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Street Art Politics & Commercialization...How Far Is Too Far?

by **Hrag Vartanian** on February 25, 2010 4

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A photo of Fauxreel's controversial Vespa Squareheads series (photo via Unurth)

For a while now, people often cite Dan Bergeron, aka Fauxreel, as an example of a street art sell-out. Why? Because back in 2008 he partnered up with Vespa to post 324 seven-foot-tall *Vespa Squareheads* wheatpaste ads on the streets of Toronto and other Canadian cities as part of an ad campaign that combined his characteristic "photograffiti" style with a very commercial addition — Vespa scooter handles.

Some people thought he went too far. It is an approach to ad marketing that isn't as original as it may seem and it even has its own name, murketing.
The AntiAdvertising Agency blog characterized the project this way:

> It's a modern classic tale: corporate gas-guzzling motor vehicle manufacturer wants to up the street cred with some ads by a jen-yoo-wine member of the underground, who enjoys to eat of the food, and voila—instant edginess. Marketing gold!

Jonathan Goldsbie of the Toronto Public Space Committee said:

> It's pathetic. It's anti-democratic. They [Vespa] believe that public space is just a blank canvas for a sales pitch.

It wasn't just bloggers who had a problem. Some wondered if the action provoked a backlash among members of the public who started to scrawl messages on Fauxreel's less commercial street work.

This week, Sebastian Buck of Unurth published a very fascinating interview with Fauxreel, who is obviously an intelligent artist with a lot to say. Buck asks about the controversial series and receives this provocative response ... I reproduced the whole answer since it feels like a complete thought:

> I definitely think artists can work commercially and with a conscience, however, I think that if you are going to do this you should be aware of the differing motivations and you should try to make the commercial project provoking to the public in some respect. Because I like blurring the lines and playing with the public's perceptions in some of the work I create, I immediately realized that the difficulties surrounding an illegal street campaign completed by a commercial interest would be a perfect fit for me. So I approached the Vespa Squarehead project with the goal of raising questions about the role of advertising in public space, examining the grey area between street art, graffiti and advertising and attempting to make connections between products and people's identities. If I can complete a series of work that will pose and examine these types of questions and it will allow me to make some money at the same time, there's nothing wrong with that in my opinion.
>
> Will working on a project like that endear you to the public? Probably not, and for me that's okay. I think the notion a great deal of the public holds, is that street artists should all fall under the same political leftist umbrella and they should all be anti-capitalism. This is certainly untrue (think about Banksy or Shepard Fairey as businessmen and Princess Hijab as a right wing street artist) and it would be boring if it were. Although the simple act of placing up illegal artwork can be said to have political connotations, if the work in question is a stencil of Talib Kweli or a paste up of fried chicken, the work is then purely aesthetically based and not political at all.
>
> In terms of drawing a line between street art and street advertising and deciding what distinguishes the two, I am not the one to be judging that. I am far more interested in the overlapping areas in between and engaging with audiences who appreciate work that challenges the political status quo associated with street art, or art in general, as well as talking to fellow artists who understand these nuances and who utilize them within their work and their approach to developing their practice and essentially their brand.

I admit to being intrigued by Fauxreel's framing of the debate. He seems to understand that the nature of street art — and I'm not talking about graffiti — has changed from its once revolutionary origins as a voice of the dispossessed. But what I don't understand, and perhaps many street artists and street art critics are trying to understand (myself included), is what is the street artist's claim to public space if it isn't for raising public consciousness or communicating an individual voice to a larger audience? Why would a street artist think they can profit off of public space so directly and still retain the respect of the community? Are they mimicking the corporate world's continuous land grab for public space?

People like Jordan Seiler at Public Ad Campaign have long been critical of illegal ads and their encrotchment on our lives, so how does this hybrid form of advertising fit in?

The only major advantage for artists, other than the monetary aspect, is that artists caught putting up these hybrid works may potentially be charged as illegal advertisers rather than artistic vandals. The penalties for the former are far less than the latter.

A vandal thinks Fauxreel is a sell-out vandal (via illegalsigns.ca)

There is a fear in this hybridization and where it could lead. Two years ago, Posterchild, an anti-ad activist in Toronto, had this to say about Fauxreel's hybrids:

> If street art becomes associated with guerrilla advertising, we will lose a lot of support. One of the few things that street art has going for it is that people see it as something of a "Voice for the Voiceless." This generates some sympathy. That sympathy will disappear when the perpetrator is thought to be aggressive companies pushing even further into our lives. Also, I worry that the end result will be closing/licensing of even more of our public spaces. Shutting out street artists.

The whole interview on Unurth is well worth a read.

Tagged as: Dan Bergeron, Fauxreel, illegal ads, Jordan Seiler, Posterchild, Sebastian Buck, Unurth

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Nick Riggle · 5 years ago

There's a lot that I find puzzling about Fauxreel's comments, but perhaps the most revealing is his use of the concept of "branding" to characterize street art practice. The implication seems to be that to be a street artist, or to progress as one, is to have or to develop a "brand". To do so is to make oneself viable in the market and so to open oneself to the possibility of financial gain. Making money is a mark of success. He justifies with with a kind of "gotta get paid" attitude. He tries to justify it further by critiquing those who denounce such a characterization of street art: such people are "anti-capitalists" or "defending the leftist status-quo".

In fact, it's much simpler than this. The people who criticize him are "street artists" who actually understand what's at stake in the practice, which is opposed to "branding" -- not because they are anti-capitalists or leftists, but because they are street artists. I've made this argument before, but when the basic motivation for one's "street art" flows from commercial need then the real significance of the "art" is "buy this". Buy Vespa. We're hip, we're street, so buy Vespa. The "art" means the same thing no matter where it shows up -- in your living room, at a bus stop, on a stone wall in rural China. That is to say, its commercial meaning does not depend on its use of the street. It doesn't use the street in any significant way, so it isn't street art. It's just an ad disguised as street art. Its use of the street is mere rhetoric -- a way of making the advertisement look cool or edgy. Even Dick Cheney or John D. Rockefeller can accept that argument.

You can make money as a street artist -- many street artists do. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. But many do so without compromising their artistic integrity.
Compromising your art to make money is the definition of selling out.

(By the way, it's interesting that Shepard Fairey also uses the phrases "blurring the lines" and "examining the grey areas" when asked about this same issue.)

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Alison · 5 years ago

Hi there

Just found your site - looks really interesting, I look forward to reading more....

I've been writing about street art (and other kinds of art/images) for some time, at my blog Images to Live By (http://imagestoliveby.wordpres... and in academic articles too... It'd be great to share some ideas sometime.

thanks!

Share ›

Hrag Vartanian ➔ Alison · 5 years ago

Hi Alison, We'd love to hear from you. Drop us a line using the contact form. If you ever want to contribute, let us know.

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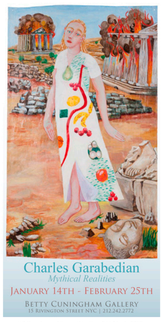

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