of Portland and businesses. These funds went towards paying for the cost of graffiti removal, purchasing removal supplies, and to administer the ordinance. It is estimated that the city of Portland spends \$2 million to \$5 million on graffiti removal annually. Stores that sell "graffiti materials," such as spray paint, are required to have materials be inaccessible to purchasers without employee assistance as well as to keep a log of individuals purchasing materials subject to inspection by the police department (Shoenberger, 2017). Due to the strictness and enforcement of these laws, the anonymity of street artists in Portland is extremely important for the artist's safety. Because of this, I will not be using any names of artists in this project and instead use pseudonym or generalized information.

Process and Materials

Due to the flexibility and freedom of the practice, Portland street artists use a variety of techniques and materials to implement their art work. The Portland street art scene is particularly known for its eclectic, extensive sticker art scene with many considering it the sticker capitol of the world. Vinyl stickers are the most popular due to their durability in Portland's rainy weather. Many artists also use free Priority Mail stickers from the post office as a cheaper alternative to the more expensive vinyl (Green, 2017). Screen printed stickers have also become a unique aspect of the Portland sticker scene with many artists screen printing their own or paying fellow artists with a screen printing setup.

Wheatpaste is another common process for pasting up work in Street art scenes due to it being relatively inexpensive and simple to make. The paste is made with a combination of sugar and flour mixed with water to create a thick, glue-like substance. Wheatpaste easily adheres any porous surface to another and dries rock-hard with only a thin coating. The flexibility and ease

of wheatpaste allows street artists to paste their work quickly and efficiently to almost any surface they encounter. The downside to wheatpasting in Portland is wheatpaste does not last in the rain resulting in its use mostly in the spring and summer.

Do-it-yourself stencils are another avenue many street artists use to quickly replicate their work. Portland street artist Skam captures the stencil making process on his Instagram @skamsticker. The process begins by coating the back of a printed or hand-done piece with a flat color spray paint. The piece is then adhered to a flat piece of wood with a light coat of spray adhesive. Once smoothed out, the illustration is cut out with an exacto blade to reveal the wood underneath. A sheet of fiberglass mesh is then glued to the entire piece, excluding where the wood is exposed. Once the glue has dried, the piece is peeled off of the wood and is ready to be used. (@skamsticker, 2019). Many artists often use stencils to replicate their work on paper with spray paint and then paste these pieces up with wheatpaste.

Instagram Audit

The Portland street art community mainly uses Instagram to connect and share their work. All accounts are anonymous with artists never showing their face or sharing their real name. Many artists often share each other's work on their stories and in posts they encounter while out in the city, tagging each other's accounts in the posts. This practice feels similar to a Where's Waldo of Portland street artists. Instagram gives the impression that the community is very supportive of each other's work with many artists often

sharing the work and products of other artists. A commonality of many Portland street artists on Instagram is the presence of a link to their Big Cartel store in their profile bio. Big Cartel is an online store service targeting artists who wish to sell merchandise online. Unlike similar sites, Big Cartel allows artists to keep 100% of their profits and offers multiple price tiers to allow all artists access to the site. Their lowest tier is completely free and does not require a credit card to open a store.

Survey

For this project, I conducted a survey to better understand how people in Portland view street art and graffiti. I received over 90 responses with the majority coming from women ages 21 to 24 and over 40. Some of the questions asked in the survey included:

What comes to mind when you hear the term "street art"?

What comes to mind when you hear the term "graffiti"?

What are your general thoughts around street art/graffiti in Portland?

What do you notice about street art/graffiti in Portland?

In what areas/types of locations do you usually see street art/graffiti in Portland?

Do you have any favorite street/graffiti artists in Portland? Are there any particular pieces you have noticed around Portland?

A general theme in the responses included associating street art with freedom of expression and rebellion. Street art was understood as art made by the people for the people and mostly described as a positive to the city. The descriptions for graffiti shared many similarities with street art but with more of an emphasis on tagging. Overall, most responses felt generally positive towards street art whether sanctioned or unsanctioned. The majority of responders felt street art was an important aspect of Portland culture and should not be controlled by the city of Portland. An unexpected trend in responses showed many responders wished to get into the Portland street art scene but did not necessarily know how to. This inspired the outcome of my thesis to create a guide to becoming a street artist in Portland.

Artist Interviews

For this project, I was able to secure interviews with 5 active street artists in Portland. I mainly used Instagram to communicate with artists in order to guarantee anonymity with the exception of a couple emails. Overall, artists were enthusiastic and open to talking about Portland street art culture and their experience as a street artist. The interviews mainly focused on the artists background and experience as an artist, their opinions on the Portland street art community, and the relation between street art culture and Portland. Many of the artists I communicated with have worked outside of Portland and were able to provide information on what made Portland's street art scene unique.

Many of the artists I spoke to expressed getting into street art as an outlet for freedom of creative expression. Many had been working as commercial artists such as graphic designers with little to no creative control over the work they were producing. Street art was their outlet to remove themselves from the strictness of commercial work and allow for complete control over their work. Now, many street artists in Portland have made street art their full time job due to income outlets such as commissioned mural work, screen printing, and selling of merchandise. Social media outlets, such as Instagram, played a significant part with exposure to their work.

The work created by street artists is deeply personal and varies greatly from artist to artist. Artists will often

have characters or motifs replicated throughout their work. In Portland, replicated motifs include skulls, smiley faces, Studio Ghibli characters, and many other unique characters. The diversity of styles in art is a key aspect of Portland's street art scene. Styles can range from collages to simple vector drawings to fine art pieces. Portland is said to be one of the sticker art capitals of the world with many, if not all street artists, printing their art on stickers. The Portland sticker scene also is uniquely known for its high volume of screen printed stickers with many artists printing their own or commissioning printing from fellow street artists. The subject matter of pieces seems to be predominantly light-hearted and sometimes humorous. Many Portland street artists view street art as

an outlet to brighten people's day and add color and decor to the streets and the subject matter often reflects this. Other artists focus on the unique public nature of street art and use it as an outlet for political expression.

There is an overwhelming consensus that the Portland street art community is very welcoming and supportive of each other and their work. Newcomers to the scene are welcomed with generosity and kindness from veterans without superiority. The community holds regular meetups at bars and around Portland for making and putting up work; everyone is always invited and encouraged to come. The scene itself is relatively small with about 50 active street artists working at a time. For the most part, everyone knows everyone and each other's work.

Portland street artists often observe “street art tourists” who put up work for a sticker season (about a year) and then vanish. Unlike Portland, street art cultures in other cities are said to be much more closed off and territorial. The openness and communal aspects of Portland street art is understood to be unique to Portland.

Despite the stringent laws around unsanctioned street art in Portland, street artists have had minimum issues with law enforcement. It should be noted that the race and ethnicity of these artists is unknown due to the anonymous nature of their work and

each artist’s experience may vary greatly based on these factors. With this in mind, the artists interviewed for this project expressed that Portland was much more tolerant to street art compared to many other cities around the United States. In Portland, Street art is viewed as low priority resulting in artists experiencing less intervention from law enforcement. More commonly, street artists have experienced intervention from private citizens when displaying their work. Types of materials can also vary in the level of intervention with wheat paste and stickers seen more legal than pure spray paint. The majority of street artists take great care when choosing where to display their work. The goal of their work is often to bring others joy and to not harm private property so awareness of placement is essential. Common places for display include the back of street signs, newspaper stands, bike racks, and electrical boxes. The general consensus from Portland street artists is the community of Portland is very accepting and enthusiastic about street art in the city.

Street Art Ethnography

To better understand Portland street art, I spent a significant amount of time observing street art in my surrounding neighborhood. I first observed how there was a lot more street art in my neighborhood than I was expecting. Street art can often blend into our surroundings and I had to learn to train my eye to notice it. The most common surfaces I observed street art displayed on included trash bins, street signs, poles, and electrical boxes. Generally, surfaces with art already displayed attracted more art as the seal was already broken. I noticed specific stickers and tags appearing every couple blocks usually in similar locations. Overall, the back of street signs seem to be the most popular place for art placement and private property seemed to be avoided or removed much quicker.

CONCLUSION

The Portland street art scene is a unique and expressive community compared to the scenes in other cities. Artists use a variety of materials when display working but stickers are especially unique and prevalent in the Portland scene. Instagram is the primary source of communication and community for the Portland street art scene with many artists sharing each other's work. The Portland community outside of street art is also very receptive and interested in the work being done by Portland street artists. Street art is seen by many to be a key aspect of Portland's culture. Portland's street art community is known for being very inclusive and supportive of each other and welcoming to new artists. Art styles and subject matter vary greatly from artist to artist resulting in a diverse and eclectic art scene. Laws involving unsanctioned street art in Portland are relatively unenforced allowing artists to work more freely without fear of prosecution. Despite this, Portland street artists are conscious of avoiding tagging private property and focus instead on

displaying work as decor for the streets. The combination of these many unique aspects of Portland street art culture make it one of the most lively street art scenes in the world.

AUDIENCE

The audience for this project would be individuals in Portland interested in learning more about the Portland street art scene or individuals with negative feelings towards the scene. I would like this game to provide a new perspective on something Portlanders view daily differentiating from a standard article or similar mediums.

DELIVERABLES

My deliverable for this project is a Portland street art board game based on the interviews and other research I have conducted through this project. The game will act as a general overview of the culture and lifestyle of street artists in Portland as well as an alternative experience to understanding the culture through a first person, story based lens. The game will include:

4 sets of street art inspired by street art in Portland

A card deck with situations based on my research that can negatively or positively impact the game

A game board

Player pieces

Rule Booklet

Fake coins to be used during gameplay

Street Art SUPERSTARS

*Reference rule book for synopsis of game play and how game elements are used

ABOUT

StreetArt SuperStars is a street art themed board game based on the Portland street art scene. During the spring of 2020, I had the privilege to interview multiple street artists in Portland about their experience as an unsanctioned artist. What excited me most about these conversations were the many stories these artists shared with me. These stories revealed the true nature of using the urban landscape as your canvas and the ever-changing challenges that come along with it. These conversations are what eventually inspired this game. The card deck contains a diverse range of scenarios based on the interviews I conducted with artists as well as other research around the subject. The street art pieces I designed for this game were simply crafted after things that made me happy, as this was a constant theme among artists I interviewed; make work that makes you happy and then maybe it will make others happy too. I hope this game does just that for you!

- Mia Pinzelik

GAME RULES

PLAYERS - 2 to 4

AVERAGE PLAY TIME - 30 mins

SET UP
Each player chooses which set of street art they'd like to use during the game and then sets their corresponding player piece on each corner of the board.

The four sets of street art are:

- Purr-ple Kitties
- Alien Invasion
- Mushroom Skulls
- Comfort Food

GOAL
The goal of this game is to be the first player to reach 100 reputation (rep) points. Rep points can be earned by putting up street art as well as awarded by drawing cards from the deck.

GAME PLAY
Each player's turn will include the following:

- Collect 2 coins
- Roll the dice and move piece
- Purchase and place street art on adjacent buildings OR skip and save for later rounds
- Pick a card from the deck and follow the instructions on the card
- Repeat for each player until one player hits 100 reputation points

COINS

Coins look like this:

Each player collects 2 coins at the beginning of each of their turns. They can be used to purchase street art during step 3 of game play.

STREET ART

COST AND REP
Each player should have selected a set of street art during the setup of this game to be used during game play. Each set of street art should include 3 different pieces of 3 different sizes. The cost and rep amount are each different for each size of art. During each player's turn, they are allowed to purchase and place street art next to adjacent buildings after rolling the dice and moving. View the table on page 3 for the cost and rep of each size of street art for each set.

PLACING ON GAME BOARD
Each size of street should be placed on any brick patterns on the board. These patterns look like this:

Street art should be placed according to the grid on brick patterns. View the table on page 3 for the number and arrangement of grid squares each size of street art should cover. You can not cover up another player's street art.

GAME BOARD

MOVING PIECES
Player pieces are moved along the gray side walk on the board. Players are allowed to move in any direction along the game board but are not allowed to reverse directions while moving their piece.

BUILDINGS
The game board contains 3 different building sizes that street art can be placed on. These buildings are indicated by the brick pattern. Players can place work anywhere on adjacent buildings if it covers the corresponding grid arrangement (see table on page 3) and it does not cover up other player's pieces. See examples of possible arrangements on page 4.

CARD DECK
The card deck contains scenarios on each card that changes your coins/reputation OR not effect either. Each player should take a card at the end of each of their turns. Coins are tracked with the physical ones provided and reputation can be tracked on a piece of paper. Coins and reputation can not go below zero. There is no negative change after the player hits zero.

WINNING THE GAME
A player wins when they have reached 100 reputation points gained from putting up street art and cards from the card deck.

	SMALL	MEDIUM	LARGE
PRICE	2 COINS	4 COINS	8 COINS
REP POINTS	3 POINTS	9 POINTS	15 POINTS
PURR-PLE KITTIES
ALIEN INVASION
MUSHROOM SKULLS
COMFORT FOOD
GRID PLACEMENT

Street Art Pieces

I learned from my interviews with Portland street artists that many of the pieces they created were inspired by their interests and things that made them happy that they hoped would do the same for others. With these pieces I tried to do the same!

Game Board

Card Deck

The scenarios on these cards are based off the many experiences of street artists that I gathered in my research. I wanted this to reflect the dynamic life style of an artist and even more an unsanctioned artist.

Player Pieces

Coins

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Street and Graffiti Art Movement Overview. (n.d.). Retrieved May 27, 2020, from <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/street-art/#nav>

This reviewed overview of the history of street art by google conglomerates a mass amount of information and images involving street art and graffiti and the history. The page delves into the main ideas surrounding street artists and important figures in the street art movement. The site is rich in content and organized to elevate the depth of information.

This site acted as an excellent starting point for my research due to the vast amount. It was used to construct the beginning frames of my research and better understand what my project could entail.

FutureLearn. (n.d.). Art or vandalism: the street art debate. Retrieved from <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/art-crime/0/steps/11888>

This article discusses the legality of street art focusing on two prominent street artists; Shepard Fairey and Banksy. The article first focuses on Fairey with a discussion of his work and the issue of legality surrounding his work. The same is then discussed for Banksy. The article raises questions around the relation of acclaim and legality.

The article worked as an introduction into the legality of unsanctioned street art. Discussing this topic with two of the most well known street artists acted as a good common ground to begin research.

Shoenberger, E. (2019, July 18). Despite Graffiti's Global Popularity, Cities Still Criminalize It. Retrieved from <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-despite-graffitis-global-popularity-cities-criminalize>

This article details the criminalization of street art around the United States. It focuses on specific laws and enforcements doctored by cities and the outcomes associated with them. The article details criminal charges, graffiti removal, the sale of street art-related materials, and laws surrounding the implementation of public art.

This article was a great beginning for research into laws surrounding street art and how cities approached unsanctioned work. A significant portion specifically talked about Portland as well.

Portland Street Art Alliance. (2017, April 19). The History of Zero-Tolerance Graffiti Abatement Laws in Portland. Retrieved from <http://www.pdxstreetart.org/articles-all/zerotolerance>

This article details the zero-tolerance policies surrounding street art specific to Portland. The article discusses the

history of the city of Portland's stance on unsanctioned street art and the enforcements in place today. These enforcements include sale of street art-related materials, graffiti removal funding and implementing, and laws surrounding permission and reporting of street art.

This article is similar to the previous but instead entirely Portland focused. Great detail and insight into the subject.

Green, E. (2017, September 20). Portland's subversive sticker culture. Retrieved from <https://news.streetroots.org/2017/09/08/portland-s-subversive-sticker-culture>

This article details the experience and background of two prominent Portland street artists. It is both an interview and documentation of their daily life as artists. Article discusses the artists' background, artistic influences, and process of making. It also details the general culture of Portland street art.

This article is exactly the sort of research I am doing for this project. The information helps to secure the direction I am planning to go in.

Wheatpaste Recipe (for putting up posters/billboard alterations). (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://destruatables.org/destructable/wheatpaste-recipe-putting-postersbillboard-alterations>

This web page illustrates a step-by-step process for making wheatpaste through visuals and written information. Tips on storing wheatpaste and cleaning of materials is also discussed along with tips on how to use wheatpaste to put up images

This website is a great source for learning and better understanding the process of making and using wheatpaste. This information will serve well in a guide book for street artists.

@skamsticker. (2019, May). How to make a stencil like scam. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17853537691430043/?hl=en>

This Instagram highlight from user @skamsticker demonstrates how to create a do-it-yourself stencil. The process is documented through photos, videos and written content resulting in a finished piece.

This information is especially important for my research because it is coming directly from Portland street artists. The process is clearly demonstrated allowing viewers to easily understand the process.