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From the Street to the Institution: The Flux of Publicness and the Ontological Crisis in Graffiti Art

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Abstract

This study traces graffiti's ontological crisis through its "street-to-institution" trajectory, examining the irreversible shift from illicit urban subversion to commodified cultural artifact. Analyzing four phases — 1970s Bronx revolt, Beijing 798 commodification, Chengdu zoning interventions, and Basquiat's institutional canonization — it reveals how the pursuit of legitimacy erodes graffiti's foundational illegality. Framed by Habermas's public sphere transformation, Danto's art-end thesis, and Foucauldian heterotopia, the work identifies a triple crisis: marketized intent, ritualized reception, and commodified existence. As physical walls become inaccessible due to policy/technological barriers, the study probes whether AR graffiti and NFTs can reconstitute digital publicness. Findings indicate such "spectral survival" prolongs street spirit yet invites new capital capture vectors. The article proposes "graffiti heritage" metrics for historical preservation and envisions a "neo-street ethos" for trans-medial practice. Graffiti's demise emerges as a synecdoche for modernity's paradox, confirming publicness as an interminable transgression game.

Keywords: graffiti, publicness, ontology, digital reconfiguration, neo-street ethos

1. Introduction

Graffiti has been characterized by a foundational paradox since its inception: its vitality derives from illegality, yet the pursuit of legitimacy progressively dilutes — and ultimately dissolves — its artistic essence. Emerging in the late 1960s on the walls of New York City's Bronx, the earliest aerosol inscriptions — distorted letters and exaggerated emblems — served less an aesthetic purpose than as a direct challenge to the proprietary order of urban space. Operating under the mode of "bombing," writers commandeered façades and subway carriages to proclaim the presence of marginalized groups, effectively transforming public space into a medium for oppositional discourse.

However, when this resistant practice is co-opted — whether through commercial brand collaborations or municipal initiatives promoting sanctioned "culture walls" — the very illegality that nourished graffiti is effaced, and its critical edge blunted. As argued elsewhere "graffiti detached from the street forfeits its original ferocity and tension; its continued classification as graffiti becomes contestable." This contention hinges on graffiti's originary paradox: the demand for legitimacy initiates its self-undoing.

At a deeper level, this conflict reflects an irreconcilable tension between two distinct conceptions of publicness. Street-based publicness is grounded in freedom, anonymity, and risk, foregrounding the radical occupation of space by individual actors. Conversely, institutional publicness prioritizes order, incorporation, and consumption, seeking to contain heterodox expression within manageable parameters.

This dichotomy manifests in contrasting forms: the anonymous tags sprayed across Bronx alleyways versus the price-tagged "graffiti-scapes" within Beijing's 798 Art District; the spontaneous intervention on a Chengdu

primary-school wall versus the blank surface left after its administrative whitewashing. As graffiti migrates from street to institution, its publicness undergoes a fundamental transformation — from the "agonistic" to the "ritualised" — whereby resistance is reduced to ornament and critique to mere signifier.

This article traces the genealogical trajectory of graffiti from the street to the institution. It aims to expose the structural contradictions underlying the flux of its publicness and to examine potential avenues for its reconfiguration in the digital age.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Illegality as the Constitutive Foundation of Graffiti Publicness

Early graffiti derives its public character intrinsically from illegality. Ferrell's Crimes of Style (1995) — analysing Denver's graffiti subculture — conceptualizes it as political criminology: marginalized youth appropriate urban space to subvert the city's spatial hierarchy. Illegality operates not merely as a legal status but as the ontological precondition for graffiti's critical-public expression. The state's "war on graffiti" thus functions as systematic dispossession, reinforcing the irreproducible triad of freedom-risk-anonymity underpinning street publicness. Relinquishing illegality nullifies graffiti's capacity to signify subaltern resistance (Ferrell, 1995).

Chackal (2016) formalizes this premise into an "illegality-condition" ontology. Graffiti, he contends, must simultaneously inhabit the physical street and the social imaginary; its meaning emerges through illicit interventions in public space. This argument resonates with Danto's "end-of-art" thesis: depriving art of definitional autonomy collapses its ontological integrity. Sans illegality, graffiti degenerates into decorative motif, forfeiting artistic and critical valence (Chackal, 2016).

2.1.2 Institutional Co-Optation: The Dialectics of Alienated Publicness

Graffiti undergoes progressive institutional co-optation, inducing profound alienation of its publicness. McAuliffe (2012) examines Sydney's "Creative City" policy, demonstrating how the state engineers a moral-geographical filter via "legal" versus "criminal" graffiti zoning. Subversive symbols thereby transmute into urban-marketing instruments — a process paralleled in Beijing's 798 Art Zone, where brand-sponsored walls signal absorption into consumer-capitalist circuits (McAuliffe, 2012).

Frederick (2016) identifies a tripartite extraction via museumification (exemplified by Basquiat):

(1) Loss of temporality (erasure of weather-induced decay in climate-controlled "white cubes")

(2) Severance from community interaction

(3) Substitution of critical resonance by auction-house commodification.

Institutional embrace thus ossifies a vital social practice into a decontextualized cultural specimen (Frederick, 2016). Zukin and Braslow (2011) further expose capital-policy collusion: graffiti-celebrated districts in New York attract speculative investment, catalysing rent inflation and artist displacement. Spatial resistance mutates into an agent of gentrification, corroborating Habermas's diagnosis of public sphere "refeudalization" (Zukin & Braslow, 2011).

2.1.3 Digital Reconfiguration: Contested Terrain of Publicness

Digital technologies reconfigure graffiti publicness amid new contradictions argues that technological mediation erodes critical potency: AR graffiti depends on smart-device capital and algorithmic platforms, while NFTization entraps works in financial speculation. Digital transgression ostensibly expands frontiers yet remains a "dance in chains" — disciplining publicness via capital logics. Drawing on Sennett, He (2013) critiques the participatory illusion of digital graffiti: algorithmically governed AR interactivity masks control mechanisms, while blockchain authentication fractures collective resistance into individualism. Digital tools thus refract rather than resolve publicness dilemmas (He, 2013).

2.1.4 Localized Praxis: Sinicization of Graffiti Publicness

China's graffiti publicness metamorphosis exhibits distinct glocalized trajectories. Yu (2009) theorizes reconstitution through "aesthetic communities", citing Chengdu's "Flower Wall" episode where graffiti fostered affective bonds, activating civic spatial proprioception as counter-discourse to state urbanism. State-sponsored "culture-wall" programs demand analysis through Foucault's heterotopia framework, revealing governance-centric appropriation (Yu, 2009).

2.1.5 Theoretical Synthesis: The Perpetual Unfinishedness of Publicness

The literature coalesces around graffiti publicness as a field of paradox. Traversing illegality, institutional capture, and digital reconstitution, it faces ceaseless recomposition. Sustaining Ferrell's "criminal style" ethos —

persistent transgression against institutionalization-commodification sieges — remains imperative for graffiti's survival as an "unfinishable game" across physical-digital realms. Its flux constitutes not merely modernist self-negation but a critical interrogation of the crisis-laden modern public sphere.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study employs a tripartite theoretical apparatus to dissect graffiti's transformative dynamics:

2.2.1 Publicness Flux: Habermasian Reframing

Habermas's Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989) posits the refeudalisation thesis: late-capitalist institutions colonize the bourgeois public sphere, neutralizing its agonistic potential. Graffiti's trajectory mirrors this dialectic — the insurgent "agonistic public" of 1970s New York devolves into ritualized display space via commercial-governmental appropriation. Beijing's 798 Art Zone epitomizes this shift: spray-painted walls, materially preserved yet stripped of insurrectionary charge, now function as consumer semiotic backdrops for photographic performance.

2.2.2 Ontological Crisis: Danto's Artworld Paradox

Danto's "end-of-art" thesis (1984) contends that art forfeits ontological integrity when deprived of definitional autonomy. Graffiti faces an acute manifestation: when insurgent symbols (e.g., Basquiat's crown motif) become commodified labels, and street improvisations are institutionally domesticated (e.g., gallery white cubes), their ontological status collapses. The auction-house hammer — fetishizing graffiti aesthetics while evacuating street spirit — reduces resistance to "graffiti-style" simulacra, dramatizing art's subsumption under market logic.

2.2.3 Spatial Power Analytics: Foucauldian Heterotopia

Foucault's heterotopia framework (1986) identifies sites where counter-conduct practices are rendered governable. State-sanctioned graffiti walls exemplify such instrumentalized heterotopias: Chongqing's Huangjueping "Graffiti Street" — fabricated via state capital (¥25M) and academic supervision — transmutes private expression into public governance technology. This spatial strategy inserts wild aesthetic growth into bureaucratic "creative industry" circuits, deploying graffiti as cultural veneer for urban renewal while neutralizing its subversive potential.

3. Street Primordiality: The Rebel Gene of Publicness (1960s–1980s)

The South Bronx of the early 1970s manifested what Marshall Berman termed a "primal scene of modernity": its crumbling tenements, defunct subway lines, and skeletal viaducts formed a derelict stage for graffiti's insurgent grammar. Here, aerosol hisses drowned out political speeches, chromatic alphabets clawed across concrete, and illegality — far from mere delinquency — became the ontological bedrock of an art form. This primordial phase (1960s–1980s) represents graffiti's unmediated engagement with urban space, predating its absorption into galleries, brands, or municipal agendas. To inhabit this era is to confront the raw dialectic between spatial resistance and ephemeral publicness.

3.1 Illegality as Ontological Condition

Graffiti's emergence in the Bronx constituted a spatial reclamation praxis, transforming privatized surfaces into insurgent palimpsests through what Michel de Certeau (1984: xiv-xx) theorized as tactical appropriation of dominant structures. Crews operationalized this logic by overwriting billboards, warehouses, and subway cars — sites emblematic of capitalist spatial hegemony — asserting collective authorship via fragmented alphabets (Austin, 2001: 67-89). The ontological necessity of anonymity, arising from illegality itself, generated radical semiotic potency: figures like PHASE 2 and TAKI 183 functioned as specters whose aliases circulated as guerrilla semaphores across borough boundaries (Castleman, 1982: 33-41).

The practice's critical urgency derived from its deliberate antagonism toward three interdependent regimes of control:

Table 1.

Regime	Graffiti Subversion	Theoretical Anchoring
Municipal order	Defiance of anti-graffiti ordinances (e.g., NYC's 1972 "Quality of Life" statutes)	Rancière's (2010) policing of the sensible
Bourgeois aesthetics	Wildstyle's formal "ugliness" rupturing civic beauty norms	Bourdieu's (1984) aesthetic disposition
Capitalist spatial logic	Illicit inscriptions redistributing visibility to the dispossessed	Lefebvre's (1991: 362-372) counter-space

By circumventing institutional gatekeepers, writers materialized Lefebvre's concept of differential space — embodying a lived critique of commodified urban environments through embodied practice (Lefebvre, 1991: 416-421). As historian Joe Austin (2001: 144) demonstrates, these inscriptions constituted "proletarian broadsheets" that bypassed media oligopolies to disseminate dissent. Following the decline of Vietnam War protests, graffiti's lexicon underwent strategic mutation: subway cars blazed with socio-political imperatives like "STOP WAR" and "FREE HUEY," synthesizing stylistic innovation with explicit counter-hegemonic discourse (Chalfant & Cooper, 1984: 112-117).

Crucially, illegality transcended mere vandalism to become an epistemological framework — a modality for corporeal understanding of urban inequality through spatial transgression (Soja, 1996: 80-83). The very act of unauthorized marking constituted what Judith Butler (1997: 11-27) terms performative constitution of the political, materializing resistance where institutional channels failed.

3.2 The Ontology of Graffiti Publicness

The dialectical emergence of graffiti in the South Bronx constituted a dual mechanism for collective identity formation and agonistic civic engagement, generating an alternative public sphere characterized by conflict-driven participation (Fraser, 1990). For Black and Latino youth systematically marginalized from institutional channels of employment, education, and political representation (Bourdieu, 1984), graffiti provided access to what Philippe Bourgois (1995: 78) conceptualized as "symbolic capital within inner-city street culture." A single tag could transform anonymous adolescents into locally recognized figures, exemplified by the 1971 rivalry between TAKI 183 and JULIO 204 — later mythologized as the "Battle of the Cornbread" — demonstrating how territorial competition generated subcultural status hierarchies (Castleman, 1982).

Graffiti radically democratized urban visual consumption through forced public encounters. Commuters experienced chromatic disruptions as ten-car trains materialized in metallic hues, their surfaces oscillating between aesthetic allure and socio-political menace (Benjamin, 1936/2008). These unmediated engagements positioned passengers as involuntary participants in a politicized aesthetic phenomenon, wherein subway carriages became microcosms of urban stratification: Wall Street executives and working-class youth confronted each other within a shared sensorium of visual shock (Simmel, 1903/1997).

The expressive potency of graffiti derived fundamentally from its temporality of risk. Practitioners operated under conditions sociologist Jack Katz (1988: 52-76) termed the "seductive phenomenology of crime," where adrenergic arousal during police evasion compressed creation into frenetic 20-minute intervals. This produced what Barthes (1980: 26-27) theorized as photographic punctum — an affective immediacy intensified by physical jeopardy — negating compositional revision and rendering each mark an existential inscription. Crucially, graffiti's material ephemerality (pigment degradation, systematic buffing) inverted conventional artistic value systems: transience became ontological condition (Groys, 2008). Unlike gallery artifacts fetishized for permanence, subway pieces thrived as vanishing acts of spatial insurgency, their critical power amplified through anticipatory erasure.

Most subversively, graffiti dissolved authorial hierarchies through dialogic spatial practice. Walls transformed into contested palimpsests where tags invited overwriting or obliteration, exemplified by a 1975 exchange on a Bronx warehouse: "ACE" → "ACE SUCKS" → "STILL KING." Such interactions materialized what Habermas (1989: 136-142) idealized as "undistorted communicative action" — albeit warped through urban crisis — occurring without institutional curation or commercial mediation. This friction-laden publicness, born of conflict rather than consensus, constituted a proto-form of what Fraser (1990: 62-71) later theorized as subaltern counterpublics: semiotically charged zones where marginalized communities enacted insurgent citizenship through spatial inscription.

3.3 The Fragility and Eclipse of Primordiality

Ironically, graffiti's insurgent qualities — ephemerality, illegality, dialogic fluidity — rendered it vulnerable to co-optation. By 1982, curator Fred Brathwaite's Subway Art exhibition marked the form's entry into high culture. MoMA's 1984 acquisition of Fab 5 Freddy's aerosol works epitomized what Theodor Adorno (1991) derided as capitalism's "absorption of dissent into commodity fetishism." Municipalities weaponized this shift: "legal walls" and "graffiti prevention programs" sanitized tagging into civic decor (Iveson, 2010).

The 1985 "Clean Car Program" symbolizes this eclipse. NYC Transit spent $143 million to phase out graffiti-coated trains, replacing them with "scrubbable" surfaces. Simultaneously, corporations commodified graffiti's aesthetics: Nike's 1987 "Rebel King" campaign hired writers to airbrush "street authenticity" onto sneaker ads. This double movement — erasure and appropriation — lobotomized graffiti's critical edge, reducing it to a "rebellion lite" aesthetic.

The primordial phase's legacy lies in its unanswerable question: Can graffiti survive institutional embrace without forfeiting its insurgent soul? Later chapters trace its fracturing into gallery trophies (Basquiat), urban

renewal props (Huangjueping), and neoliberal alibis (798 Art Zone). Yet even in its twilight, the South Bronx ethos persists wherever spray cans defy privatization, however fleetingly. As writer LEE Quiñones lamented: "They stole our rebellion but missed the point — it was never about paint. It was about claiming space to scream, we exist."

4. Institutional Appropriation: The Explosion of Ontological Crisis (2020s)

The 2020s witnessed graffiti's paradoxical ascension into the sanctums of cultural legitimacy. Once vilified as vandalism, this quintessentially insurgent art form became systematically collected, exhibited, and commodified by museums, auction houses, and curatorial networks. Yet this institutional embrace constitutes not a triumph of tolerance, but the culmination of an ontological rupture. When spray paint migrates from the street wall to the white cube and capital circuits, graffiti undergoes a fatal ontological metamorphosis: its transition from event to exhibit severs its existential roots, triggering systemic collapse across three interdependent dimensions — creative intent, mode of reception, and existential form.

4.1 Spatial Dislocation: From Dialectical Surface to Neutered Artefact

The street wall's significance transcends visual aesthetics; it functions as a dialectical interface continuously reshaped by urban forces — meteorological erosion, seismic vibrations, social friction — that collectively forge its material historicity. As evidenced in early Bronx works, surface decay (peeling paint, chemical oxidation) served not as degradation but as a temporal archive of urban struggle. This aesthetics of erosion constituted the embodied signature of graffiti's political charge.

Institutional spatial displacement annihilates this ontology. Museum conservation regimes (24°C, 55% humidity, UV-filtered lighting) enforce artificial stasis while amputating the work's environmental symbiosis. Walls are surgically excised into portable aluminum panels; aerosol fumes are scrubbed by carbon filters; surfaces entombed behind glass become untouchable relics. This spatial translation enacts a dual violence:

(1) Temporal Disembodiment: Ephemerality — a core condition of street graffiti — is replaced by artificial permanence.

(2) Sensorial Deprivation: The haptic/olfactory dimensions (texture of brick, bite of spray fumes) are erased.

The Basquian trajectory epitomizes this rupture. Jean-Michel Basquiat's illicit 1980s Brooklyn interventions operated within street logic; his 1982 canvas Untitled, auctioned for $110.5 million in 2017, embodies institutional capture. Crucially, the auctioneer's hammer severed graffiti's umbilical cord to the street: the wall became artifact, the canvas commodity, and price supplanted risk as value metric. As Sennett (2018) observes, such dislocation "sterilizes urban vitality into cultural capital."

4.2 Tripartite Ontological Collapse

This spatial shift detonates graffiti's artistic ontology through crisis vectors operating recursively:

4.2.1 Creative Intent: From Self-Expression to Market Commission

Primordial graffiti (1970s-80s Bronx) emerged from existential urgency: writers risked arrest and environmental erasure to declare marginalized identities — "I am here." Illegality fuelled creative authenticity, transforming walls into "newspapers for the poor" (Castleman, 1984).

Institutional patronage inverts this logic. Corporate sponsors and museums now impose Pantone palettes, brand narratives, and quantified KPIs: Instagram check-in targets, CSR alignment metrics, visitor footfall quotas. Spontaneity yields to contractual obligation; the aerosol can become a branding instrument. As Benjamin's aura withers under mechanical reproduction (1936), graffiti's originary impulse — born of hazard and necessity — atrophies into bespoke cultural production. The artist transforms from urban insurgent to service provider.

4.2.2 Mode of Reception: From Agonistic Dialogue to Spectatorial Ritual

Street reception constituted a dialogic agon: passersby could critique, augment, or obliterate works in real-time. This participatory instability embodied Barthes' writerly text—open, mutable, and collectively authored. Museum institutionalization imposes a regime of silence. Ropes, vitrines, and docents enforce a do not touch protocol; viewers become passive contemplators divorced from response capacity. Graffiti is aestheticized into a closed text, its political potency neutralized. This inverts Barthes' "death of the author" (1967): here, the death of the respondent occurs. The work's social friction—its capacity to provoke public debate—is supplanted by hushed connoisseurship.

4.2.3 Existential Form: From Ephemeral Trace to Perpetual Commodity

Street graffiti's ontological ephemerality—its susceptibility to buffing, demolition, or elemental decay—was constitutive of meaning. Its transient existence mirrored marginalized communities' precarious social reality.

Institutional assimilation erases this vulnerability. Graffiti is transmuted into durable commodities: canvases for

auctions, aluminum panels for galleries, or NFTs for digital speculation. Baudrillard's simulacral order (1981) manifests fully: the original context becomes irrelevant; its market phantom circulates infinitely. Banksy's Love is in the Bin (2021) exemplifies this logic—the shredding stunt, framed as anti-market critique, was instantly absorbed into capital valorisation, fetching $380,000 while transforming mechanical destruction into branded spectacle. Ephemerality, once graffiti's existential anchor, is reconfigured as eternal asset.

4.3 Synthesis: Necropolis of the Street Spirit

This tripartite collapse reveals institutional appropriation's terminal consequence:

(1) Creative intent is displaced by budgetary calculus

(2) Dialogic reception yields to spectatorial discipline

(3) Ephemeral existence solidifies into asset logic

When the risk of erasure vanishes, graffiti forfeits its raison d'être. The museum-market matrix does not "elevate" graffiti; it enacts ontological euthanasia. As Foster (2015) argues, neo-liberal cultural institutions function as "taxidermists of the avant-garde" — preserving the form while extinguishing the animating spirit. The spray can's migration from subway tunnels to Christie's auction block marks not graffiti's legitimization, but the necropolis of its street ontology.

The 2020s thus crystallize a fundamental inversion: graffiti, born to interrupt urban space, now serves to decorate the corridors of cultural capital. Its institutional "success" signifies not acceptance, but the final stage of a half-century assimilation project — the neutralizing of dissent into exchange value.

5. Reconfiguring Publicness in the Digital Age: Spectral Survival or Ontological Rebirth?

5.1 The Collapse of Physical Space: The Foreclosure of the Concrete Canvas

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented intensification of urban governance strategies aimed at eradicating physical graffiti. This concerted effort manifests through a dual assault: juridical hardening and technological fortification. Legislatively, anti-graffiti statutes have evolved beyond mere prohibition into regimes of severe punitive deterrence. Singapore's Vandalism Act (1994), for instance, mandates corporal punishment—three to eight strokes of the cane—for recidivist offenders, framing graffiti as a transgression demanding physical retribution. Concurrently, surveillance technologies have achieved unprecedented sophistication.

This convergent assemblage—punitive law, algorithmic surveillance, and reactive materials—effectively declares the traditional physical public sphere closed to the graffiti writer. The tangible act of inscription is foreclosed both technologically and juridically, forcing practitioners into a strategic retreat from the concrete city. This spatial shift, however, constitutes more than a logistical displacement; it represents a profound ontological mutation for graffiti practice.

5.2 The Possibility of Virtual Publicness: Digital Frontiers and Their Contradictions

5.2.1 Augmented Reality (AR) Graffiti: Embodying the Street Spirit in the Ethereal

Augmented Reality (AR) technology offers graffiti a novel, frictionless modality—a "second skin" overlaid onto the material world. Utilizing mobile applications or AR headsets, artists anchor ephemeral digital layers—animated texts, images, or 3D models—onto any physical façade, visible only through mediated screens.

Crucially, AR graffiti retains core attributes of its street progenitor: anonymity and immediacy. Creators operate remotely; works can be globally deployed, instantaneously modified, or erased without physical trace. Enforcement authorities, deprived of a corporeal target, must navigate the opaque governance protocols of platform corporations to request takedowns. This circumvents traditional spatial property rights, effectively reconstituting graffiti as an illicit act within the digital domain. The locus of enforcement shifts from flesh to code, with risks displaced onto account suspension and IP tracking (Soares, 2017). The metaverse thus perpetuates the "asymmetrical contestation" (de Certeau, 1984) characteristic of the street, but the battlefield migrates from pigment on brick to pixels in data streams—a guerrilla war waged within the interstices of platform infrastructures.

5.2.2 NFTisation: Blockchain Authorship and the Spectre of Capital Capture

Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) present an alternative pathway, offering graffiti artists "digital signatures" (blockchain-authenticated provenance) and mechanisms for fractionalized secondary-market revenue. The 2021 transformation of Banksy's Morons—physically burned in a ritualized act, then minted as an NFT and sold for $380,000—epitomizes this paradoxical passage from material erasure to symbolic, market-mediated eternity. On-chain certification ostensibly guarantees artists' rights and confers new forms of liquidity and collectability.

However, the underlying mechanics of NFT markets expose profound contradictions. Firstly, their dependence

on volatile crypto-capital enables speculators to corner "artificially scarce" digital assets, effectively re-financializing the very ephemerality once intrinsic to graffiti's street ontology. Works originally imbued with dissent become ensnared within smart-contract trading loops, transmuted into endlessly divisible financial instruments (Guinard & Margier, 2018). Secondly, NFTization necessitates the complete erasure of situatedness. Graffiti detaches from its constitutive environment: the wall's material patina, the ambient rumble of the subway, the contingent pause of a passer-by—all embodied, place-specific memories—are compressed into a 256 × 256 pixel thumbnail circulating within a placeless digital ether (Kwon, 2007). Baudrillard's (1981) "order of simulacra" reaches its apotheosis: the original context becomes irrelevant; what circulates and accrues value is the endlessly reproducible code-phantom, severed from the social and spatial conditions of its genesis.

5.3 The Janus Face of Digital Graffiti: Coexisting Trajectories of Resistance and Capture

Digital technology has not annihilated graffiti's publicness; it has bifurcated its ontology into parallel, yet divergent, trajectories. AR layers function as spectral urban guerrillas, operating within the legal grey zones of platform governance. They preserve the crucial elements of anonymity and immediacy inherent in street practice, yet fundamentally forfeit the haptic materiality—the visceral grain of concrete, the olfactory bite of spray—that grounded graffiti's corporeal presence and resistance (Lefebvre, 1974). Conversely, NFT graffiti, spotlighted and authenticated on the blockchain, becomes curated by capital as a distinctive badge for a new techno-elite. It achieves a form of permanence and generates economic yield, but capitulates entirely to the logic of financial speculation and market validation (Frederick, 2009).

In both modalities, the "ghost" of graffiti persists, but its hauntings migrate. It no longer clings to brick facades or subway steel; it flickers across server farms, manifests within headsets, and resides in cryptocurrency wallets. Publicness is not extinguished; it undergoes reterritorialization within new, digital power grids governed by platform algorithms and financial protocols (Foucault, 1986). The proclaimed "death" of physical street graffiti, therefore, signifies not a terminus but an ellipsis—an interlude anticipating the next transgressive gesture launched from an anonymous digital node.

5.4 Spectral Persistence: The Shifting Terrain of Publicness

The digital age furnishes graffiti with novel modes of survival alongside unprecedented pitfalls. AR technology extends the kinetic spirit of the street into virtual space, enabling new forms of anonymous, immediate intervention. Simultaneously, NFT protocols forcibly recode graffiti's value system under the hegemonic logic of late capitalism, accelerating its alienation from social critique into asset class. Confronted by this intricate techno-cultural ecology, we are compelled to radically reconceptualize the very boundaries of publicness. It can no longer be understood primarily as the fixed, physical occupation of space, but must be reframed as a perpetual game of transgression—a dynamic negotiation across shifting physical, virtual, and hybrid territories, constantly probing and redefining the limits of the permissible (Fraser, 1990).

Consequently, graffiti's proclaimed "death" should be interpreted not as an endpoint, but as a critical moment of media transmutation and strategic recalibration. The foundational impulse—anonymous inscription, spatial claim, dissident expression—adapts to the constraints and affordances of new technological environments. Publicness itself, as an interminable dialectic of assertion and containment, never concludes; it merely awaits reactivation within the emergent territories defined by bits, pixels, and algorithms. The corner has changed, but the spectre of transgressive inscription endures.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of graffiti art, tracing its genealogical trajectory from marginalized street practice to institutionalized cultural phenomenon, reveals a four-phase ontological metamorphosis: from subversive rebellion to commercial commodity, from vernacular spectacle to digital artifact. This study demonstrates that each transition stage fundamentally reconstitutes graffiti's core identity beyond mere stylistic evolution, progressively hollowing out its foundational ethos of spatial resistance (Brighenti, 2010; Dickens, 2008).

Historically, graffiti's potency derived from three constitutive elements: anonymous authorship, physical engagement with urban surfaces, and defiance of legal-spatial boundaries (Castleman, 1982; Lachmann, 1988). Contemporary institutionalization processes, however, systematically neutralize these defining characteristics. Law enforcement transitions from punitive suppression to co-opted surveillance (Ferrell, 1995), anti-graffiti nanotechnology transforms walls into "immunized surfaces" (Deleuze, 1992), while blockchain authentication converts ephemeral tags into NFT commodities (Paul, 2021). Through these processes, a practice originally rooted in social critique becomes absorbed into the cultural industry's reproduction mechanisms (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944), its radical spatial praxis reduced to consumable aesthetic product.

This institutional co-option exposes modernity's central paradox: oppositional cultural forms inevitably undergo semantic dilution upon entering mainstream recognition frameworks (Marcuse, 1964). The irreversible loss lies in graffiti's ontological dependence on its unmediated "street primordiality" — the bodily risk of illegal

execution, the unpredictable material dialogue between aerosol and surface, and the political urgency of marginalized voices inscribing urban space (Cresswell, 1996). Cultural institutions may preserve stylistic motifs through conservation efforts (as seen in Berlin Wall graffiti protection programs), yet such preservation inherently sanitizes the practice's original subversive energy. As demonstrated by Chongqing's Huangjueping Graffiti Street case, state-curated "graffiti zones" transform sites of confrontation into curated heritage spectacles, where periodic retouching maintains artificial dilapidation while guided tours narrate sanitized histories of artist-government collaboration.

The digital realm introduces new dialectical possibilities. Augmented Reality (AR) overlays on municipal architecture, AI-generated tags from archival data, and metaversal graffiti bombing retain fragments of street practice's subversive spirit — anonymity, immediacy, and spatial contestation (McQuire, 2008; Manovich, 2020). However, the medium's migration from physical walls to data streams fundamentally alters graffiti's ontology: digital anonymity lacks the bodily stakes of street execution, while algorithmic surfaces resist the material contingencies crucial to traditional graffiti aesthetics (Virilio, 1997).

To confront this ontological crisis, this study proposes a dual strategic framework:

(1) Graffiti Heritage Documentation

Implement an evaluative system recognizing 20th-century graffiti interventions (1970s-1990s) as historically specific cultural sites, akin to protected industrial ruins (Edensor, 2005). Through archival preservation and spatial demarcation, such recognition would formally differentiate between historical street practice and contemporary institutional co-option, acknowledging their irreconcilable socio-political contexts.

(2) Neo-Street Praxis Development

Leverage digital technologies not as preservative tools but as tactical media to reinvent graffiti's oppositional potential (Garcia, 2021). AR graffiti layers could enable real-time anonymous interventions on augmented urban surfaces, while blockchain technology might facilitate decentralized artwork authentication without institutional gatekeeping. Crucially, this neo-street ethos should consciously avoid nostalgic replication of past practices, instead developing new resistance strategies appropriate to algorithmic urbanism's material conditions. When physical walls become impenetrable to traditional methods, data streams and augmented spaces may constitute the new guerrilla battlegrounds.

Graffiti's presumed "death" thus signifies not termination but metamorphosis — a reminder that publicness constitutes an evolving terrain of transgression (Mitchell, 2003). The practice's institutional absorption paradoxically creates space for reinvention: by formally acknowledging the historical rupture between street graffiti and its digital-institutional successors, we clear conceptual ground for emergent forms of spatial resistance. Future research should investigate how neo-street practitioners navigate the tension between digital reach and material embodiment, particularly examining whether metaversal graffiti can achieve comparable socio-political impact to its physical predecessor.

Ultimately, graffiti's trajectory encapsulates a broader cultural dynamic: the perpetual oscillation between countercultural emergence and capitalist recuperation (Frank, 1997). Its digital reincarnations continue testing this dialectic, challenging us to redefine publicness in an age when urban surfaces exist simultaneously as concrete walls and data clouds.

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