

*Those Who Trespass Against Us, and
How They are Changing the World*

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Writer's Note:

I've been fascinated with busking since I was very young, ever since I visited the Halifax Buskers Festival in 2005, and began doing it myself when I was thirteen years old. In researching this topic, I revived my interest in the idea of property ownership and social and political activism through public art. A good number of my friends are also involved in public and performance art, and their insights became part of the research process and are featured here in the form of personal interviews. I chose to interview people I know first-hand because art has more meaning to me if I know the artist and can get into his or her head—part of the reason I love the music of Chase Winn (featured in this paper) so much is because I know his story. His voice conjures up more than notes for me—it conjures up the actual person. There is more to the music than the words and chords: behind each note, each strum or pick or slap of the bass or “tsin” of the ride or ribbon of falsetto or bubble of baritone, my friend is there, hiding conspicuously in his songs. The friends I have interviewed are not professionals (unless one counts the people who tip them as sponsors, in which case they would absolutely be professionals) and are usually young enough to not have a whole lot of experience in this world; they maybe don't know who they are yet, or what their art means—to them or to the public—and these interviews are just a glimpse at their musings about what they think might be the meaning, the reason behind their art. The term “street art” is used in this paper to mean all forms of public art, including performance, music, two-dimensional, sculpture, etc.

The idea of public and private spaces is deeply ingrained in our society; when we are born, typically we are born into a family who owns a house and a piece of land, which we never question—our yard is our domain, and the sidewalk is fair game. It's obvious to us. The way we interact with space is invisibly and undeniably affected by this idea, and nowhere else is it more evident than in street art. The artist must decide on a site for his or her art, and the choices made deeply affect the message the piece sends. Each space has different qualities that the artist can utilize to further the meaning of his or her piece. Public and private spaces have for years been used as platforms for social and political activism, especially by artists. Here we will discuss how artists use public space as a platform for social and political change, how they use the distinction between public and private space to enhance or add meaning to their messages, and what the potential of a given space is and how it affects the message an art piece in that space.

Some artists practice publicly simply because of its convenience and wide audience. Street musician Chase Winn calls it “a good way to reach a lot of people” and observes that, “While not every person who sees it will be affected, definitely more will be affected than if [the art] were sitting in someone's garage or a museum”. Winn uses his music primarily as “a way to vent or to express [himself],” and secondarily as a way of making a living. When asked about his own experience in socio-political activism, he stated, “I've never really written or performed with the idea of changing things. I've used music to strike people down individually, but I haven't tried to bring across a greater

change,” mostly because “I don’t really enjoy reading folks the riot act; I’d rather have a conversation with them.” He uses his music as a way of communicating with the public on a deeper level, and the public space Winn uses is the only platform from which this type of communication is possible. Winn says that the view of street art as an invasion or seizure of space is held by people who “want their safe sanctuaries to be just that, and art can change that.” Still, he says, “It’s important that people experience something different once in a while,” and public art can provide this break from the everyday.¹ Winn’s goal of providing this spice is tangential, but present; it is not deliberate, but it is there. His message through his art’s publicness is one of presence: His art says, “I am here, I am a part of this community, and I need some help from this community, and in return I will give you my art—whether you want it or not.”

Art displayed or performed publicly can also send a message of defiance and presence: the artist is saying essentially that, because this place is public, he or she has the right to use it in any way he or she pleases; the state, though it owns the property, has no real power to dictate how the public uses the space. Sure, they can *tell* the people to stay off the grass, but ultimately it is up to the people to use the space as they see fit, as is seen in a video of street musician Shane Warman, who stands playing guitar directly under a sign which reads NO STREET ENTERTAINERS IN THIS AREA BY ORDER.² The space is still public, and Warman’s defiance of this order is his way of taking it back from those who would restrict his artistic expression. The public nature of his art, similarly to Winn’s, is a way of telling the world that he exists and has something to offer, and he will offer it wheresoever he pleases. Warman uses the idea of seizing public spaces deliberately, sending a message to the established authorities that they can’t tell the people what to do or where to do it. He exploits the power of public space to send his message.

There is power in public space, and this power lends itself well to social and political activism, which is evident in the performances of the Russian feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot. Founded in August of 2011, the group is made up of a varying membership of women aged twenty to thirty-three.³ The women don balaclava masks and acidic-neon tights and hit the streets to perform quick, guerilla-style punk rock concerts which are filmed and edited into music videos to be put on the Internet.⁴ Their lyrical themes don’t stop at feminism, however; they also fight for LGBT* rights and against Russian president Vladimir Putin—whom they regard as a dictator⁵—among other issues. The group was formed out of frustration with government policies which were discriminatory against women, such as legislation which placed restrictions on legal

¹ Winn, Chase. Personal interview. 23 April 2014.

² P., Sabrina. “Busking in Canterbury: Shane Warman - Midnight Sunrise”. 14 April 2012. Accessed 30 April 2014. Digital file.

³ Clover, Charles. “Pussy Riot dig claws into Putin”. March 16, 2012. *Financial Times* (London). Accessed 16 April 2014.

⁴ Langston, Henry. “A Russian Pussy Riot”. March 2012. *Vice*. Archived from the original on October 27, 2012. Accessed 16 April 2014.

⁵ Cadwalladr, Carole. “Pussy Riot: will Vladimir Putin regret taking on Russia’s cool women punks?”. July 29, 2012. *The Observer* (London). Accessed 16 April 2014.

abortions.⁶ The main goal of Pussy Riot is social and political change, and the band attacks it from the angle of street performance, describing their brief concerts as “pure protest . . . super heroes in balaclavas and acid-bright tights seize public spaces in Moscow,”⁷—similar to Shane Warman’s use of public space in Canterbury, though on a much larger and more politically-driven scale. Pussy Riot uses public space as a means of saying, “We’re here, we’re loud, we’re going to force you to listen to our message, and we’re willing to be arrested for our cause.” They cite punk rock bands Angelic Upstarts, Cockney Rejects, Sham 69, and The 4-Skins as their musical influences, but make one clear distinction:

What we have in common is impudence, politically loaded lyrics, the importance of feminist discourse and a non-standard female image. The *difference* is that Bikini Kill performed at specific music venues, while we hold unsanctioned concerts. On the whole, Riot Grrrl was closely linked to Western cultural institutions, whose equivalents don't exist in Russia.⁸

Their use of public space sends a message to Putin, using state-owned—and therefore Putin-owned—property to protest against the state and against Putin. They use public space for public statements, not only ignoring the government’s attempts to shut them down, but using those attempts—arrests, concert break-ups—to further prove their point: that Russia is being oppressed and needs to be freed.

The same principle of freedom through public performance is utilized in *Invisible Theatre*, which uses staged commonplace situations to instigate dialogue about important social issues in communities around the world. *Invisible Theatre* was founded in 1973 by Augusto Boal as an offshoot of Theatre of the Oppressed, which itself was founded in 1971. Originally started in Brazil, *Invisible Theatre* is now practiced all the world ‘round. Their website calls Theatre of the Oppressed “the perfect synthesis between the antithetic *Discipline* and *Freedom*.” “Discipline” to them means that they “must re-establish the right of everyone to exist in dignity”; “freedom” is the ability to invent ways to “help humanize Humanity, freely invading all fields of human activities: social, pedagogical, political, artistic” and more. They believe in peace, not passivity, and state that they are “of, about, by, and for the Oppressed.”⁹ The performances of *Invisible Theatre* are “invisible” in that they are not big, look-at-me plays—instead they are just a few people acting out a relatively everyday situation which in fact illustrates a much larger problem in the community. For example, a non-traditional “family” of actors—say, a lesbian

⁶ Flintoff, Corey. “In Russia, Punk-Rock Riot Girls Rage Against Putin”. February 8, 2012. NPR. Archived from the original on October 27, 2012. Accessed 16 April 2014.

⁷ Brooke, James. March 19, 2012. “Moscow Grrl Band sets Kremlin’s Teeth on Edge”. Voice of America. Archived from the original on October 27, 2012. Accessed 16 April 2014.

⁸ Chernov, Sergey. “Female Fury”. *The St. Petersburg Times* (1693 (4)). February 1, 2012. Archived from the original on October 27, 2012. Accessed 16 April 2014.

⁹ “Theatre of the Oppressed”. Accessed 15 April 2014
<<http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org/en/index.php?nodeID=3>>.

couple and their two kids¹⁰—could be visiting a park and be heckled by a bystander (also an actor) who perhaps says something like, “It’s just not right,” or “These kids need a father.” The audience—that is, the other people in the park—respond however they will; after a time, the actors will reveal themselves as being so and start a discussion about the issue they addressed in their performance. The public nature of the performance allows people to enter the dialogue without feeling awkward or as if they are intruding upon the piece; instead they are encouraged by the public nature of the performance to join in as part of the public and participate in the “invisible” discussion. Without the discussion and raised awareness of these issues, the community would go on living comfortably as if nothing were wrong, even though these situations are happening every day around them; *Invisible Theatre* drags them out of the closet and into the sunlight for everyone to see their grotesqueness, then hands out scrub brushes to the community members so they can help clean the issues up. *Invisible Theatre* breaks down core problems in everyday situations so that the community in which they occur can see the roots of the problems and get to them more easily; in no other place is this possible than in public.

The author John Green once posed the question, “The idea of private property—that’s weird; how does land become owned?” This question has prodded the mind of every street artist who uses trespass to send a message. Whereas public art is a study in conspicuousness, art displayed or performed on private property sends an entirely different message—trespass is a blatant “fuck you” to the owners and to the law, and it requires a sense of anonymity to preserve the practice, as opposed to the purposeful publicness of the artist performing or displaying on the street corner or in the park. Where the public performer puts his or her face at the front of the performance, the trespassing artist must keep hidden, or risk arrest. In the book *Trespass*, Carlo McCormick states that “society, as the collective condition that strives for order in a vain effort to defy the entropy of being, is a construction of boundaries.” He also observes that, “As much as it is expected of artists to follow the rules like anyone else, the license we grant creativity is ultimately about giving artists some tacit permission to constantly stretch, challenge, and, if need be, defy this unending accumulation of boundaries.”¹¹ And stretch them they do.

Street artist Banksy uses the violation of private property as a different sort of platform for social change. He cites the reason for his use of trespass as his belief that “[a]rt should have your pulse racing, your palms clammy with nerves and the excitement of creating something truly original in a dangerous environment.”¹² His work also incorporates the idea of private property and movement restriction as simply an obstacle to be overcome—for example, one of his pieces depicts two children tossing around a sign which reads NO BALL GAMES, showing innocent improvisation at its most ironic.¹³ Banksy also tackles other socio-political issues in his artwork, such as his reworking of Monet’s *Water Lilies*, in which he addresses environmental issues, adding

¹⁰ Mitchell, Tracy. “Invisible Theatre”. Accessed 1 May 2014 <<http://beautifultrouble.org/tactic/invisible-theater/>>.

¹¹ McCormick, Carlo; Schiller, Marc; Shiller, Sara. Ed. Seno, Ethel. *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2010, pg. 15.

¹² BC News. “Faces of the Week”. 15 September 2006. Accessed 24 April 2014 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/5346822.stm>.

¹³ Banksy. “No Ball Games”. Online image. Accessed 28 April 2014 <<http://cultcollectiveblog.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/banksy-no-ball-games.jpg>>.

two shopping carts and a traffic cone into the famous painting, conjuring up the cynical opposite to what McCormick calls “utopian visions grafted upon the urban dystopia of alienation and disaffection.”¹⁴ Instead of these “utopian visions” many artists depict, Banksy focuses on the “dystopia” part in order to further draw attention to the issues. His pieces are gritty but tasteful, showing social issues through a lens of frustrated optimism; this can be seen especially in his stencil work on the West Bank wall, which was erected along the Israeli-Palestinian border to stop suicide bombers from crossing over into Israel: Along the wall are strategically placed images showing the hope that is struggling through black mud to the surface, such as a little girl floating upwards on a bunch of balloons, illustrating a childish, hopeful whimsy that can carry the warring nations to peace. The potential of such a space as the West Bank separation barrier is almost boundless, and Banksy uses it as a means of giving a nation hope for a brighter future. Banksy uses stencils in particular for their “political edge. All graffiti is low-level dissent, but stencils have an extra history. They’ve been used to start revolutions and to stop wars.”¹⁵ This is because of their replicability; the repetition of the image is part of what gives the piece its power, and putting replicates of the image in specifically, carefully chosen places—along the West Bank wall, on the side of a synagogue—enhance this power exponentially. Public spaces may spread the message to more people, but private spaces tell another story—a story of public citizens using private spaces to promote public change.

Every space has potential when viewed through a creative lens, but specifics about the space affect the message of a piece which is placed or performed there. A public space holds the potential of reaching a very wide audience, but the artist must be comfortable with putting his or her face at the front of his or her art; public space begets public images begets public individuals, especially with performance pieces, wherein the artist him/herself in essence *is* the art. Public art is a way of telling the state what the people will do with a space as opposed to how the state wants the people to use the space, and this is a powerful message. In the case of Pussy Riot, it is even dangerous to the point of heightening the urgency of their message: “Down with Putin, up with equality”; we’ll do whatever it takes, and we won’t stand down—instead, we’ll stand out. The public artist challenges social boundaries and creates pockets of creativity and vitality around the communities in which they practice, but sometimes at the expense of the public’s general comfort—which, as Winn pointed out and *Invisible Theatre* addresses, can be a good thing.

Private spaces are more of a challenge to the boundaries mentioned by McCormick, the ones which comprise our fragile society and keep it from realizing the ugly truth about itself. The street artist who practices on private property breaks down these boundaries and shows people what is on the other side: For artists, beyond the boundaries there is a rush of adrenaline, as Banksy described; for the rest, it is a world of possibility, what McCormick calls a “social wilderness,”¹⁶ where there are no boundaries and society

¹⁴ McCormick, Carlo; Schiller, Marc; Shiller, Sara. Ed. Seno, Ethel. *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2010, pg. 188.

¹⁵ Ellsworth-Jones, Will. “The Story Behind Banksy”. February 2013. Accessed 24 April 2014 <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-story-behind-banksy-4310304/?no-ist>>.

¹⁶ McCormick, Carlo; Schiller, Marc; Shiller, Sara. Ed. Seno, Ethel. *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2010, pg. 188.

is truly free. Trespass is a more active form of defiance than public art; the trespassing artist actively seeks out a space which he or she should not be occupying and alters it to his or her own liking, regardless of the opinions or desires of the property's owner. While public artists become part of the scenery (though in an active way), trespassing artists aim to challenge the scenery and make it something new.

The world of street art has many parallels to everyday society and can teach us much about ourselves and our world. There is a lot to learn about human psychology and culture though what we make out of sight or deliberately in sight of others. Though street art is often more than just a marker of "I Was Here", this idea of capturing "tokens of place without which one would feel like he had never been there,"¹⁷ as McCormick says, is ancient and inherent—even Lord Byron signed his name into the Temple of Poseidon, and Arthur Rimbaud did the same upon the Temple of Luxor. Marking up a blank brick wall or performing on a street corner are ways of learning how humans are a part of the environment: We are not above or beyond the earth or environment, and there is no such thing as "zero impact"—we will always have an impact, we just need to decide whether to make it a positive one or a negative one. Analyzing street art can help with this because it teaches us about our most basic needs: the need to mark, to create, and to share our creations with the world, whether that be by performing or displaying them on the public street, or exhibiting them on the wall of the big company whose practices harm our environment. The space in which a piece is displayed or performed is integral to its message: public faces sharing their art with the community or showing the state what the real potential of a public space is, or anonymous artists whose practices push and challenge the boundaries of society in subtle and powerful ways. Either way, the message of the artist is clear. Those who are open to the public and those who trespass against us work together to change the world as we know it—hopefully for the better.

¹⁷ McCormick, Carlo; Schiller, Marc; Shiller, Sara. Ed. Seno, Ethel. *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Urban Art*. Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2010, pg. 188.

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