Art that can’t be bought or sold—created with passion and commitment only to be destroyed—covers the cities of the world. It’s called post-graffiti, urban art or street art, but no matter what it’s named, this form of creative (anonymous, illegal) expression is a labor of love for artists—and professional graphic designers.

During the May 1968 Paris uprising, students penned a slogan: Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible! Refusing to accept marginalization by the de Gaulle administration, students scrawled this graffiti defiantly across the walls of the city, bringing the government to a virtual standstill. In solidarity, renowned painter Joan Miró, living under the thumb of fascism, joined in creating the graffiti-like painting May 1968 in his studio, in his beloved Spain where one could be executed just for speaking the wrong language. Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible! Challenge the status quo.

Post-graffiti is ultimately a declaration of self-determination, and each expression is, in itself, a manifesto: Deal with me. I am here! To make this statement real, artists create spontaneously, under the cloak of night, on desolate streets in decaying parts of town, ears poised for the sound of sirens.

Whenever I travel to a new city, graffiti is my magnet: Drawn to a painting on a wall or a stencil on a lamp post, I connect with each image, often finding this human expression more lyrical than the predictable landscape. Deal with me. I am here! For me, a city without a healthy offering of street art lacks something. Jake Dobkin, street art maven and force behind streetsy.com says, “There’s something very hopeful about street art. It manifests the life of the city. It can be wiped away, but it always comes back. A lot of street artists are political; they don’t like Bush or the war. They are responding to the world. Interestingly, societies that are very high on the authoritarian index see more graffiti than societies in the middle. Iran, for instance, is said to have some graffiti, as well as Baghdad. When you really clamp down on freedom of expression, that energy has to pop out somewhere.”

New York has long been a mecca for urban artists, who gravitate to the underdeveloped parts of town notably the East Village and Chinatown in Manhattan, Williamsburg in Brooklyn. They paste or stencil or paint their art on an empty wall or next to (but not over) other artists’ work. In the late 1970s, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring emerged as street artists in New York City. Basquiat was a high-school dropout and Haring attended the School of Visual Arts, but was expelled for using the interior of an sva building as a canvas for graffiti in a project with Basquiat. Their work stood out amidst the raw graffiti that was, in those days, like wallpaper in the subways, on bombed out buildings and racketball courts. Graffiti became a symbol of a downtrodden, bankrupt New York. Both Basquiat and Haring soared past anonymity to international celebrity—into the top galleries and museums—only to crash and burn. Basquiat died of a heroin overdose at 28, Haring of aids at 32. Considering their short lives, their legacies are huge, particularly for street art and for reinvigorating the perennial query: What is art?
Museums and galleries worldwide are filled with exquisite works we acclaim or disdain, created by very polished talent. We call that art. Yet, in the early 1900s, Jean Dubuffet discovered the unsophisticated, self-conscious art of the institutionally insane. He named it art brut (or raw art), a term that was later broadened to "self-taught," and now is commonly called "outsider art." And Miró called graffiti "art with a capital A," because it was free and anonymous.

After a recent trip to Barcelona, where a friend and I wandered the narrow cobbled streets in search of brilliantly colored street art, I arrived back in New York just in time to hear that a seven-story building called 11 Spring had been reclaimed by international street artists and transformed into a fantasyland. Jet-lagged but jazzed I rushed over to Spring and Bowery. As I tried to enter, I was blocked by a very weary Wooster Collective representative who showed me the now five-and-a-half-hours-long line that stretched for two blocks—unprecedented for an art show of any kind. This was the last day of the two-day show.

I realized, quite painfully, that I, along with thousands of others, was missing out on one of the most unique art experiences of the decade. Peering through the building's open doors, I saw the work of Judith Supine, D*Face, Momo, Swoon, Faille, Jr and Shepard Fairey being viewed to sounds, emanating from boom boxes brought by spectators and tuned to a special frequency, of a DJ piping music into this gutted wonderland. A few weeks later, Sara and Marc Schiller, their Weimaraner, Hudson, and I sat in the Schiller's toney East Village co-op. They told me excitedly how they came to discover and fall in love with street art. Clearly of one mind on the subject, they summed the transformation of 11 Spring, artists arrived from the work of Judith Supine, D*Face, Momo, Swoon, Faille, Jr and Shepard Fairey being viewed to sounds, emanating from boom boxes brought by spectators and tuned to a special frequency, of a DJ piping music into this gutted wonderland.

Marc are not artists—they have corporate jobs—they were in a good position to help the movement gain a voice. So they created a salon in their loft and helped connect many of the artists. Sara and Marc's love is infectious. They touched hands as they talked gleefully about putting together the exhibit at 11 Spring and about the fabled history of the building. A man named John Simpson had lived in the building for twenty years. No one ever saw him. Maybe he was an inventor, maybe a set designer. He must have lived in raw space, maybe with just a sink and a hot plate. No one seems to know for sure. Adding to the mystique, he would light candles in each of the building's many windows each night. "One day, legend has it, he walked down the street with a cart and a check for four million dollars and moved to Paris," Marc says. He had sold the building. The otherwise dreary building came to life as street artists started to cover it with wheat pasted images, paint and photographs. The more the Schillers wrote about the building, the more artists came to 11 Spring. Then it sold again, soon to become luxury co-ops.

Caroline Cummings, one of the new owners, with a PhD in art, realized that this collage of street art should not go unheralded. The Schillers convinced her to let the artists do their thing, before the renovation began. They had seven weeks. To summate the transformation of 11 Spring, artists arrived from all over the world (some sponsored by Cummings), brush and wheat paste in hand, including graphic designer and illustrator Shepard Fairey, who runs Studio Number One in Los Angeles. "Shepard's the Godfather of the movement," Marc says. "'Obey Giant' is all over the world." Unlike most street artists, Fairey, 36, uses his real name. He's been arrested thirteen times in seventeen years. Caught in the act. But, he adds, "When you're having fun, you're not paralyzed." Fairey recalls his art student days at Rhode Island School of Design when he'd pin his work up on the wall to be critiqued. "People in the art world can be brutal. You develop a thick skin. Street art's anonymous.
Work by the brilliant British artist Banksy was splashed recently in Williamsburg, much to the dismay of the large street art community. The splashing was quickly covered with art, which was again splashed and again re-covered. And so it goes. Splashing is not the only action taken against street artists, many of whom have Web sites and receive hate mail. Banksy, perhaps the most secretive of all the street artists (he would not be interviewed for this article), posts the hate mail he receives on his Web site, without comment at the recommendation of his solicitor. (Knowing Banksy’s snappy dark humor, he could have written them himself.)

To: banksy@banksy.co.uk
Subject: Your work

You are a sick man. In fact, you [sic] not a ‘man’ at all. Not even half a man. While most of your artists paint their art at the forefront of advancing civilization and seeing it from suffering, you represent those who would not only hold back civilization but evolution of our species too. If I believed in a God I would pray to him tonight for you [sic] and your family’s destruction.

On his site, Banksy tells all visitors exactly how he makes his brand of street art and provides many of his images as free downloads. He can well afford to give it all away. Brad Pitt recently bought half a million dollars worth of Banksy’s art. Banksy certainly keeps his solicitor busy!

The more commited street artists (who, by the way, seem to be mostly white, 30-something, middle-class men) want to make their art their lives. Some succeed more than others in giving up their day jobs. Banksy and Fairey have clearly made it. The British artist D*Face, who is a graphic designer, illustrator and jack-of-all-trades, is eking out a comfortable living. Nonetheless, there is an unfortunate blending of the two street art community. The splashing was quickly covered with the Splasher’s convoluted manifesto pasted over it. Right: Banksy’s splashed anti-graffiti anti-graffiti anti-graffiti manifesto.

anyhow. I don’t sign it. And I don’t care if anyone hates it.” He adds, “You don’t need resources to create street art. You just do it. That’s empowering.”

But Fairey and others have become targets, especially in New York where the Serial Splasher and the Premature Ejaculator roam the city with buckets of paint obliterating (“splashing”) artists’ works. During the writing of this article, the Splasher has destroyed four more iconic Fairey works in New York City. Why? Seemingly oblivious to the notion that he himself is the author and jack-of-all-trades, is eking out a comfortable living. His cop poster ‘I’m Gonna Kick Your Ass’ shown here.

But Fairey and others have become targets, especially in New York where the Serial Splasher and the Premature Ejaculator roam the city with buckets of paint obliterating (“splashing”) artists’ works. During the writing of this article, the Splasher has destroyed four more iconic Fairey works in New York City. Why? Seemingly oblivious to the notion that he himself is the author and jack-of-all-trades, is eking out a comfortable living. His cop poster ‘I’m Gonna Kick Your Ass’ shown here.

I believed in a God I would pray to him tonight for you [sic] and your family’s destruction.

On his site, Banksy tells all visitors exactly how he makes his brand of street art and provides many of his images as free downloads. He can well afford to give it all away. Brad Pitt recently bought half a million dollars worth of Banksy’s art. Banksy certainly keeps his solicitor busy!

The more commited street artists (who, by the way, seem to be mostly white, 30-something, middle-class men) want to make their art their lives. Some succeed more than others in giving up their day jobs. Banksy and Fairey have clearly made it. The British artist D*Face, who is a graphic designer, illustrator and jack-of-all-trades, is eking out a comfortable living. Nonetheless, there is an unfortunate blending of the two street art community. The splashing was quickly covered with

Banksy certainly keeps his solicitor busy!

The more commited street artists (who, by the way, seem to be mostly white, 30-something, middle-class men) want to make their art their lives. Some succeed more than others in giving up their day jobs. Banksy and Fairey have clearly made it. The British artist D*Face, who is a graphic designer, illustrator and jack-of-all-trades, is eking out a comfortable living. Nonetheless, there is an unfortunate blending of the two street art community. The splashing was quickly covered with

D*Face arrived at St Spring to add his art to the exhibit fresh from sculpting an English gentleman’s dressing room out of ice in the Ice Hotel in the Arctic Circle. When he reflects on how far he’s come he adds, “The only one stopping you is you.” But D*Face knows that police can stop you too. “In London there are cameras everywhere. If you’re caught, the police caution you to stop. They don’t arrest you unless you persist. Manhattan is very risky. You can get beaten up. Brooklyn is slightly more relaxed, you might get a little pushed around, but you’ll get hustled, no doubt.”

Fairey says, “[MAYO] Guiliani pushed to get graffiti removed, but street art doesn’t look like hoodlum art.” Graffiti is often tagging and can be a way of marking a gang’s territory, whereas street art, while often provocative, is neither hostile nor threatening. Nonetheless, there is an unfortunate blending of the two in the minds of the police.

But you can outsmart the authorities. Momo spelled his name across the width of Manhattan, up and down blocks across the East Village in one long dribble of pink paint, ending up in the East River. Totally legal. He commemorated the act in a video. He makes collages out of cut colored paper that he wheat pastes illegally, and also on construction fences (temporary surfaces are more acceptable to the law) safely nestled alongside commercial ads usually posted in multiples. He adds, ironically, that, “Doing something commercial is more acceptable than art. The cops don’t know the difference between your work and the iPod ads anyway.” And there’s a good reason: Designers are influenced by street art, especially when they’re trying to appeal to an audience that’s young and hip.

Blocks away from St Spring is the site of the annual Outsider Art Fair, an event that validates the commodification of raw art. A simple lead pencil drawing on newsprint created by a now deceased outsider artist from the backwoods of Alabama may fetch $20,000. What will happen to street art? Will the ber

D*Face says, “It’s more about thinking than about the street. The work on the street is about questioning what we are being force-fed. Think about what you are in relation to society. It has a confrontational quality.” Sara Schiller says, “By using lasers, impermanent materials, artists will find a way.”

Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible! Freedom! CA

design issues