

David Vichnar, PhD
OPPONENT'S REPORT:

re "*Street Art in Galleries: Aura, Authenticity, and the Postmodern Condition*"
by Ewelina Chiu
(MA dissertation, 2014)

Addressing the ambiguous status of "street art" as a mode of cultural production located within the contested territory between the Museum and the erstwhile "urban underground," Ms Chiu's thesis adopts a set of critical paradigms articulated in the work of Walter Benjamin (aura), the Situationist International (unitary urbanism), and Jean Baudrillard (simulation, simulacrum and graffiti as "non-sign") in order to come to terms with the difficulties entailed within the label itself. As she states at the very outset, once "street art" becomes exhibited and sold in galleries and museums, it becomes "unclear what the label designates" (2).

Ms Chiu's thesis is broad in both its art-historical scope—covering the ground, within art history, from Duchamp via Pollock, Warhol, Basquiat, all the way to her subjects proper, Banksy and Mr Brainwash—and its theoretical engagement. Its argumentation is lucid and sticks to the point, and Ms Chiu is apt at synthesizing or drawing parallels between concepts from widely divergent theoretical discourses. Apart from the above-mentioned, there is, for example, the incisive analysis of the cyclical vs. irreversible time – and street art's "commitment," or rather "subjection" (27), to the latter, in chapter 1, or the fine discussion of Barthes vs. Bourdieu on photography (in chapter 2) as reproductive art, which then becomes transformed into the "method of allowing a piece [of street art]," notoriously ephemeral, "to live on" (49), but also the tool of its easy commodification. The reading of the thesis has been an informative exercise for the opponent who has gleaned a lot of fresh insight into such disparate topics as the New York graffiti in the 1970s, Pop art (and the transition from its "Tomato Soup" to street-art "Swag Soup" [91]), the confluence of "iconicity" vs. "anonymity" in the contemporary art world, and, of course, street art in both its historical roots and present challenges.

However, there are two major formal flaws to the execution of Ms Chiu's thesis, and one to do with the progression of her argumentation. First, the formal makeup of the thesis suffers from quite a few serious misspellings. To take but three: "complimentary" (82) and "compliment" (91) should in both cases read "complement/ary"; there is "Jean Michel-Basquiat" (4 and *passim*) or even "Jean-Michelle Basquiat" (15) running the length of Chapter 1, and the Situationist *détournement* becomes "détournment" (35-9 and *passim*) throughout. More serious than this editorial carefreeness are places in which Ms Chiu's terminology remains rather off-hand and nonchalant where precision and elaboration are required (to say that "Situationist International's theory *takes quite a bit* from Marxist thought" [7, my emphasis], or that "Tony Silver's *Style Wars* (1983) *took a look* at New York graffiti" [15, my emphasis] is not to say very much).

More importantly, there is an unnerving tendency toward repetitiousness in Ms Chiu's claims, detrimental to the effectiveness of her argument. Again, to take but two prominent examples: one is told no fewer than three times within the space of three pages that Basquiat and Haring represent two opposite types of graffiti artist: "the self-taught" vs. "the professionally trained," and the repetition of this point is almost verbatim (19-21; and 117). Similarly redundant, verbatim repetition occurs with Ms Chiu's other pairing, Banksy and Mr. Brainwash, "the anonymous" vs. "the iconic" (106-8; and 128) Or, when evoking the idea of "icons of iconicity," the cultural/economic feedback-loop of commodity-capitalist modes of

"representation," Ms Chiu makes an interesting and important point, but one that still doesn't need to be hammered home so repetitively: Warhol's images are "recognized as a *sign of iconicity*" (78); Warhol's "Pop Art iconography" is "one of *images whose coded iconic message is iconicity itself*" (80); and finally Warhol is described as having "created an iconography of Pop Art images [...], not only as iconic images of the bygone art movement, but also as *icons of iconicity itself*" (124, my emphasis). Weeding out these and other repetitions would make for a far smoother and tighter argument. This also relates to how Ms Chiu chose to conceive the Conclusion to her thesis. The aims and purposes of the "Conclusion" section should be a brief reiteration of argument—rather than the 15-page reader's digest of the entire thesis, including repeated quotations from secondary sources—as well as a discussion of results and suggestions for further research, both of which are missing from Ms Chiu's final "constellation."

Ms Chiu's picture of the discrepancy between street art's original ambition and ultimate achievement is persuasive, but done in somewhat broad brush strokes. What starts off, in Ms Chiu's account, as anti-spectacle, anti-commodity, and anti-capitalist, ends up being its very opposite. Thus, in chapter one, Ms Chiu contends that "street art is perhaps a particularly well-suited art form to consider as anti-spectacle because it continues to be marginal even as it is appropriated" (24), and, a few pages later, that "street art becomes a commodity even as it tries to exist as anti-commodity," and so "what began as anti-spectacle turns back into spectacle as street art becomes neutralized via a network of commodities and commodity fetishism" (30). In chapter two, Ms Chiu describes street art as "always already discarded art," yet in the same sentence continues to observe that it "gains the potential to be assigned monetary worth and enter, *against its will*, into the world of commodities" (67, my emphasis). This "against its will" is an interesting and recurring point – why, if everything about street art seems to point in one direction, does it keep swerving in the opposite one? Whose "will" does this "entering" oppose and whose "will" does it obey?

The capitalist "feedback loop" which constructs every type of marginality against the background of the mainstream, is chiefly identified by Ms Chiu with the Internet understood as "the constellation of Benjamin's dialectical image" (69). While the use of the Situationist *dérive* (Ch. 1), or indeed the Pop-Artistic "iconicity" (Ch. 3) as conceptual frameworks within which to situate street art in the age of digital reproduction seem apposite, Ms Chiu's constant resort to Benjamin's concepts of "aura" and "authenticity" vis-à-vis "mechanical reproduction" is not only anachronistic, but ultimately found irrelevant to both the theory and practice of street art. Especially in the light of Ms Chiu's conclusion that street art "participates in the discourse of deconstruction through its use of repetition and lack of emphasis on the importance of the original" (120-1), the question is particularly pressing: What, then, is the rationale for using or "rethinking" Benjamin's model, other than to demonstrate its inapplicability? Why not make a more systematic use of Derrida's model of e.g. complementarity (mentioned in passing in Ch. 2)?

It is the opponent's final impression that Ms Chiu's conceptual "constellation," broad, interesting and stimulating in itself, is construed at the cost of a more specific and detailed historical contextualization. Questions remain: Does street art merely replicate the web's failed promise of liberation turned institutionalization? Where do we draw the line between the original ambition and the final achievement? where did it all go wrong? or did it? what, if any, is the difference between a Basquiat or a Haring and a Banksy or a Mr Brainwash, apart from the different institutional context of their work? aren't there connections between the "Taki 183" tag, the Pop Artistic "tendency toward liking," and the generalised culture of "tagging" and "liking" on facebook? what do we make, for all its alleged subversiveness, of street art's continuous attachment to *art* – in both name and practice?

Still, despite its inadequacies in form and inconclusiveness in argument, Ms Chiu's thesis presents a well-researched, original contribution to critical discourse on the still evolving, dynamic field of street art within the so-called postmodern condition. As such, it deserves a grade between excellent and very good, depending upon the candidate's ability to address the issues raised in the two reports at her defence.

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