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## **The power of urban street art in re-naturing urban imaginations and experiences**

Claire Malaika Tunnacliffe

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# The power of urban street art in re-naturing urban imaginations and experiences

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**Abstract.** Urban street art is a powerful tool in reflecting the experience of the urban, provoking an engagement of urbanites with their environment, and in re-socialising public spaces. Encounters with urban street art within the everyday create social interstices, opening up ways of seeing and feeling the world differently; allowing for a creative feedback loop between artist, individual spectator and society. Through the lens of environmentally engaged urban street art, this working paper explores how this artistic and social movement reconnects the natural and social worlds within an increasingly urban existence. By disconnecting from the world around us, we have forgotten the natural and social entanglements that make up the fabric

of the urban context, and in doing so we continue to create irreparable damages to the environment. With environmentally engaged urban street art disrupting the mainstream experience of the urban, the spectator is provided with an alternative vision of the world at play within the everyday setting. As a result, it is proposed that at the crossroads between urban street art and everyday life, the spectator evolves from a passive to an active participant in the contemporary make up of urban cities. By awakening new understandings and raising consciousness, environmentally engaged urban street art provokes a re-engagement of urbanites with the environment, acting as a catalyst for transformative social change.



# Content

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<b>1. Introduction</b>	5
<b>2. The framework</b>	7
2.1. Environmentalism and the urbanisation of nature	7
2.2. Everyday life and street art: rewriting the urban environment	7
2.3. The emancipated spectator	8
2.4. Tightening the relational space	9
2.5. Unitary urbanism	9
2.6. Applying the theory	10
<b>3. The current role of urban street art</b>	12
3.1. Vandalism, graffiti or public art?	12
3.2. An evolving role: street art, visual culture and contemporary society	13
3.3. Quantifying and qualifying urban street art	16
<b>4. The potential role of environmentally engaged urban street art</b>	17
<b>5. Conclusion</b>	24
<b>References</b>	26

## List of images

- Image 3.1: CutUp, Barcelona, 2006
- Image 3.2: Mark Jenkins, London, 2008
- Image 3.3: Mark Jenkins, Rome, Date Unknown
- Image 3.4: Brad Downey, London, Date Unknown
- Image 3.5: JR, Kenya, 2009
- Image 3.6: JR, Kenya, 2009
- Image 4.1: Anna Garforth, London, 2008
- Image 4.2: Anna Garforth, London, 2009
- Image 4.3: Edina Tokodi, Brooklyn, 2008
- Image 4.4: Gaëlle Valledary, France, 2011
- Image 4.5: Moose, San Francisco, 2008
- Image 4.6: Alexandre Orion, São Paolo, 2007
- Image 4.7: Isaac Cordal, London, 2009
- Image 4.8: Isaac Cordal, London, 2009
- Image 4.9: Isaac Cordal, Belgium, 2012



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# 1. Introduction

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This paper presents an argument in defence of urban street art<sup>1</sup> as an artistic and social movement, exploring its power in repurposing space through experimental interventions<sup>2</sup>. For the purpose of this working paper, the definition of urban street art has been borrowed from Nicholas Riggle<sup>3</sup>, “an artwork is street art if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning” (Riggle, 2010, p.246). It involves creativity, anonymity, illegality, longevity and ephemerality, but also elements of performance, gentrification, social activism and place-making. It is a multifaceted practice of art that engages the spectator, weaving itself into the everyday. The particular focus of this paper is to explore how environmentally engaged urban street art (EEUSA) provokes a re-engagement of urbanites with their environment or, in other words, re-naturing the imagination and experience of the urban. EEUSA is defined as street art that carries either environmental messages and/or uses natural mediums to disrupt the mainstream experience of the urban. It is imperative to note that while it is recognised that urban street art is a global phenomenon, this paper primarily speaks from the narrative of the scenes in both Europe and the United States. The ‘spectator’ within this paper is defined as the individual man or woman, moving within the everyday public spaces and structures governing public life. Though sometimes interchangeably used with ‘viewer’, the use of ‘spectator’ is borrowed from Jacques Rancière’s argument of emancipating the spectator from the spectacle<sup>4</sup>.

This subculture is as rich in the variety of pieces created as in different artists, “indeed there are as many different motivations, styles and approaches within this artistic arena as there are practitioners themselves” (Schacter, 2013, p.9). Today, urban street art is a multidimensional hybrid of street art, graffiti and fine art, adapting methods of graffiti, as well as the street in which it is exposed, framed within conceptual ideas. Sculpture, yarn-bombing, stickers, mosaic tiling, chalk, wheat-pasting, wood-blocking, stencils as well as the ever present spray can, are some of the wide ranging mediums used to leave messages across some of the world’s most vibrant cities. While this paper does not have the scope to delve into a historical account of urban street art, it is not possible to address it without acknowledging graffiti. The emergence of urban street art as a cultural practice has its origins in graffiti from the late 1960s in New York, developing throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s as a form of ‘tagging’<sup>5</sup> (Riggle, 2010, p.251). However, while they share similar elements, there are differences in ideology and form (Armstrong, 2005, p.2). Graffiti is identified as an aesthetic occupation of spaces, whereas urban street art repurposes them (Ibid). As subcultures challenging the

dominant visual culture (an unending stream of advertising, commodity, industrialisation, consumption and alienation) both graffiti and street art provide alternatives to this vision. However, they occupy a confusing paradigm, lacking any middle ground, between reverence or persecution, street artists themselves “arrested, fined, subjected to community based orders, blamed for encouraging social decline, and defined variously as thrill seekers, rebellious youth, or dissatisfied trouble makers” (Young, 2012, p.2). In almost a schizophrenic frenzy, pieces are either, “immediately destroyed or reverently protected, practitioners are either fined and imprisoned or idolized and adored” (Schacter, 2013, p.10). Many artists, such as Banksy or OBEY (Shepherd Fairey), originating from the street scene, have made the transition into the more formal institutionalised art world of galleries and exhibitions. Whether urban street art is condemned or idolised, it has undeniably opened new ways of visioning and experiencing the urban fabric of everyday life. The visual encounter is changing, considering the multidisciplinary nature of urban street art, and the economic, political, and social climates, of the urban landscape of the cities within which they are placed. By adopting varied mediums and techniques, it manipulates the urban space, awakening unconscious repetition. Through this awakening process, if for a brief ephemeral moment, the spectator becomes an active participant, “its relationship to the public via interactivity and the questioning of the spectator remains an essential springboard for the creation of urban street art” (Floch, 2007, p.iii).

Since the 1960s, environmental issues have been increasingly exposed, resulting in an urgency to change the level of human impact on the natural environment. However, it could be argued that this urgency has not been communicated successfully enough to provoke the drastic change needed. The resistance to cultural change is difficult to understand when negative human impacts affect the natural environment, in turn threatening it with an uncertain physical, social and economic future. There is a value-action gap between people’s attitudes and behaviours. Environmental movements have been credited in changing people’s attitudes over concern for environmental issues, but have failed to alter people’s behaviours in terms of more permanent lifestyle modifications, “despite growing numbers of members in environmental organisations, and despite the considerable fundraising successes of many of these organisations, the natural environment has sustained and continues to sustain, significant damage” (Burns et al, 2001, p.26). For the purpose of this paper, transformative social change is defined as the raising of social consciousness and awareness through environmentally based urban street

art on issues encompassed in the field of environmentalism. As a result, I depart from the assumption that people will not only be more aware of their attitudes, but also change their current unsustainable lifestyle patterns on an everyday basis.

It is both difficult and naïve to consider environmental issues in isolation to social, political or even economic layers, and it is even more so to consider the urban context completely separate from the rural. Since 2008, the majority of the world's population live in urban cities (UNFPA, 2007); resources to run these are produced in the rural and redistributed within the urban, at both a local and global scale. Life can change irrevocably amid these complexities, and to observe only a segment of these linkages is to ignore their evolving role. As the world continues to urbanise, cities become more complex. Urban street art plays a vital role in exploring the cultural, societal and behavioural shifts, deconstructing and reconstructing the relationships, power dynamics and social make up of urban society. As it gains more recognition, both locally and globally, the connections between the social, political, economic, environmental, culture and art are revealed. To view contemporary urban cities as homogenous is to ignore these human and nonhuman connections. An essential aspect of urban street art is that it is not selective, exclusive or discriminatory. It is for the everyday man or woman, a social interstice situating itself firmly within the socio-natural entanglement of daily routine. It is not necessarily new information, but new ways of revealing it. In this way, urban street art becomes a feedback loop into mainstream culture, closing the connections between artist and viewer, between producer and consumer, and between the individual and society. Through the appropriation and re-appropriation of dominant images, products, messages, spaces, economy and hierarchical distribution of space experienced in urban environments, urban street art transcends the conventional, controlled use of space.

In Chapter Two, a thorough theoretical analysis creates the backdrop for the understanding of the everyday life and the role of art in reawakening awareness. What is

perceived as art is defined by individual opinion; its message is interpreted differently depending on both the artist and the spectator – based on who they are, their life experiences, and so on. Due to the fluidity of interpretation, it is important that this working paper is framed within an in-depth cross disciplinary analysis, encompassing; environmentalism, urbanisation & spatial distribution, the philosophy of praxis & everyday life, the role of the spectator as a result of the encounter, as well as theories on art. Chapter Three will observe the *actual* role of urban street art in urban societies. In order to do so, this paper will argue against the idea that this social movement leads to increased dereliction and disorder, but acts as a catalyst for transformative social change. Serving as a social interstice within the everyday, there is a new awareness of peoples' attitudes and behaviours in their urban environment, bringing the unconscious to the conscious. Chapter Four will address the *potential* role of EEUSA. Through examples, this paper will recognise how changing the points of encounter with environmental issues can potentially change current social norms, cultures and ideologies. This potential will be explored by building on street art as a tool for urban discovery, challenging the way cities are shaped, experienced and lived. This paper is a compilation of secondary information, including; theoretical and street art books, papers, websites, as well as documentary short-films. One of the difficulties encountered was to qualify and quantify the impact of urban street art on the everyday life at both the individual and collective level. For this reason, it primarily observes these impacts theoretically. This paper is an 'art ethnography', the artist exploring and documenting their interpretation of contemporary culture, politics and society; Through the analysis of street art and EEUSA, Chapter Three and Four expand on the role of the artist as an ethnographer, applying theories to street art. In Chapter Four, the impact of art on cultures of sustainability is observed to elaborate on the environmental dimension. While some data exists on the qualitative impact of urban street art, even less exists for EEUSA, with further research needed to enrich the dialogue between politics, environment, culture and art.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

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1. Street art, as well as graffiti, also appear in non-urban areas. This paper is simply concerned with the urban phenomenon as it argues that street art is a tool that can awaken muted urban experiences.

2. For ease of explanation, urban street art within this proposal encompasses graffiti and street art, as well as the various artistic mediums these may come under.

3. Nicholas Riggle is a Lecturer of Philosophy at the New York University. His paper "Street Art: The Transfigurations of Commonplaces" is used within this paper to argue for the need to bring art out of the art world and into the everyday life.

4. This argument is further explored within Chapter Two, Sub-section 2.3 The Emancipated Spectator.

5. The practice of writing one's pseudonym.

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## 2. The framework

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EEUSA is about reconstructing the existing world. It acts as an urban intervention seeking to challenge the ways in which cities are experienced, shaped and lived. This chapter will take a theoretical approach to dismantling and rebuilding the individual and collective relationships with society through EEUSA.

### 2.1 Environmentalism and the urbanisation of nature

The world is going through an urbanisation overhaul. Between 2009 and 2050, the world population is expected to go from 6.8 to 9.1 billion, the majority of growth taking place in the Global South (Cohen et al, 2010, p.468). With an increasingly urban population, as a result of decreasing mortality rates and a rural-to-urban migration, people are becoming disconnected both literally and culturally from nature. While the urban-rural linkages become increasingly obscured, vital bonds of food, water and energy remain. The increasing demand for food will 'necessitate' the domestication of nature. What is left will be due to its difficult exploitation and for conservation or leisure uses; "96% of the Earth's surface not in cities will increasingly be shaped by the wants of urban dwellers, many of whom may know little about it" (McDonald, 2010). But as the world continues to rapidly urbanise, what would happen once it reaches its carrying capacity? It is important to remember that nature and society do not exist in isolation from one another. Everyday life in the urban setting is made up of social and natural entanglements. To ignore their relation to one another is to ignore the very fabric of today's urban society, maintaining the invisible barriers between the two. Urban political ecology, the study of human and nonhuman interaction, serves to create an understanding of how urban environments are produced and socially constructed, acting as an entry point for investigating the urban metabolism (Zimmer, 2010, p.343). By revealing these dynamics, a more profound understanding of our environment emerges.

For the purpose of this working paper, I have defined EEUSA as urban street art that carries either environmental messages and/or uses natural mediums, which jolt the routine of everyday life off its predictable path into a new awareness of the urban landscape. Karl Marx argued that to ignore the mutual co-evolution of nature and society was to neglect a key element of both analysis and critique in our modern urban societies (Loftus, 2012, p.xii).

Therefore, not only does this paper argue for the act of environmentalism to take place in the everyday, but also to acknowledge the socio-natural dimensions of society. We need to rethink our understanding of the fabric of everyday life in order to capture the interaction between the natural and the social, revealing the relationships between, "Where we live, how we live, what we consider natural, and decisions which have been and are being made (or not being made) by people operating in government and the corporate state" (Wander, 2002, p.ix). We need to disentangle the individual from mass consumerism. Henri Lefebvre envisaged a radical reorganisation of the everyday through the encouragement of creative impulse, "a critique of everyday life encompasses a critique of art by the everyday and a critique of the everyday by art. It encompasses a critique of the political realms by everyday social practice and vice versa" (Lefebvre, 2014, p.313). Alex Loftus saw that if a piece of art reached universal appeal (which is often not the case), it is due to, "the way in which it captures what appears latent and unnoticed in the world" (Loftus, 2012, p.xi). Art and its practice can be extended to the socio-natural complexities of the urban setting, seeing through the routine of everyday life regulated by consumerism.

### 2.2 Everyday life and street art: rewriting the urban environment

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), Michel de Certeau describes how citizens place themselves within the power structures that establish the spatial organisation of cities. Our relation to the society we live in is shaped by decisions and actions that we do not necessarily participate in and possibly are not even aware of. De Certeau argued that by breaking away from the preconceived notion that those dominated by power are passive consumers, daily life was something in fact made, through a creative production. This can arise from 're-employments' the constant appropriation and re-appropriation of products, messages, spaces and territories, most typically of others (de Certeau, 1988, p.xi). He compared this activity to the intellectual bricolage defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1962), Lévi-Strauss stated that the bricoleur must make do with materials at hand, choosing from a finite set of tools and materials, constructing in the physical and literal sense with materials at hand works which can be tactically employed in situations, where there are limited resources and a limited room for manoeuvre (Ahearne, 1995, p.173). De Certeau

saw the practice of reading as consciously or unconsciously combining fragments and creating a personal interpretation from, “the indefinite plurality of meanings” (Ibid, p.172). This idea of an unconscious, repetitive routine of the everyday can also be found within Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947), “Everyday life is a crust of earth over the tunnels and caves of the unconscious” (Wander, 2002, p.vii). Lefebvre sees ‘moments’, defined as “the attempt to achieve the total realisation of a possibility” (Lefebvre, 2014, p.642), as opportunities for triggering new understandings and awareness; “among moments, we may include love, play, rest, knowledge, etc. We cannot draw up a complete list of them, because there is nothing to prevent the invention of new moments. How and why should we classify any particular activity or ‘state’ as a moment? What should our indexes and criteria be? a) *The moment is constituted by a choice which singles it out and separates it from a muddle or a confusion, i.e., from an initial ambiguity.* Natural and spontaneous (animal or human) life offers nothing but ambiguity. The same is true for the amorphous muddle we know as the everyday in all its triviality, where analysis discerns the detritus and the seeds of possibility. Moments are there in embryonic form, but it is difficult to make them out with any clarity” (Ibid, p.638). Within the urbanised society, Lefebvre recognised these as moments emerging within the public spaces, denoting, “Society has been completely urbanised...the street is a place to play and learn. The street is disorder... This disorder is alive. It informs. It surprises... The urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things. A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become ‘savage’ and, by escaping the rules and institutions, inscribe itself on the walls” (Irvine, 2011, p.9).

In Lawrence Lessig book *Remix* (2008), the author promotes the concept of a ‘remix culture’. Primarily concerned with music or movies, it refers to and observes how people absorb cultural products into their lives; combining or editing existing materials to produce something new; it is up to personal interpretation and translation, appropriating and re-appropriating, “the dominant image economy and hierarchical distribution of space experienced in metropolitan environments” (Ibid, p.18). The public is free to add, change, and interact with their culture; it is flat and shared from person to person (Lessig, 2008, p.28). Similarly, art does not take place in a vacuum; it requires reflection, consciously or unconsciously, of both the artist’s and viewer’s past, present and future experiences and hopes. Lessig outlines two cultures; a Read Only Culture and the Read/Write Culture. In a Read Only Culture, consumption is more or less passive. The information or product is provided by a small ‘professional’ source, promoting a Read Only business model of production and distribution, limiting the role of the individual to consumer or audience. The public absorbs but does not interact with this culture, and instead lives “a culture experienced through the act of consumption” (Ibid, p.36).

However, a Read Only Culture is not enough. Read/Write Culture has a reciprocal relationship between the producer and the consumer, nurturing individual creativity to produce and influence their culture, continually remixing and producing new material, and in this way the culture becomes richer and more inclusive. The fear is that the Read/Write Culture could disappear, displaced by an increasingly Read Only one, one “more comfortable with simple consumption” (Ibid, p.28).

### 2.3 The emancipated spectator

As Lessig argued the disconnection between producer and consumer, Jacques Rancière makes a similar argument between art and spectator. In *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011), Rancière identified the need to reconstruct the, “network of presuppositions that place the question of the spectator at the heart of the relations between politics and art” in order to bring about a meaningful relationship (Rancière, 2011, p.2). While he predominantly discussed this emancipation in relation to theatre<sup>1</sup> some of his ideas can be applied to EEUSA. Emancipation is, “the blurring of boundaries between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body” (Ibid, p.19). Rancière coined the ‘Paradox of the Spectator’, as he saw spectators as active interpreters, developing their own translation, in order to appropriate it (Ibid, p.22). He identified theatre as an assembly in which ordinary people become aware of their situation and discuss their interests; arguing that there is no theatre without the spectator. Similarly, there is no art without the spectator; EEUSA acts as the catalyst for revealing current realities in everyday life. In doing so, the public is drawn out of passiveness and transformed into active participants in order to, “Shift the focus away from those people who are easily perceived as creators so as to give some space, some room, to those people who absorb cultural products...And to think a little bit about what happens once [it] has been distributed: how it may get absorbed into the lives, into the very being, of people” (Irvine, 2011, p.6). Viewing is an action that confirms or transforms our position, and emancipation begins when the barrier between spectator and actor is challenged, “when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection” (Rancière, 2011, p.13). Therefore, a spectator may also take on the role of actor, interpreting what is visible with regard to other elements; seeing, feeling and understanding things as much as the artist. Thus, the passive spectator is not in a perpetual passive condition. In Rancière’s view, like Lessig’s remix culture, participation occurs when the spectator interprets the visual, “Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the

time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed" (Ibid, p.17). If we look at the fabric of everyday life in modern society, there are starting points everywhere. These are doors to new understanding and learning, creating a dual relationship; every spectator is already an actor and every actor is a spectator in their everyday life. This realisation allows for the movement away from a 'spectacle of boredom', "one which has produced a generation incapable of grasping the idea that there might be life outside of it" (Potter, 2008, p.51)

## 2.4 Tightening the relational space

There is therefore an alienating experience of urbanisation, one that could be challenged by exploring and exposing the links of society, culture, and environment through EEUSA. The activity and product of art can create and open up lines of communication, connections that are otherwise, "levels of reality kept apart from one another" (Bourriaud, 2002, p.8). In Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002) he views society as reduced to the role of mass consumer, where human relations are no longer directly experienced but lived through a blurred generalisation. Similarly for de Certeau, the term consumer reduced the complexities of everyday life into uselessness, arguing that in reality they are users and re-producers, "everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others" (de Certeau, 1988, p.xii). As a result, "The relationship between [society and mass consumer] has to take on extreme and clandestine forms, if it is to dodge the empire of predictability" (Bourriaud, 2002, p.9). EEUSA, as an artistic activity, allows for the clearing of this generalisation, through social experimentation, enabling a state of encounter within the everyday life. We can refer to this as a social interstice, an interval of time and space, where new lines of communication can be made. Bourriaud saw art as being relational, to varying degrees, a foundation for dialogue, particularly suitable, "when it comes to expressing this hands-on civilisation, because it tightens the space for relations" (Ibid, p.15).

Bourriaud, like Rancière, identified that art allows the viewer to perceive, comment and take away from the experience. While not confined to the private space, EEUSA can have a similar effect, "Street artists are distinguished by a reactive stance vis-à-vis their spatial, political and social environment. Their great attention to traditions and to certain types of popular knowledge, the bridges they build between various disciplines, [broaden] the access of populations to culture" (Floch, 2007, p.iv). Today's street artists attain global notoriety, appropriating and remixing imagery, politics and ideas in digital form over the Internet, "The interdependence of our creativity has been obscured by powerful cultural ideas but technology is now exposing this connectedness" (Ferguson, 2011). EEUSA is unique as it combines the private, public and digital realm, increas-

ing its demographic impact. Within a Read/Write Culture, EEUSA lives at an intersection between the producer and the public, interacting with the surroundings and the environment. Many urban street artists are nomadic, doing work in multiple cities and documenting them online. They re-imagine the global city, using its surface to mark and inscribe visual interpretations that function both locally and globally. Through the appropriation of the public visual space and the use of the Internet, reading and rewriting the city has resulted in this inter-mural global phenomenon.

## 2.5 Unitary urbanism

Guy Debord was a founding member of Situationist International (1957-1972), an international group of revolutionaries that advocated experiencing an alternative everyday life to the one promoted by capitalism. Rooted in Marxism and 20th Century European artistic avant-gardism, Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) argued that the spectacle is a fake reality that masks capitalist degradation of human life, and that the modern city is designed to channel people into a dual capitalist trajectory: work and consumption. However, Debord saw contemporary cities as centres for possibility. Seeking to transform everyday life, the Situationists explored the possibility for new meaning; how these lines of communication could be opened up, all the while understanding that these were, "channelled, circumscribed, or even denied by powerful social and political forces whose dominance was dependent upon such suppression" (Pinder, 2004, p.109). Experimenting with situations, the idea was to construct environments favourable towards the fulfilment of desires. Using methods adopted from the arts, a series of experimental fields of study were developed, including psychogeography and unitary urbanism. Psychogeography is a diverse and creative way of taking the everyday pedestrian off their predictable routes, and as a result, jolt them into a new, more profound, awareness of their urban landscape. Unitary urbanism became a central part of the Situationists efforts to transform public space. Debord defined it as, "the use of the ensemble of arts and techniques as means contributing to an integral composition of milieu" (Ibid, p.115). This meant revealing the complex process of constructing urban spaces and architecture, rather than the end result. Debord referred to this as the 'architectural complex', if we focus on this as "the basic unit of construction through diverse means and events – among them sound, art, cinema, poetry – [this] could be brought together and used to condition ambiances and produce effects at the level of the situation" (Ibid). Therefore, architecture becomes not about forms but situations, visualising urban space a key part of unitary urbanism, taking its cues from the possibilities in cities and everyday life that are yet unrealised, "wanting it to function as a hypothesis for using the means available to humanity today to freely construct its life, beginning with the urban environment" (Ibid, p.116).

## 2.6 Applying the theory

For an irrevocable change in everyday life, there is a need to critique the practices undertaken in making the world. This entails a realisation and, in part, a revolution, by the everyday man or woman. Marx stated that, “the greatest world-changing ideas emerged from the acts of everyday people, whose practical acts make the world” (Loftus, 2012, p.xii). This paper argues that one such act could be urban street art. Furthermore, it argues that EEUSA has the potential to change current lifestyles so that they are more conscious, aware and sustainable of our environmental damages. By looking at such modes of art, we can see how deep they extend into the fabric of the modern city, and their potential for widening discussion and transformation. It is necessary to frame what is meant by urban street art and everyday life within this working paper. Urban street art has flourished into both a viral form of online art as well as a physical movement of marking urban space on a global scale. It has no single definition; it is an amorphous art form found in and inspired by the urban environment, the city becoming the canvas. With anti-capitalist and rebellious undertones, it is a form of art best understood in situ. Urban street art becomes a tool for communicating nonconformist views, asking difficult questions and expressing political, social and environmental concerns. The everyday is a consequence of social and natural entanglements, referring to routine and habit. It is made up of daily reoccurrences, “gestures of labour and leisure, mechanical movements both human and properly mechanic, hours, days, weeks, months, years, linear and cyclical repetitions, natural and rational time, etc” (Lefebvre, 2002, p.18). The period between production and disappearance marks the longevity of a piece of urban street art. It is this moment that acts as a social interstice, moments in which the artist’s function is to evoke a reaction, where its pieces are “left to an audience to be liked or loved, hated or loathed, judged or simply ignored (Mathieson, 2011, p.7). Their audience, everyday passersby in the street, become spectators. Lefebvre and de Certeau are two pillars of this framework, allowing for the exploration of how individuals place themselves within the power structures that establish the spatial organisation of cities. Looking at the works of The Situationists, Debord, Bourriaud and Rancière, an argument for the role of the spectator as an active participant in the urban culture is introduced. It is important to define the ‘street’ as public areas found within our urban landscape, both active (spaces used by the public) and inactive (abandoned corners of the city), “where the street is taken in a very broad sense to denote, roughly, any urban public space” (Riggle, 2010, p.244).

This working paper is not taking an antagonistic stance towards urban cities; rather the theoretical framework seeks to explore the possibilities for emancipation from the mainstream within everyday life, and in turn applying it to the practical, contemporary encounters of urban street art with

individuals. Through the dualistic role of the individual and the artist within society, certain relationships within the existing world are revealed, depicting concealed and passive facets to everyday life. In an era of increasing urban spatial growth, it is worth raising critical approaches to cities and everyday life, particularly in the process of development and urbanisation. Urban street art opens an artistic interstice within the everyday, and it is through this interstice that we can begin to see an alternative way of living. While Lefebvre was interested in the representation of space in relationship to knowledge and power structures, de Certeau focuses on the practices within that structure. Both, saw creative retorts as a means of counteracting dominant ways of life, with de Certeau championing the need to appropriate and re-appropriate dominant products, messages, spaces and territories. In Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life*, he envisaged a radical reorganisation of the everyday through the encouragement of creative impulse, and this particularly holds true in today’s alienating experience of urbanisation. This working paper is an exploration in how to close the relational gaps between individuals and between individuals and society. Throughout the process of alienation from society and others, it is important to remember the make up of public spaces. Lefebvre said, “...What you say about the diversity of everyday life is less and less true. Technology or industrial civilisation tends to narrow the gaps between lifestyles [...] in the world as a whole” (Lefebvre, 2014, p.313). What does this say about how we relate to others in public spaces? Building on Debord’s argument that the ‘spectacle’ is a fake reality channelling people into a one-way conversation, between work and consumption. Modern modes of production are accumulations of spectacles, “all that was once directly lived has become mere representation” (Debord, 1992, p.12); life, as we know it, is just for appearance. Debord saw contemporary cities as sites for new possibilities, but the spectacle cannot be so easily split from social activity, in turn erupting from one another and reinforcing the sense of alienation, “the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity” (Ibid, p.14). This separateness upholds the spectacle as both representational and superior, “spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very centre that maintains their isolation from one another” (Ibid, p.22). In seeking to transform everyday life, perhaps the entry point is to attempt to alter this real activity, for it to then be ingested into the spectacle, or vice versa. However, the spectacle remains out of reach and beyond dispute, acting as both the means and the ends (Ibid, p.15). This is due to the domination of economy on society, transforming everyday life from being into having into appearing. The world is no longer directly lived but appears through a plethora of spectacles and images. The lines of communication between a lived reality and the spectacle need to move away from, firstly, a one-way communication and, secondly, the passive acceptance of an alienating everyday reality, recognising that commodities lie, “at the core of this pseudo-response, to a communication to which no response is possible” (Ibid, p.153).

As images replace reality itself, and necessitate both the passivity and isolation of the individual in society, banalisation has installed itself, “we are bored in the city, we really have to strain to still discover mysteries on the sidewalk billboards, the latest state of humour and poetry” (Knabb, 2006, p.1). However, Debord envisioned alternative urban visions, the Situationists explored these possibilities for emancipation, “we don’t intend to prolong the mechanistic civilisations and frigid architecture that ultimately lead to boring leisure. We propose to invent new, changeable decors” (Ibid, p.2). The construction of situations was linked to the fundamental desire for total creation and the need to play, with architecture, time and space (Ibid, p.4). Art, in whatever guise it takes, allows for sociability, “art is the place that produces a specific sociability” (Bourriaud, 2002, p.16); fostering an encounter that allows the spectator to perceive, go through an internal reaction and allow for response. Urban street art has a similar response, “street artists are distinguished by a reactive stance vis-à-vis their spatial, political and social environment. Their great attention to traditions and to certain types of popular knowledge, the bridges they build between various disciplines, [broaden] the access of populations to culture” (Floch, 2007, p.iv). In the context of the Situationist arguments, the creativity at play with urban street art is one that reveals the complex process of constructing urban spaces and architecture. Much like unitary urbanism, it visualises urban space, taking its cues from the possibility in cities and everyday life. Urban street art can shake the everyday from its reverie and ask critical questions on the alienated, separateness of the spectacle and real activity. The two alienating experiences of real activity and the spectacle exist in isolation but also erupt from each other. Urban street art readdresses this imbalance, through the creation of social interstices. In questioning the role of the spectator within these interstices, urban street art opens up a dialogue between real activity and the spectacle, taking place within the street, making its accessibility both immediate and indiscriminate. Street art does not exist in a designated artscape, instead it is art outside of the art world, of museums and galleries, and instead in the everyday. It is ephemeral, free to experience, at the same time overseen by no one and everyone (Riggle, 2010, p.249). Within the street, artists must make pieces call for attention by entering streams of consciousness, “one is jolted out of whatever hazy cloud of practical thought one was in; one is forced to consider one’s purely practical and rather indifferent relationship to

the street, and a curiosity to explore the work develops” (Ibid). Therefore, who is the spectator of street art? The simple answer is; everyone. This may seem fairly obvious, that everyone who uses the street is a spectator of street art, however if we continue to build on Debord’s argument; the spectator is simply part of the production of the spectacle, and therefore this role becomes rather redundant. What must be brought into question is the role of the spectator as an emancipated active participant. In this way, borrowing from Rancière, a meaningful relationship can be established, one that places, “the question of the Spectator at the heart of the discussion of the relations between art and politics” (Rancière, 2011, p.1). While Debord defined the spectacle as alienating, Bourriaud saw the arts as the tool to create and reignite relational spaces, “art has always been relational in varying degrees, i.e. a factor of sociability and a founding principle of dialogue” (Bourriaud, 2002, p.15). In a society of spectacle, separateness keeps these lines of communication alienated from one another, “the present day social contexts restricts the possibilities of inter-human relations all the more because it creates spaces to this end” (Ibid, p.16). As a result, the spectacle, the social mechanisms of society, reduces the relational space for connection. Bourriaud proposes relational art, as art that uses human interaction and social context as inspiration. In this, the art is relational to the everyday context, tightening the relational space. In contrast to Bourriaud’s belief that art was a space in which, “I see and perceive, I comment and evolve in a unique space and time” (Ibid), Rancière notes that critiques of being a spectator reveal two faults; viewing can be both ignorant and inactive, separated from the capacity to know and the power to act (Rancière, 2011, p.2), “the malady of the spectating man can be summed in a brief formula: the more he contemplates the less he lives” (Ibid, p.6). He saw society shaped in the image of theatre, where the spectator is a passive voyeur as opposed to an active participant. He proposes that in order to change this, the viewer must be either able to empathise or be made to use his own sense of reasoning. The role of the artist is to draw the spectator out of passivity and transform them into active participants, in doing so, shifting “the focus away from those people who are easily perceived as creators so as to give some space, some room, to those people who absorb cultural products...And to think a little about what happens once [it] has been distributed: how it may get absorbed into the lives, into the very being, of people” (Irvine, 2011, p.6).

## NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

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1. Drama, dance, performance art, mime, etc.

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## 3. The current role of urban street art

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### 3.1 Vandalism, graffiti or public art?

What is the particularity of urban street art? It is visual art, imagined, most of the time produced, and exposed in one public space: the street. It carries rebellious, anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist messages typically unauthorised or supported by local governments. These interventions are not for profit, differentiating themselves from corporate art, vandalism and territorialism. It includes not only more traditional notions of graffiti, but many different forms of media and techniques; sculpture, yarn bombing<sup>1</sup>, stickers, mosaic tiling, wheat pasting<sup>2</sup> posters, wood blocking<sup>3</sup>, video projection, flash mobbing<sup>4</sup>, stencils, guerrilla art, street installations<sup>5</sup>, and art intervention<sup>6</sup>; “the work displays a spectrum of uncensored talent that is immediately put in front of an audience, ready to be liked, loved, hated, judged or simply ignored” (Mathieson et al, 2011, p.7).

Historically, war propaganda from the First and Second World Wars, are examples of a mode of communication aimed at influencing the attitude of a community towards a cause or position, often used to manipulate human emotions by displaying selective information (Stokoe, 2010). In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a renewed call for freedom of expression in public space, stemming from art and political contestation movements in Europe, “At the time, Europe was undergoing a large number of historic configurations: a return to democracy, the development of artistic practices outside “official art”, a reaction to the industrialisation of the art market and so on” (Floch, 2007, p.iii). In the 1980s and 1990s, popularity for such movements grew, both in numbers of festivals, shows, and companies, as well as public attendance (Ibid). In the 21st Century, urban street art exploded. Rebelling against consumerism, it proved an alternative, “street art became a counterbalance to commercial advertising and its assault on consumers” (Gavin, 2007, p.6). However, as the floodgates of this visual art opened, its original intention seemed to get lost. This was exacerbated by the proliferation of images through the Internet, and adopted by branding, “we used to call ourselves underground, but now it seems like everybody is down here” (Potter, 2008, p.167). No longer pushing the boundaries of the urban experience, many artists began to look in new directions.

The visual encounter is therefore changing, considering the multidisciplinary nature of urban street art and the economic, political and cultural contexts of these practices. By

adopting new methods and techniques, street art manipulates urban space. Urban street art does not necessarily mean defacing or destruction; instead something can be added or altered to jolt the everyday life. For instance, London’s CutUp<sup>7</sup> were an anonymous collective of art activists who commented on the urban environment by using existing materials on the street, a technique developed by the Situationist’s known as *détournement*. They shared the desire to reorder urban landscapes through intervention and play; by ripping down billboard or advertisements, cutting them into mosaic-squares, and re-ordering them before re-pasting them, CutUp “want to draw attention to the psycho-logical environment that we all inhabit and how the controlled visual elements of the city can directly affect how people feel and think” (Gavin, 2007, p.12).

In manipulating these images to represent youths and marginalised characters in society, they comment on their role in space, “We felt that they symbolised the isolation and disaffection of society “they observe, quoting Debord, “His actions are no longer his own but rather someone that represents them to him” (Ibid, p.12). And so, the definition of vandalism blurs.

Many of those who critique the urban street art and graffiti movements often refer to the broken window theory<sup>8</sup>. It argues that if in one instance there is a broken window it increases the likelihood of more broken windows and graffiti appearing. Therefore, the broken window theory acts as a signalling effect for urban disorder. While the theory illustrated graffiti as one means of disorder, rather than urban street art per say, it does exemplify the need to control and keep society tidy in a bid to maintain order. Arguably, there are varying definitions of order itself, but in this case it illustrates a form of tyranny. Whether the line blurs between vandalism, territorialism or art, urban street art itself remains considered a crime in the UK under the Criminal Damage Act 1971, and those intent or in the act of graffiti will be prosecuted, receiving a fine and risking imprisonment (The Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea, 2012). However, even with penalties, urban street artists continue to express themselves. The irony is that many street artists become household names, moving from the streets to the exhibition room to the auction house to even the museum; for example Banksy and OBEY. Some street artists have become brands, while others are hired by large corporate companies to endorse a new and avant-garde form of advertising. It seems that urban street art is now almost encouraged, in part by

companies but also by tourism boards; street artists are being revered in the street and persuaded into the gallery space, as, “many now recognise how square they were in trying to eradicate it” (Mathieson et al, 2011, p.7).

### 3.2 An evolving role: street art, visual culture and contemporary society

Let us return to the arguments proposed by Debord and the Situationists. Even though street art straddles a grey line between legality and illegality, it has become a part of the way people shape their urban surroundings. Many street artists are influenced by Debord's idea of the spectacle; “the spectacle is society itself, is part of society and the instrument to dominate society” (Gavin, 2007, p.7). There are many facets to the spectacle, and

mass media is only one of them. Images replace reality itself, and necessitate both the passivity and isolation of the individual in society. However, Debord saw that “alternative urban visions have often acted as beacons for exploring the emancipatory possibilities of life in the present and breaking through to new and better futures” (Pinder, 2004, p.108). One such urban vision was to create a new situation, one that unified art and life outside of the spectacle, moving beyond art that is governed by it, “If the spectacle is summed by the non-intervention, then this art consciously intervenes. It is active, not passive” (Gavin, 2007, p.7). Part of removing it from the spectacle was to bring art into the streets; outside of the formal institutions of government and art; outside of the bubble and influence of homes, screens, and commodities, “In a culture dominated by a glut of sensationalist, vacuous, throwaway media and virtual culture, the ‘real’ physical world has to reassert its presence in our

Image 3.1. CutUp, Barcelona, 2006



lives” (Ibid). It is the public who choose what and how they respond to urban street art, and not a curator who places a work in front of an audience. This called for the reinvention of art. Now a household name within the art world, Banksy is the most provocative, influential and thought provoking street artist of the noughties. Stringing unique technique, sarcastic wit, and anti-war/capitalist/establishment opinions together, Banksy created a new understanding of urban street art and the impact of its messages, “Every piece seems to share the quality of an instantly memorable humorous or satirical or poignant ‘hit’, which kicks around in your memory, making you think again” (Mathieson et al, 2011, p.16). Similarly, Mark Jenkins, an American artist, creates human shaped sculptures from clear masking tape, which he then leaves in various improbable urban places in order to, “shift viewers perceptions into recognising some of the weirdness that lies around them” (Ibid, p.107). Seeing the street as a space for interaction, Jenkins recreates people who live at the peripheries of urban life, half human/half urban creature, doing certain activities, and observes the reactions; “people approach poking, kicking and sometimes making modifications. I see them as part of the performance. I like leaving the works out there open-ended – as a sort of question mark against itself and everything around it” (Gavin, 2007, p.60).

Urban dwellers have become accustomed to daily existence of urban life being encompassed and contained within a physical framework of walls, buildings and pre-determined routes. Urban street art, is about repurposing those spaces, through the often comical but predominantly pertinent manner of asking questions - Why is there a bin for this or that? Why do we ignore the bin and throw stuff on the floor? Why do we cross a road in this manner? Why can't I cross here? Why is this sign telling me to stop, start, wait? We have become docile in its existence, reassured by the guidance they provide.

Debord and the Situationists sought to counteract this unconscious acceptance through different techniques, contesting the dominant urban conditions, and developing contrasting visions of city life. Through *dérives*, a rapid passage through varied urban settings to observe ambiances and behaviours, the “emotional contours of cities” are experienced (Pinder, 2004, p.113). Games were used to intercept urban spaces and disrupt the rigidity of contemporary urbanism, opposing the limitations for play available in urban spaces, “they not only studied urban spaces, including the potential for play within them, but also participated in a game within those spaces based on a more liberated way of life that sought to extend through experiment and constructive practice” (Ibid). An example

**Image 3.2.** Mark Jenkins, London, 2008



**Image 3.3.** Mark Jenkins, Rome, Date Unknown



that mixes both games and urban street art is the work of the street artist Invader, whose mosaic-tiled space invader, named aptly after the arcade game, populates much of the World. The artist created a life-size version of the game over ten-years ago, the idea is simple, spot an invader and get points. Invader says, “the act itself is political but otherwise, it’s more an experiment” (Mathieson et al, 2011, p.101). Brad Downey is another artist who forces the viewer to become aware of the street through exaggeration, humanisation or distortion of the urban space and its architecture. His piece *Sit Your Arse Down* (2004) saw him change tube signs from station names to commands. That same year, he created *Madonna and Child*, where a miniature sign was placed next to a larger one. In Image 3.4 Downey’s piece creates something completely different from its original intent, making

us question the original purpose of the signs in the first place. He explains, “I believe everyone needs and benefits from creative acts. Everyone needs to question his or her surroundings and reality” (Gavin, 2007, p.16).

Within all of the work undertaken by street artists is the notion of closing the gap between the spectator and the artist, the message and the interpretation. People can become part of the creative process, by adding opinion, comment or content to an initial piece. This echoes the need to evolve from a Read Only toward a Read/Write Culture. JR<sup>9</sup> creates what he calls ‘pervasive art’, the people who he photographs do not only view his art, but are the subject of it, “And they don’t just see it, they make it... In this artistic activity, there is no stage separating the actors from the spectators” (JR, 2009, p.8).

Image 3.4. Brad Downey, London, Date Unknown



His work raises questions, creating a space for encounter through a participative practice of art. In contemporary urban societies where everything is designed, when even nature gets designed into the fabric of the modern city, and in a world where the individual is considered but a mass body of consumerism, “creation can be a potentially revolutionary alternative” (Gavin, 2007, p.7).

### 3.3 Quantifying and qualifying urban street art

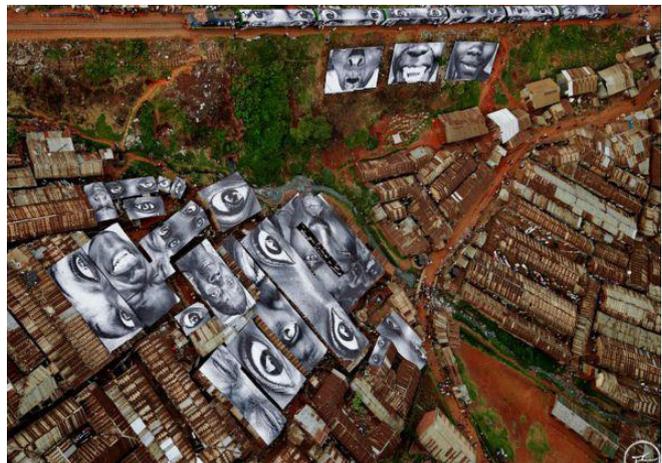
It is a dizzying prospect to account for the wide variety of individuals that make up the audience of urban street art, “the only immediate feedback the artists get is how long [it] stays in place” (Potter, 2008, p.157). It is also naïve to consider the public as one homogenous body. At a local level, various studies in European countries show that, “grassroots actors are keen to learn more and to supplement their own intuitive and pragmatic knowledge” (Floch, 2007, p.205). The main means of promoting street art and attracting audiences are festivals, through com-

panies; but it is difficult to evaluate the demographic make up of these. From a European perspective, it is “essential to stress that street artists take part in great challenges that are currently raised at the EU level in terms of economics, social issues, the environment and citizens” (Ibid, p.vi). However, surveys and interviews conducted in various countries employ different approaches to gathering data. In France for example, a ‘market research’ approach was adopted, one which considers, “how our cultural practice, our cultural action...on creating a living environment” (Ibid, p.205). In contrast, UK research focuses on public satisfaction, particularly, “the economic and social implications of events at the heart of the city” (Ibid). There is a division in opinion on urban street art, with some countries giving it political recognition, even formulating supportive policies and measures, while others do not give it either the political or artistic recognition, even though there is activity on the ground (Ibid, p.143). These are just a couple of examples of the variations in approach by national governments to street art, and evidently there is a need for further research; it is important to identify its public as this information will provide a useful tool for furthering recognition and legitimacy.

Image 3.5. JR, Kenya, 2009



Image 3.6. JR, Kenya, 2009



### NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. A form of street art that uses colourful knitted yarn instead of paint or aerosol.
2. Wheat paste is a liquid adhesive made from water and starch. It is used to stick paper posters to walls and other surfaces.
3. Art painted on a piece of wood (i.e.; plywood) and attached to street signs
4. Considered as mass public performance art, it is when a group of people assemble in one place to perform an unusual action in a public space before quickly dispersing.

5. Typically 3-D.
6. An art intervention is the re-interaction with a previously existing piece of artwork, audience or space.
7. Collective from 2005 – 2009.
8. First published in 1982 by James Q. Wilson & Dr. George Kelling, it is a criminology theory that studies the effects of disorder.
9. A Parisian artist who travels the world taking pictures of the people he meets and then enlarges these to paste uninvited on walls around the world.

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## 4. The potential role of environmentally engaged urban street art

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This paper has explored the use of urban street art as a tool for urban discovery. It challenged the way in which cities are experienced, shaped and lived; drawing attention to the power dynamics, interests and social relationships that make up the fabric of the urban. This raises issues of legality and illegality, the use of space, and questions the practice of everyday life. It calls for the creation of situations to unmask the spectacle, acting as the social interstice for awareness and change. The argument in Chapter Three observed the relationship between society and urban street art. In this next chapter, a third element is introduced, the environment; here, the argument becomes cyclical, exploring the dynamic relations between the environment, street art and society. Environmental art can be defined as “(1) the production of artistic works intended to enhance or become part of an urban or other outdoor environment; (1.1) the production of works of art by manipulation of the natural landscape; (2) The production of works of art in the form of large installations or assemblages that surround the observer” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). Increasingly, environmental art is crossing over from the exhibition room to the street and back to the galleries. This fluidity is important, as it gives the art the chance to adapt to, address, and represent, the constantly changing nature of society. Indeed, it provides the opportunity to explore environmentalism within these different settings – as well as interacting with a wider demographic. As messages of political, economic, environmental, or social discontent are interwoven within contemporary street art, the points of encounter provide a broadening opportunity and diversity to remix mainstream culture, and as Lefebvre pointed out, within the masked spectacle, “It is obviously in the domain of art that this illusion and its consequences may be best observed” (Lefebvre, 2014, p.632).

With the previous chapters in mind, how do we now understand EEUSA as a tool for transformative social change within urban spaces? By placing importance on the role of the consumer or spectator within politics, art and environment, a meaningful relationship can emerge. Indeed, “the critique of everyday life has a contribution to make to the art of living [...] the art of living implies the end of alienation – and will contribute towards it” (Ibid, p.219). Through the eye of the artist and the spectator, certain relationships within the existing world are revealed, depicting concealed and passive facets of everyday life. Street art can be used to condition am-

bienances and influence the creation of situations; failing to criticise the everyday, “means accepting the prolongation of the present thoroughly rotten forms of culture and politics, forms whose extreme crisis is expressed in increasingly political apathy and neo-illiteracy, especially in the most modern countries” (Knabb, 2006, p.92). In an era of increasing urban spatial growth, it is worth returning back to the debates within unitary urbanism, one that raises critical approaches to cities and everyday life. The avant-gardism of unitary urbanism explored issues of representation, imagination, participation and pleasure. The creation of situations is an exploration of these states of encounter and artistic interstices. The interstice becomes a, “space in human relations that fit more or less harmoniously and openly in the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system” (Bourriaud, 2002, p.16). EEUSA is the lens that suggests other possibilities. Of course, encounters vary in association, “Each of us connects differently. The connection runs deep in some; it skips across the surface in others. Sometimes it catches us and pulls us along. Sometimes it changes us completely” (Irvine, 2011, p.7). The spectator and the artist are interchangeably the instigator of such revelation and the receiver. Everyday life is remixed as the spectator takes something away from the visual interpretation, transformed from a passive into an active participant. In this way, social transformation is cyclical. Cities become fluid spaces of possibilities for transformation, “New challenges to unequal power relations emerge in cities around the world, as people re-appropriate and reconstruct urban spaces with the aims of social transformation” (Pinder, 2004, p.120). This working paper therefore views EEUSA as a starting point, a door to new understanding and awakenings, jolting the everyday from predictable, blurred generalisation. As a result, it evokes an environmentally conscious transformative social change, instigating a Read/Write Culture that nurtures the creativity of individuals to produce and influence, contributing to the art of living, “In the future the art of living will become a genuine art, based like all art upon the vital need to expand, and also on a certain number of techniques and areas of knowledge, but which will go beyond its own conditions in an attempt to see itself not just as a means but as an end” (Lefebvre, 2014, p.219).

This paper has sought to exemplify how the street can be more about social interactions, relating to other people, and how street art can challenge our attitudes

and practices in everyday life to support sustainable transformative social change. The environment does not stand-alone against political, social or economic issues; our daily reality is woven out of these entanglements. EEUSA reflects this by critiquing the everyday life through the social interstices it creates, and revealing new environmental understandings, raising an awareness of surroundings. Additionally, the spectacle only reinforced our alienation from one another, with Debord stating, “the spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. Materially, the spectacle is ‘the expression of estrangement, of alienation between man and man’” (Debord, 1994, p.151).

It is not merely about raising individual consciousness, but collective consciousness as well, with self-emancipation beginning when we emancipate ourselves from, “the material bases of an inverted truth. This ‘historic mission to establish truth in the world’ can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but – only and always – by that class which is able to effect the dissolution of all classes [...] It cannot be carried out, in other words, until individuals are ‘directly bound to universal history’; until dialogue has taken up arms to impose its own con-

ditions upon the world” (Ibid, p.154). In February 2012, an international conference in Berlin called “Radius of Art: Creative Politicisation of the Public Sphere, Cultural Potentials for Social Transformation” discussed the effects of art and culture on socio-ecological transformations towards more sustainable cultures focussing on; art for social transformation, public art, art towards cultures of sustainability, and cultural policy strategies and funding structures (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2012). While the conference observed art under the umbrella term ‘public art’, arguments and conclusions can be applied to EEUSA. It defined public space as neutral space, but recognised that this did not exist in reality, constrained by the influence of consumerism, “Which constantly has to be fought for in order to be constructed and deconstructed according to the wants and needs of artists and varied audiences” (Graf, 2012). It considered that there were two categories of this art. Firstly, art that dealt with social and political issues, pushing for social interaction, participation in conceptualisation by locals, and broadening the range of spectators. Secondly, a hit and run guerrilla tactic, more conceptual than aesthetic, merging with everyday life, “creates in-between spaces, un-commercial environments, in which a creative rather process orientated chaos brings people together for positively contributing to the culture of life, of locality and their community” (Ibid). The projects aimed

**Image 4.1.** Anna Garforth, London, 2008



to strengthen individuals, groups and society, initiating and promoting social or ecological transformations through the potential of art and culture as a catalyst for transformative social change. These cultures, “search for conceptual alternatives which are derived from biological and cultural diversity and in so doing enables human welfare” (Radius, 2012). It found that with a continued lack of definition, recognition for public art was difficult, but that it is interdisciplinary, the antithesis of the monoculture, making living conditions better and more beautiful and that the works become a platform for social interaction and activism (Ibid).

EEUSA encompasses more than just traditional notions of graffiti; the use of natural mediums<sup>1</sup>, reverse graffiti<sup>2</sup>, sculpture, light installations, and guerrilla gardening, among others. Many artists sensitive to issues of pollution have developed types of street art that are conscious in their environmental impact and express an environmental message. They are less toxic and hence more appropriate at disseminating their message.

Anna Garforth, a London-based artist, works with a range of mediums; natural, recycled, and edible. With a background in design and illustration, she works “moss into beautiful lettering, cookie dough into edible posters and rubbish into typographic wonder” (Garforth, 2012). Inspired

by guerrilla gardening and the British artist Andy Goldsworthy (who creates installations using materials and tools found on site), Garforth redefines the phrase ‘urban jungle’ with her living-based art. Garforth pastes on walls, fences and buildings, using a natural mix of sugar, yogurt and beer, her harvested moss typography; ‘Mossenger’ (Image 4.1). By using biodegradable ingredients, the idea is that it will colonise and grow. Garforth’s subtle and melancholic pieces are a statement about the loss of wilderness in order to make room for more urban structures, for example, placed in disused plots of land that are to be demolished to make room for new flats. Her pieces silently accuse society of forgetting the simple act of growth, a statement on behalf of nature. In a derelict setting, the social interstice created by natural life, causes the spectator to pause, the stark contrast between living and nonliving a reminder of a lost connection between human and nonhuman life.

Jane Rendell in *Art and Architecture* (2006) argues that, “art is functional in providing certain kinds of tools for self-reflection, critical thinking and social change. Art offers a place and occasion for new kinds of relationship ‘to function’ between people” (Rendell, 2006, p.4). In creating the typography of the word ‘grow’ within a context where little natural growth takes place, and in inhabiting a space of abandonment and derelict, Garforth creates a ‘minor *détournement*, “the *détournement* of

**Image 4.2.** Anna Garforth, London, 2009



an element which has no importance in itself and which draws all its meaning from the new context in which it has been placed" (Knabb, 2006, p.16). Similarly to Garforth, artists Edina Tokodi and Gaëlle Valledary, use grass in their own forms of living, urban graffiti. In combining both natural and unnatural elements, new ensemble are created, which strikingly reveal the imbalance between natural and urban, human worlds.

These mediums are often unexpected elements in the urban setting, where nature is an unwanted surprise if it is not pre-planned into the fabric of the city, "The nature surrounding me? Every shrub is planned, its selection influenced... The sky...is laced with wires...The sunset...a product of automobile and industrial emissions and the efforts of ecology groups to establish smog controls" (Wander, 2002, p.viii). This further jolts people's awareness and conscious to their surroundings. Confronting the unnatural environment with the natural, it asks questions on the blurring of the natural world, of this blind and dangerous acceptance of a monoculture, "a wall is not just a wall, it is somebody else's opinion and you do not have to accept it" (Potter, 2008, p.102). Indeed Bourriaud wrote, "Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modelling possible universes" (Bourriaud, 2002, p.13). Tokodi's piece (Image 4.3) is clear and profound, a brazen question mark in the urban context. In the same way, Valledary's work (Image

4.4) is a reminder that what lies under our feet is not tarmac but earth, and grass, and life. This awakens our senses, which allow us to critique the existing world and forge towards a future, "Building on this relational understanding of the senses [...], truth is not to be found in a world beyond sensation but in truer and deeper sensation. Transformative change will alter not just the objects of the senses but the sense themselves, such that, 'revolution unites subject and object in liberated sensation and thereby reveals the truth of nature'" (Loftus, 2012, p.36). Through these encounters, they incite questions in the spectator, acting as a tipping point for connection and understanding. By combining natural elements to an 'un-natural' urban surrounding, a *détournement* occurs, leading to, "the emergence of productive forces that necessitate other production relations and a new practice of life" (Knabb, 2006, p.14)

Other artists have chosen not to use any mediums at all, instead removing the dirt and grime found on urban walls. The pioneer of reverse graffiti is Moose (Paul Curtis), a British-born artist. Using water jets to clean, he creates art from the negative space. Image 4.5 is a piece he did in 2008 in San Francisco's downtown Broadway Tunnel. It was representative of the hundreds of indigenous trees and plants in California, which would have been widespread 500 years ago. Acting as ghosts from the past, they are a reminder of what came before

**Image 4.3.** Edina Tokodi, Brooklyn, 2008



industrialisation and urbanisation, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real” (Bourriaud, 2002, p.13). Moose says, “I’m not the world’s biggest environmentalist, but it’s impossible for me not to tow the environmental line. The whole core of what I do is based around drawing in pollution and writing in natures’ voice” (Moose, 2008).

In 2007, Brazilian Alexandre Orion produced one of the largest-scale work of reverse graffiti. Using just a cloth, he recreated an urban mortuary scene, ‘Ossario’<sup>3</sup> (Image 4.6), in São Paolo’s Max Feffer Tunnel. Orion is a critic of the contemporary urban city. His skulls look out in quiet accusation on the living, rapping at our consciousness, interrogating our comfortable acceptance of pollution. His piece speaks of both love and hate. Love for a city that needs to be more imbedded within our everyday, environmental consciousness, and hate, for its obsession with consumption, “In this aesthetic pursuit, he scrapes the soot off our subdued urban consciousness from the walls. He lends visibility to this craftily disguised but treacherous pollution” (Ossario, 2006). By dwelling in the circumstances of the present, the artist “catches the world on the move: he is a tenant of culture, to borrow Michel de Certeau’s expression” (Bourriaud, 2002, p.14).

As tenants of culture, artists have a visual impact on people in the everyday setting, “However much the environment thing is rammed home to people, seeing how dirty a wall is by cleaning it in this way it [...] gets people immediately. They go up and look at it, and they think it’s spray paint, and then it’s just a cold realisation that the world is really, really dirty” (Moose, 2008). There is a shock value to reverse graffiti<sup>4</sup>, as we go about the routine of everyday life, the effect of our actions is an after thought, the build up of pollution forgotten; out of sight, out of mind.

Revealing these layers prompts a realisation of the passing of time, but acts as a catalyst for action, where the *détournement* instigated by EEUSA is an intrinsic part of moving into a more environmentally engaged world, “... we find [*détournement*] linked to almost all the constructive aspects of the pre-Situationist period of transition. Thus its enrichment, through practice, seems necessary” (Knabb, 2006, p.21).

In *Cement Eclipses: Small Interventions in the Big City* (2011), Patrick Potter explains the poignancy of Isaac Cordal’s tiny scenes, “When we let the sadness in we allow ourselves to feel something rather than disconnect our emotions with blank pessimism. The sadness can then be of something positive” (Cordal, 2011, p.2). Cordal gives little explanation on his works, his message told by his sculptures instead. Tinged with mournfulness, these tiny scenes are revealed to only the most careful eye. His little forlorn men in grey suits are a subtle reminder of the current state of the world, using what is already present and shifting our perception of its purpose. These tiny interventions make you take a second look at the urban structure, giving new meaning to the abandoned corners of the urban environment; puddles represent climate change and the rising of water levels, a drainage pipe our polluted seas (Image 4.7).

At the same time, Cordal awakens the child in us. In doing so, it is not with pessimism that you meet the state of the world, but with sympathy that we encounter this form of EEUSA, an urge to protect these little men, “They are there to provide a one handed clap to shake you from your reveries and plug you back in to the world” (Ibid).

Cordal’s project *Waiting for Climate Change* (2012)<sup>5</sup> highlighted the overriding social attitudes on issues of climate change. Such pieces such as ‘Follow the Lead-

**Image 4.4.** Gaëlle Valledary, France, 2011



**Image 4.5.** Moose, San Francisco, 2008



er' and 'Slowly Sinking' are satirical attacks on the passivity of society, the former on how we simply follow and do not challenge current practices of everyday life, and the latter, the aftermath effect of such blind following. In 'Waiting for Climate Change' (Image 4.9), his sculptures depict men in suits and lifebuoys, clutching mobile phones. His pieces expose a fragmentation in society,

where the individual is engrossed in oneself, in one's technology, more than in the people and environment that surroundings.

EEUSA acts as a movement against the process of 'decomposition', "in which traditional cultural forms have destroyed themselves as a result of the emergence of supe-

**Image 4.6.** Alexandre Orion, São Paulo, 2007



**Image 4.7.** Isaac Cordal, London, 2009



**Image 4.8.** Isaac Cordal, London, 2009



**Image 4.9.** Isaac Cordal, Belgium, 2012



rior means of controlling nature which make possible and necessary superior cultural constructions” (Knabb, 2006, p.52). The legacy of the art rather than the role of the artist, play a cultural response to environmental issues. The diversity in EEUSA reflects the dexterity of artists, the mediums and messages they seek to address and their own concern over environmental issues. In creating these new points of encounter, EEUSA has the potential to raise the consciousness and awareness of one’s surroundings, serving as a stark reminder of the natural world’s existence, and our effect on it, “this system of intensive encounters has ended up producing linked artistic practices: an art form where the substrate is formed by inter-subjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the “encounter” between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning” (Bourriaud, 2002, p.15). The social interstices created by these environmentally engaged street artists are a reflection of the world around them and their experiences of it. The very act of EEUSA is political. It is a counter culture to the homogenous urban society. The artist protests against the, “tendency to blur, collapse and erase the distinctions between art, politics and everyday” (Smith, 2004, p.163). EEUSA strengthens the visibility of the environment in the urban context, highlighting its pivotal role as a resource for human activity, “to

undercut capitalism’s power...the key step was to begin living a richer, less alienated, more participatory culture... Through a fusion of art into the everyday, people should rediscover their ability to control their own lives” (Ibid). EEUSA provides an intense experience within the everyday life, “the truth ... is that the people do make a choice. ... If it isn’t right, it disappears. If people love it, it stays” (Potter, 2008, p.49). Through the *détournement* of everyday elements into a new ensemble, it reignites and unifies our affection, values and sensitivity to the world around us. In this way, the spontaneous act of EEUSA awakens our unconscious reality of how alienated we are from the natural world. Currently, there remains a research gap for further analysis on its qualitative and quantitative effects and the extent to which it acts as a catalyst for change. However, it can no longer be ignored as a growing subculture, one that takes to the streets and visualises an alternative approach to the world, and as Lefebvre exclaims, “Let everyday life become a work of art! Let every technical means be employed for the transformation of everyday life! From an intellectual point of view the word ‘creation’ will no longer be restricted to works of art but will signify a self-conscious activity, self-conceiving, reproducing its own terms, adapting these terms and its own reality” (Lof-tus, 2012, p.109).

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. Mud, grass, moss, plants, etc. Anything that can be taken from the natural environment and used as a medium of expression.
2. A form of graffiti that removes layers of dirt instead of adding layers of paint.
3. War memorial.
4. Authorities struggle to react to this form of EEUSA, as it is not

vandalism in the traditional meaning – could you consider a destructive act as one that involves cleaning? And so, in turn reverse graffiti addresses that stigmatisation around urban street art as vandalism.

5. He expose hundred's of his cynical yet humorous sculptures on the Belgium coastline during the 2012 Beaufort04, the fourth edition of the Triennial of Contemporary Art by the Sea.

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## 5. Conclusion

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Fundamentally, this working paper has explored the accessibility and use of public spaces within our contemporary urban structures. It has also sought to explore the intervention of urban street art and EEUSA as a playful and colourful way of reconnecting with our environment, ourselves, and our communities. By exploring the very act of creating urban street art to that of the arguments of the Situationists, Debord, de Certeau, Lefebvre and others, we see how urban street art becomes the entry point in the everyday urban experience in reawakening our unconscious routine and patterns. To look at the fabric of everyday life, through the encounters of EEUSA, is to create new possibilities for an alternative future. An essential part to understanding urban street art is that it is not selective, exclusive or discriminatory. It is for the everyday man or woman, a social interstice situating itself firmly within the socio-natural entanglements of daily routine. These are doors to new ways of understanding and learning, creating a dual relationship; every spectator is already an actor and every actor adopts the role of spectator. At the intersection between spectator and spectacle, EEUSA reawakens the muted everyday existence. Through the process of *détournement*, natural and urban elements are brought together within the everyday, to form not new, but reveal forgotten relations between man and nature, occurring against the alienating experience of the urban landscape. Through social experimentation and play, it enables a state of encounter within the street and thereby reduces the relational space between the two. It may be argued that EEUSA may only offer yet another spectacle upon the surface of the urban landscape, however, there exist counter arguments to this. Firstly, and possibly most intrinsically is that street art, whatever its message, exists within the ambiguous space of the street. Within that space, it occupies a confusing paradigm; either being condemned by law or preserved behind plastic casings. Ideally, it is loud enough to be seen, but without being poached upon by corporations, branding, advertisements, etc. Within this landscape, it places itself, without 'permission' amongst the controlled uses of space in public areas, throughways, advertising, and so on. While the sanctions against graffiti and urban street art are arguably disproportionate in weight, for urban street art to retain its worth as a counter spectacle, it cannot be commoditised or given 'free walls' to paint. This notion of providing space for artists continues to control the very spectacle the artists attempt to dispel. For therein, the anti rebellious, counter spectacle messages of which it

denounces are lost. By straddling the ambiguous space between illegal and illegal, EEUSA, avoids becoming another spectacle masking reality. Within this ambiguous space, urban street art retains its capacity as a catalyst to opening up a dialogue between spectator and spectacle. In combining human interactions and social context within the street, EEUSA creates new situations, alternative gateways of envisioning the everyday. In this way, social interstices are opened up and the predictability of everyday life moves from a one-way conversation between producer and consumer, to an active dialogue between spectator and spectacle. Through the emancipation of the passive spectator, into an active participant, the prevailing spectacle of dominant culture is challenged. Secondly, viewing is an action that confirms or transforms our position, with emancipation beginning when the barrier between passivity and action is challenged. The passive spectator is not in a perpetual passive condition, as participation, and therefore emancipation, occurs when the spectator interprets the visual. Urban street art does not have a static audience, one that arrives to watch a performance and then leaves. Rather, its audience is an overarching reach of people who use the street, a constantly changing and fluid movement. By existing in the street, it avoids the filtering of people into a smaller, elite demographic and remains accessible within the public realm. The legacy of urban street art is one that exists both momentarily in situ between spectator and urban street art, but also on a more timeless scale as a memory, immortalised within the virtual world. In remaining accessible on these multiple levels, the spectacle continues to be challenged both in situ and online. It is the combination of these two elements, within the confusing paradigm between legal and illegal, that EEUSA avoids the predictability of becoming yet another spectacle. As a result, this creates urban street arts unique ability to change the way we envision our everyday existence.

In exploring the possibilities for a Read/Write Culture, EEUSA is identified as a feedback loop into mainstream culture, closing the connection between artist and spectator, between producer and consumer. Through the act of appropriation and re-appropriation of the dominant images, products, messages, spaces, economy and hierarchical distribution of space experienced in urban environments, EEUSA transcends the conventional, controlled, use of space. Therefore, transformative social change is defined as moving be-

yond a change of attitudes towards a change in lifestyle patterns and behaviours. However, there are limitations to the argument provided within this working paper. Primarily, without the voice of the spectator themselves, this paper remains solely within the theoretical realm, and therefore the success of EEUSA as a supportive tool in catalysing transformative social change needs further research. While Chapters Three and Four exemplified street art and EEUSA in practice as a growing subculture, through a variety of artists and techniques, it was primarily discussed from the artist's perception and opinion. To move beyond the topical and speculative to the practical act of catalysing transformative social change, there needs a more grounded understanding of the cultural effect of urban street art itself: Who are the spectators? How does it make them feel? What do they take away from the encounter? Do they change their routine because of it? How can we understand more fully the role of the active participant? This can only be done through extensive primary data collection; extensive in that it uncovers as many facets of the non-homogenous society and this art form; its mediums and messages. In addition, no urban city resembles another, and so measures of success must be case-

specific to the very making and fabric of that city. Finally, it is important to recall that the artist is not a neutral component within the argument explored in this working paper. The artist themselves expressing their own life experiences, beliefs and opinions through the art, just as the spectator at the point of encounter reacts, interprets and remixes it with their own life experiences, beliefs and opinions. To erode the importance of the role of the artists is to ignore the importance they play as activists in this social movement, however, this paper concentrated on the experience and the potential of the spectator, triggered by the encounter of EEUSA to go from a passive to an active participant of their society. However, further research on the qualifying and quantifying impacts of EEUSA is needed in order to move beyond the theoretical predictions made within this paper. A key part of that is pushing for the recognition of urban street art as a viable contribution to the makings of society and culture. Due to the visual encounter with EEUSA, be it by adding moss or removing dirt from walls, there needs to be an honesty with the state of the world, as it drives home a truth about the reality of the environment in the urban context, one which we cannot push to one side. One which we cannot ignore.

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