

Summer 2021

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Public Access Screenings: An Ontological Inquiry into Cinematic Street Art

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Abstract

Street art is a blossoming field of aesthetics, but aestheticians have yet to elucidate a theory of the relationship between street art and film. Film and street art seem intuitively antithetical. Street art is a static art form that interacts with the physical space it inhabits, while film moves and requires projection onto a surface. These intuitions, however prevalent in society, neglect the burgeoning styles of avant-garde film and street art that subvert tropes of both artforms. I assert that film-as-street-art, or cinematic street art, is feasible practice, both philosophically and practically. I discuss the extant ontologies of street art and endorse Bacharach's theory of aconsensuality, which emphasizes the importance of avoiding seeking permission when creating street art. Subsequently, I discuss two ontologies of film: Walton's transparency thesis and Carroll's ontology of film, and argue in favor of Carroll. Utilizing the frameworks of Bacharach and Carroll, my research dissects two examples of potential examples of cinematic street art, the practice of video painting and the short film *MUTO*, which I argue cannot be defined as cinematic street art. Second, I suggest types of cinematic street art and provide a theory for cinematic street art as a practice. The distinct practice of cinematic street art requires that an artwork be placed aconsensually, make the street essential to the function of the artwork, and retain the qualities of a film that Carroll lays out.

Keywords: street art, philosophy of film, aesthetics, ontology of film, cinematic street art

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I. Press Play

On July 25, 2019, Twitter was ablaze as independent entertainment company and hipster darling A24 cryptically tweeted a video with six of their films each listed with a respective set of coordinates. Entitled “Public Access,” A24 led a campaign that brought a select few of their acclaimed films to the places they were set in via massive white billboards, all free of charge (Sicurella, 2019). The creative publicity stunt not only capitalized on the unique sense of space that many of their films are imbued with, the films were situated in such a way that it is reminiscent of an adjacent artform: street art.² Yet, philosophers of street art, the few that there are presently, have neglected discussing the feasibility of an intersection between street art and film. The disparate methods of production for these artforms may intuitively feel incongruous, given that we often associate street art with graffiti, stencils, and sculptures and film with site-specific projection. I argue that, despite their appearances, street art and film are not ontologically antithetical artforms. That is, while I concede that film-as-street art (henceforth cinematic street art) is a niche approach not yet utilized by street artists, its ontological and pragmatic process is reconcilable with the current ontologies of street art. Furthermore, if philosophers wish to accommodate more broadly film within the canon of street art, then I challenge them to provide a more rigorous definition that encompasses the totality of visual artforms.

This paper is organized into four sections; in the first two sections, I will review the philosophical literature on street art and film and contest some theories of the respective

¹ I wish to thank Sara Protasi, Sondra Bacharach, Andrea Baldini, Nicholas Riggle, Aaron Meskin, John Trafton, and Colleen Hanson for their guidance, support, and collaboration in the completion of this project.

² This is especially true of the *Good Time* Public Access screening, which occurred on a billboard next to a Brooklyn subway stop.

mediums; in the third section, I will address a specific artwork that some aestheticians would regard as cinematic street art; the fourth section will supply a constructive argument for cinematic street art and account for potential counterarguments.

II. Sketching the Street Art Debate

In “Street art: The transfiguration of common places,” Riggle (2010) contends that “[a]n artwork is *street art* if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning” (italics original; p. 246). The definition joins two claims: street art must make *material use* of the street and this material use is *internal*, or essential, to how the artwork functions in space. To clarify, what Riggle means is that an artist utilizes the material street by binding the very existence of the artwork to the street. The most obvious examples of this are graffiti artworks, which literally adhere to the street that the artist paints them on; the same may be said of wheatpaste, ceramics, and wallpapering. A painting produced in, say, a studio on a canvas and subsequently hung in an alley would not satisfy either of Riggle’s requirements, since it would not make use of the street nor make meaning from the street. If this painting were removed from the street and hung instead in an art gallery, it would retain its meaning and effect; the same can be said of commercial art and advertisements (p. 246). A prominent and paradigmatic example of street painting, according to Riggle, is Invader, the Paris-based street artist who has now ‘invaded’ 65 cities and 33 countries (<https://urban-nation.com/artist/invader/>). Invader’s moniker is a reference to the classic 1978 video game *Space Invaders*, which he emulates with his mosaics of the pixelated sprites.³ The remarkable art he produces is not always located on the physical street, yet it is

³ Invader’s website is located here: <https://www.space-invaders.com/home/>

generally uncontested as street art.⁴ Another example Riggle provides is the artist C.Finley, who adorns unappealing dumpsters with wallpaper to beautify them. When someone eventually rips the wallpaper off or it naturally peels away from the metal box, the meaning of the art disintegrates with it (ibid.). Thus, Finley's work makes the street internal to the function of her unique artworks.

Of course, street art encapsulates more than conventional media. Seed-bombing, the practice of planting packets of flower seeds into neglected spaces, is widely considered by aestheticians to be street art (e.g. Bacharach, 2016; Willard, 2016). Its titular cousin, yarn-bombing, similarly beautifies unappealing spaces with knit fabrics (e.g. bike rack cozies). One such artwork, *Tank Cozy* by Marianne Jorgensen, is not only a humorous juxtaposition of feminine hot-pink fabric knit onto a tank, it is an anti-war commentary and critique of military fetishization. In each of these approaches, the artwork makes use of the *material* street rather than simply being placed on it. Indubitably the street itself becomes a potent source of meaning for the artwork, hence satisfying Riggle's internality requirement. This also entails that when an artwork created for the street is removed from it, then a portion of its effect is lost, for artwork in the street "outstrips the power of its manifest aesthetic properties" (Riggle, 2010, p. 250).

The term 'street' itself, however, has been obscured by the presence of street art not spatially located in the street. Banksy, the most well-known working street artist, epitomized this conundrum with his 2004 piece *Banksus Militus Ratus*, a stuffed rat with the inscription "Our time will come..." placed inside the London Natural History museum without permission.

Banksus Militus Ratus is undoubtedly street art in the eyes of aestheticians for its activist

⁴ A quick search on Google of the "top 10 most famous street-artists" consistently yields Invader, among others. This in itself is not indicative of their philosophical status as street artists, but it demonstrates that there is a consensus among the general public on what street art looks like.

functions and subversive properties (Bacharach, 2016), but it poses a problem for those who rely on street art existing in the *street*. Riggle (2010) himself is aporetic when defining the notion of *street*. He explains that, in order for a space to count as the street, “people must treat it as the street” (p. 255). This is an intuitive enough suggestion, but he muddies the waters by adding that this means “maintain[ing] a vague constellation of practical attitudes toward [the street]” (ibid.).

Public approbation also plays a key role in defining the relationship between public and street art. When the public enjoys the effect of a given piece of street art, they are much less likely to remove it from the space it is presented in. Conversely, if the public dislikes what has been created, people may be motivated to seek its removal through the local agencies or take it upon themselves. On the street, an artwork’s impact or resonance with the surrounding community is measured by the length of time it stays up. The most widely appreciated artworks may stay up permanently, but there is always a tacit understanding that art may be removed at any time by anyone. This is a marked contrast from public art, which, ironically, cares not for the public’s initial or continued approval. Since public art is usually commissioned by bureaucratic authorities and protected by law, its effect cannot be predicated on its ability to remain unscathed -- it is expected to be.

Baldini (2016) argues that Riggle neglects “subversiveness” of street art in his appraisal of the medium. For Baldini, the disruption of the banal environments street art is often placed in is tantamount to our conception of street art. Disrupting the concrete jungle of New York with a vibrant mosaic (ex. *Invader*) also disrupts our thinking and expectations, engendering situational awareness and new modes of thought. Aestheticians broadly concur on this notion, even Riggle, but Baldini is particularly keen on positing that this disruptive value inherits its power from subversiveness. Some of Baldini’s other criticisms seem to stem from theoretical

misunderstandings that Riggle (2016) clarifies, but other scholars challenge Riggle's definition too, as will be discussed next.

Riggle's article, which garnered him both praise and criticism, has promulgated discourse about street art's ontology. Bacharach (2016) posits that *aconsensuality* is the determinant of street art, Chackal (2016) observes that *illegality* and *illicitness* are just as, or even more so, integral to the function of street art as is the street, and Baldini (forthcoming) establishes a performance-centered ontology for street art. Let us first discuss aconsensuality. Aconsensuality, unlike consensuality or non-consensuality, refrains from seeking consent from a party (Bacharach, 2016, p. 486). A party, *x*, commits aconsensual act *z* when they do not ask the other party (or parties), *y*, for their permission to engage in said act. By contrast, if party *x* was denied permission from party *y* to engage in *z* act, but proceeded to engage in *z* act, this would be non-consensual. According to Bacharach, aconsensuality is the framework that we employ for measuring the status of a street art artwork, as well as how we delineate public art from street art. Artworks that go through the bureaucratic authorities in government and receive funding from those sources have been publicly sanctioned, whereas street art circumvents this entire process and often exploits it. Bacharach explicates her ontology further through a four-step method of street art production that integrates aconsensuality:

- (1) these works are subject to alterations and destruction, and hence street artists accept the resulting ephemerality of their works;
- (2) these works are often illegal;
- (3) street artists have a strong incentive to remain anonymous...
- (4) if street artists strive to make defiant and subversive art, art that falls outside of the mainstream, then it should come as no surprise that their work is often deeply antithetical to the art world. (p. 487)

To illustrate this method, Bacharach turns to the case of Barry McGee, a street artist commissioned by the city of Sydney for public art. Accused of being a sell-out, McGee created both the commissioned artwork as well as an aconsensual one, reestablishing his *bona fides* as a street artist in the community (p. 488). Bacharach does not believe aconsensual art is mutually exclusive with illegality (p. 481); in other words, one could theoretically make street art that is aconsensual but not illegal. The rather ambiguous supposition, Baldini (2018) points out, is antinominous since aconsensuality conceptually implies *de jure* regulatory violations of a given space (p. 14). Private property is designated in legal documents, so to produce an aconsensual artwork, which Bacharach says occurs on private property, entails that the artist violates the city's regulations for private property (Bacharach, 2016, p. 486). But there is a response to this criticism. In 2009, the Brazilian government passed legislation that legalized street art in cases where consent by the property owners was given to the artist (Young, 2012). We can imagine a similar case wherein a city or state level government passed a law sanctioning all street art, but forewent the consent *proviso*. Street artists would now be empowered to produce artworks in any space, including private properties, without legal repercussions; this does not have any bearing on aconsensuality. In effect, an artist could still produce the artwork aconsensually but not violate the legal statutes of the city. Bacharach's ontology is sensible, but other scholars have sought to define street art in its legality.

Chackal (2016) assesses street art as contingent upon two variables, *illegality* and *illicitness*. Chackal's account marks these two variables as "co-constitutive" since illegal street artworks are *de facto* contradictory to social conventions (p. 363). Alison Young (2014), who Chackal quotes on the subject, finds that, despite illegality being a prominent feature of street art, "[i]nvolving the illegality... as the central definitional feature is also problematic" (Young,

2014, p. 4). Taken to its logical extreme, as we will soon encounter in Baldini's criticism, illegality relies on judicial authority to determine the artistic merit of an artwork. Chackal responds that illegality has been a central feature of the production of street art, especially in its inception in 1970s urban graffiti, thus contemporary productions still rely on illegality as a source of cultural capital and authenticity. Furthermore, illegality accounts for the intentionality of street authors in their approach, the ephemerality of their works, and the necessity for anonymity. Baldini (2018) again provides a strong counterargument to illegality as a necessary and sufficient condition for street art. He provides the following dialectic: a street artist completes a painting, is arrested by a police officer directly after completing it, and is acquitted by a judge. The precedent set by this hypothetical case, or an actual case similar to it, would entail that the judicial system assumes street art to be illegal *a priori*. The onus is thus placed on the artist to justify why their creativity is worthy of exoneration, therefore we reach a *reductio ad absurdum* wherein all street art is essentially illegal (Baldini, 2018, p. 24). For Baldini, illegality is one of the multiple variables that we consider when analyzing street art. This is not to mitigate the importance we place on illegality when evaluating street artworks -- illegality is often a highly salient trait we consider in this medium. However, Baldini contends we face a *reductio ad absurdum* that is unconvincing to understanding street when we fixate on illegality, as Chackal does. What Chackal does provide is a suggestion for a performance aspect of street art that Bacharach's object-centered ontology fails to capture.

Baldini's work advances Chackal's notion of street art as performance into a performance-centered ontology (Baldini, 2017; Baldini, 2018; Baldini, forthcoming). The performance-centered ontology that Baldini endorses holds that we appreciate not so much the product of the street artist's action but instead their "generative actions," an application of

Davies (2004) theory of art as performance (Baldini, forthcoming, p. 290). We may notice a tag placed at the highest point on a bridge or behind heavily secured barriers and wonder, “How did someone manage to get up there?” Perhaps we witness an intricate tag conspicuously placed in a populated location and ponder, “How did this artist manage to avoid arrest?” Tacit in each of these queries is an appreciation of the performance involved in the production of an artwork. The appreciative practice of street art is not amenable to an object-centered ontology like that of Bacharach (2016); it is incapable of judging the constitutive components of the street art performance. Crucially, street art is an improvisational artform grounded in spontaneity. No matter how thoroughly one plans their street artwork, there are unpredictable variables that will alter the production. Spontaneity is a prominent feature of street art, one that we should consider because it disrupts “enduring patterns” of behavior and objects by injecting discontinuities in the environment (Hausman, 1975, qtd. in Baldini, forthcoming, p. 287). Rebellion against authority manifests itself in spontaneity, Baldini asserts, contributing to street art’s essential subversiveness. To clarify, subversiveness, as adapted by Baldini (2018) from Ásta (2008, 2013), is a social property. Humans confer social properties onto objects based upon their judgments of physical facts, according to Ásta. Baldini points out that, in the particular case of street art, our judgments are not constituted merely from identifying the content and legality of the artwork (Baldini, 2018, p. 31). We confer subversiveness from the aggregation of these facts. Ásta (2013) also observes that social properties are properties dependent on the response of individuals. In that way, subversiveness is also a contextually-dependent construct, oscillating between the different cultural, historical, and sociological contexts of a place. When evaluating the subversiveness of an object, one must examine it holistically based on the aforementioned

variables. Object-centered ontologies give primacy to the work-product such that concerns of spontaneity and subversiveness are relegated or altogether disregarded.

Baldini's performance-based ontology is compelling at first glance. Previous attempts at constructing an ontology of street art have yielded mixed results, partially because these ontologies have neglected integrating the generative performance of street art. Baldini articulates precisely this concern and purports to redress it, but the performance-based ontology is just as problematic as previous endeavors. Performance-based ontology regards the street art work-product as ancillary to the performance and favors a narrow breed of the diverse medium. In virtue of endorsing an ontology that assumes that appreciation is derived from the performance, the work-product simply becomes the manifestation of this performance. Baldini (forthcoming) himself labels street artworks as "traces revealing a street artist's activity," traces of an activity that "an appreciator can imaginatively reconstruct" when viewing an artwork (p. 291).

Theorizing street art artworks as traces accommodates those street artworks that are unconcerned with the aesthetic value of their product, viz. graffiti. Conveniently, Baldini often supplements his ontology with myriad examples of graffiti, rather than a broad selection from the medium. When we introduce Blu's monolithic murals or Shelly Miller's breathtaking sugar paintings into the discussion, there is unmistakably an aesthetic appreciation working in tandem with performance appreciation. Our holistic examination of street art reveals that Baldini's ontology is predisposed towards a genus of street art, not the species itself. Where that leaves us then is with aconsensuality, which we have adequately defended from Baldini's counterargument. Let us not completely discount Riggle's ontology either, for Bacharach endorses the general notion that street art makes the street internal to its meaning, as do I. What Riggle's ontology lacks is a sufficient definition for conceptualizing *the street*, so our endorsements are tentative. We may be

able to largely circumvent this issue by assenting aconsensuality, but another crucial deficiency of the extant street art ontologies are that they have all managed to neglect a ubiquitous form of contemporary art: film.

III. Developing a Clearer Picture of the Moving Image

The ontological study of film has existed nearly as long as the medium itself, emerging in Hugo Münsterberg's (1916) monograph *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. Unique in its ability to circumvent the boundaries of time, space, and causality, film is a visual medium "adjusted to the free play of our mental experiences and which reach[es] complete isolation from the practical world through the perfect unity of plot and pictorial appearance" (p. 138). The inner world of the film, later to be denoted as the *diegesis*, was of particular interest to Münsterberg as a psychologist. Unlike other visual mediums, we are (ideally) completely immersed in the sensory experience of watching whatever film is playing. Filmmakers achieve this continuity of existence through formal techniques such as editing, shot composition, costuming, and lighting. Moreover, the 'photoplay' was still in its infancy when Münsterberg was writing in 1916; a century later, proliferation of movies has exponentially grown. Film critic André Bazin, inspired by Münsterberg's work, indelibly transformed the landscape of film ontology with *What is Cinema?* (1971), a two-volume interrogation into every facet of the moving image with appraisals of exemplary films. The photograph, millions of which compose a film, is the mirror that a director holds up to reality in creating their art. Bazin believes that the photograph is therefore uniquely transparent:

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere

approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. (p. 26)

Film's ability to bridge the gap between *realism* and *the real* is the apotheosis of the Renaissance tradition of painting. Where centuries of artists had attempted to recreate a moment in time, photography now enabled them to create images for people to look *through*, rather than *at* (p. 165). This entails a fundamental disjunction between painting and moving images: one's perception and enjoyment of paintings relies on aesthetic interest, whereas photographs are aesthetically disinterested. The photograph is identical with the object itself for Bazin, so, in seeing the photograph, we care not for its inherent aesthetic properties; we are aesthetically disinterested in the photograph.⁵ A second, more conspicuous disjunction between painting and film concerns counterfactual dependence.

Counterfactual dependence refers to the dependent relationship between an object and observer in art. If object *x* is *photographed* by person *y*, then it axiomatically follows that object *x* will appear in the photograph as it existed when seen by person *y* (Currie, 1996, p. 53). If I take a photograph of cars I see passing by on the freeway, then the photograph will represent the cars passing by on the freeway as they are. I do not expect that the image will show them levitating or driving in reverse because the camera is dependent on the counterfactual (or actual) object.

Painters, on the contrary, act as the intermediary between the object and the image (Walton, 1984, p. 261). If I were to paint the same image that I previously photographed, I now have the liberty to modify how the cars appear as much or as little as I like. Perhaps I wish to paint each car blue in my scene, even as the assortment of car colors in the freeway is more variegated. My intervention in this instance, a freedom that any artist may exercise in their

⁵ We will return to this concept shortly when evaluating the transparency thesis of Kendall Walton.

artwork, is an indication that we are independent of the counterfactual situation we are representing when painting. Therefore, according to Kendall Walton's (1984) transparency thesis, when I see a photograph of cars passing by on the freeway, or of my great-great-grandmother who is long deceased, I am seeing those objects themselves (p. 251).

An objection to the Transparency transparent thesis is that neither photographs nor the moving image contains the necessary spatial egocentric information to be transparent.⁶ Spatial egocentric information, sometimes called spatiotemporal information, refers to the human ability to gain knowledge about the location of objects in space and time through our perception (Currie, 1995). There exist many prosthetic devices that we regard as transparent, such as mirrors, periscopes, and telescopes. Walton exploits this slippery slope as a challenge to his skeptics: differentiate those prosthetic seeing devices from photography or cinematography. Although this challenge might seem to sweep the rug out from under us, this is not so when we realize that it would be fallacious to assume there is continuity between these prosthetic devices and photographs. All optical devices, including mirrors, enable the user to ascertain spatial egocentric information in the process. For, if humans were unable to see where objects, especially threats, lie, then our survivability would be significantly diminished. In the case of prosthetic seeing devices, we can still look around the imminent space in the lens or the mirror and know what is there. Photographs cannot give us the same spatial egocentric information any bodily or prosthetic seeing device can (Currie, 1995, 65). Without such information, photographs cannot be transparent and are therefore not things we merely see through.

Walton (1997) provides a thought experiment to counter the spatial egocentric argument. Suppose that I am seeing a carnation through a series of mirrors, ignorant of their number, their

⁶ There are other refutations to the Transparency thesis that we will not discuss for our limited purposes, including Carroll's (2008) argument against aesthetic disinterest.

location, or the fact that there are mirrors. Even though I lack egocentric information of the carnation, Walton asserts that I see that carnation. He then introduces a variation, wherein I see the carnation in front of me, but now I suspect there are mirrors on each wall which preclude me from knowing where the carnation truly is (Walton, 1997, p. 129). In this case -- Walton argues -- if asked if I see the carnation, I would say that I do not. Thus, Walton himself invokes the weakness of a doxastic requirement (belief requirement) on the part of the seer. Stated another way, agreeing that we cannot see the carnation in the second case means we tacitly agree that our beliefs affect how we see the carnation. Cohen and Meskin (2004) suggest that, although my beliefs may be undermined or eroded because of the mirrors, it does not follow that “such confusion should vitiate [my] capacity to see” (p. 199). Undoubtedly I may question where the carnation is, but my belief does not prevent me from accessing reliable spatial egocentric information about the carnation insofar as I can orient myself toward the object. We cannot spatially orient ourselves within a photograph, at least to the degree that would be sufficient to warrant a serious interrogation of the notion (Carroll, 2008, p. 102).⁷ Therefore, the transparency thesis collapses under the pressure of its own suppositions.

Of course, we still require an adequate explanation for what film *is*, one that we may adduce in evaluating its compatibility with street art. There are myriad comprehensive accounts that philosophers have provided in answering the question, “what is cinema?”⁸ No doubt that one could ask ten philosophers for their definition of film and come away with eleven answers, but

⁷ The advent of 3D imaging for popular entertainment (movies, televisions, and recently in the Facebook application), as well as the proliferation of omnidirectional (360-degree) cameras are noteworthy technological advancements which bear consideration. These technologies *mimic* the effect of inhabiting a 3D environment, but insofar as they simulate this effect rather than providing spatial egocentric information, then they are merely optical illusions. If 3D imaging were to advance in such a way as to provide the same physiological stimulation as existing in a real environment, this may refute the argument for spatial egocentricity discussed above.

⁸ See Bazin (1971), Danto (1979), and Currie (1995) for other prominent ontologies of cinema.

for our purposes, Noël Carroll (2008) has elucidated the most comprehensive definition for the phenomenon. Carroll describes x cinematic work such:

x is a moving image if and only if (1) x is a detached display or a series thereof; (2) x belongs to the class of things from which the promotion of the impression of movement is technically possible; (3) performance tokens of x are generated by templates that are themselves tokens; (4) performance tokens of x are not artworks in their own rights; and (5) x is two-dimensional. (p. 73)

Let us elaborate on this definition piecemeal. The notion of *detached display* is an intuitive extension of spatial egocentricity. When we perceive an object in space normally, we ascertain spatial egocentric information about said object in relation to us that we use to orient ourselves toward it. If I am standing on Crissy Field in San Francisco looking toward the Golden Gate Bridge, I orient myself to face directly toward the iconic structure. However, if I am in New Orleans watching the shot of the Golden Gate Bridge in *Dirty Harry*, I cannot immediately orient myself toward the Golden Gate Bridge. Film is evidently “phenomenologically detached” from our physical bodies, even if the camera interacts with the space around it (p. 57). This brings us to Carroll’s second requirement: the moving image belongs to a category that gives the *impression* of movement. When we watch a movie, we anticipate movement to occur in the film; this expectation is rational for a viewer to have given the nature of the *moving* image itself. However, it is perfectly reasonable that a filmmaker may exploit this human inclination for their own ends. Carroll gestures to Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*, a film composed of still images that convey a story. The very essence of such a work is an artistic antinomy; yet, are we to deny that Marker’s much-lauded film is no longer that which it is routinely categorized as? Because we

must account for static films, Carroll's second requirement presupposes that we *anticipate* movement when watching a film, rather than categorically assume it (p. 61).

Having assuaged the first two concerns, a new problem is introduced in the theater. Motion pictures and theatrical performances are kindred spirits, so much so that the nascent film industry struggled to differentiate itself from theatrical performance. Though it evolved into a distinct artform by the mid-1910s, theatre and film both belong to the "multiple-instance" type of art (p. 64). Each instance, or performance, of the art is designated as a token experience; however, these token performances are produced entirely differently. Motion picture 'performance' is a referent for the use of a *template* -- DVD, Blu-Ray, film reel, VHS, streamed video -- to show a movie, whereas a token performance for the theater is an *interpretation* of a play, a "recipe" as Carroll insightfully describes it (p. 66).⁹ When a theatregoer witnessed Laurence Olivier performing in a rendition of *Hamlet* at the Globe Theatre, they witnessed the performance token of Shakespeare's text as interpreted by Olivier; in this instance, the interpretation is the artwork. When a moviegoer witnessed a performance token of Olivier as Hamlet in his film adaptation of the play, the performance token was generated from a film reel template; in this instance, the film reel was the artwork. Thus, requirements three and four acknowledge that film "performance tokens" (a screening of a film) are generated from a template (ex. DVD) and, unlike theatrical performance tokens, these tokens are not artworks unto themselves. Yet, one class of counterexample, the mechanical figurine, appears to fit all of the requirements (p. 72). The mechanized Jack Sparrow that peeks out of a barrel on the *Pirates of*

⁹ Arthur Danto (1985) discusses the significant role that actors play in delineating a film from a theatre performance. He writes: "In a movie, a role belongs to the person who plays it in the sense that were another to play the so-called same role, it would be in a different *work*. So the fact that films use actors ought not to mislead us into thinking of film as an essentially performative art inasmuch as nothing counts as a different performance of the same work." (italics original; p. 107).

the Carribean ride in Disneyland still fits the bill, yet no one acquainted even in the most tangential way with film would defend mechanical figurines as film. To avoid this objection, the final requirement enumerated by Carroll stipulates that a motion picture must be *two-dimensional*.

Having briefly laid the ontological foundations for both street art and film most germane to our discussion, we may now build our argument concerning the relationship between these two prominent forms of contemporary art.

IV. The *MUTO* Dilemma

Ask most aestheticians interested in street art what their mind goes to when they contemplate cinematic street art and likely all will mention *MUTO*. *MUTO* (2008)¹⁰ is a short-film by the street artist Blu, a renowned street artist famous for his intricately painted murals and animated shorts.¹¹ These shorts all utilize the street in the same way -- that is, the street becomes an individual frame of animation for the video.¹² Blu individually paints an image, photographs it, paints over it, and paints the same image a few inches ahead of the previous. The tedious process yields a truly astonishing reward for us viewers, but *MUTO* also poses a dilemma because it is amenable to certain ontological accounts of street art but not others. I argue that *MUTO* cannot be cinematic street art.

For their parts, Riggle (2010) and Baldini (forthcoming) identify *MUTO* as street art, and Riggle specifically gestures to consensus among artists and appreciators that Blu's film is street art as proof of its status (Riggle, 2010, p. 256). The status of *MUTO* is much more precarious

¹⁰ *MUTO* is available here: <https://youtu.be/uuGaqLT-gO4>

¹¹ Blu's body of work is available here: <http://blublu.org/b/category/news/>

¹² Street artists, such as the Broken Fingaz collective in Israel, have since reused Blu's technique for their own artworks: <https://vimeo.com/10555187>

viewed through the lens of Bacharach's ontology. Should we accept Bacharach's view that street art broadly is aconsensual, we would have to accept that each individual artwork must be aconsensual. Given this, *MUTO* would need to itself be an aconsensually-produced film. "What is the issue with this?" the performance-centered ontologist may ask. I may necessarily concede that Blu produced his individual artworks, the frames of each painting, without consent from the property owners, therefore each artwork is street art in itself. This is irrelevant, however, since the aconsensuality of these artworks does not apply to the film -- aconsensuality is not a transferable property as elucidated by Bacharach. The aconsensuality of an artwork is inextricably linked to it and cannot apply to any other artwork by proxy, such as a photograph taken of an aconsensual artwork. A natural solution to this may be to invoke Walton's transparency thesis. If photographs are transparent, then there is no aconsensuality to be transferred between Blu's street artworks and *MUTO*: the photograph, by virtue of being seen through, *is* aconsensual. This is a tempting solution, but it necessitates that we back a theory proven dubious. Even if we discount the spatial egocentricity counterargument, a new predicament rears its head. Encountering street art 'in the wild' is an intuitively distinct experience from encountering street art on Instagram. What Riggle (2010) brilliantly describes as an "unsolicited aesthetic injection," that moment of happening upon street art on an otherwise ordinary walk, is incomparable to the phenomenological event of finding a picture of street art on the internet. Having acknowledged the phenomenological disparity between these two experiences, we disarm the transparency theorist's potential argument that seeing street art in the wild and in a photograph is the same experience.

Perhaps the most controversial characteristic of *MUTO* is the one we have not yet addressed, that the short-film is not located in physical space. Each example supplied herein or in

the extant street art literature assumes *a priori* that street art begins and ends on the street. For, if the conception of a street artwork was not the street, then its genealogical essence would be of another kind. Components of a street artwork (e.g. stencils for spray painting, knitted fabrics for yarn bombing) may be created beforehand, but the product is only realized in the street. The converse is true of *MUTO*. The street artwork paintings in Blu's short-film are components analogous to stencils, *ad hoc* tools for the creation of an artwork. *MUTO* brilliantly utilizes one medium, street art, to generate a product in another, film. But, dissimilar to street art, *MUTO* does not become a film until *after* it has been on the street. Not until all of the still frames are organized chronologically in editing software is the film realized. If street art is conceived in the street, then cinematic street art is as well. Since *MUTO* does not become a film until *after* the street, the cinematographic element of it cannot be a component of a street artwork. This is why we so naturally conflate *MUTO* as cinematic street art when it is a film *about* street art!¹³

If *MUTO* cannot be cinematic street art because it is not aconsensually produced, transparent, or begins in the street, it begets the question, what examples are there, if any?

V. Finding a Spot for Film in the Street

Possibly the most intuitive and parsimonious solution one may gesture towards as cinematic street art are films projected onto the street. Far from the unwieldy devices they were a century ago, projectors are now a highly compact and generally affordable means to watch video on any space. Why could we not project, say, Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* onto an alleyway in Queens and label that cinematic street art? Similar to a knitted yarn-piece that is then attached to

¹³ My choice of wording here may provoke some criticism. *MUTO* is not necessarily *about* street art in the same way that Varda's *Mur Murs* (1981) or Silver's *Style Wars* (1983) is. In those documentary films, street art is the subject that the filmmakers choose in order to engage broader discourses about society. By contrast, street art is the object in *MUTO*.

a street pole, the skeptic could say that *Ikiru* is an ingredient of the artwork but not yet the artwork until it is placed in the street. The problem here is that it assumes that *Ikiru* gains meaning by virtue of being projected outside of the cinema. In fact, no unique artistic work occurs because projecting *Ikiru* itself does not make the street internal to the film's function. The film can be projected anywhere in the world and retain its poignancy. Applied retroactively, any film not produced with the exclusive intention of internalizing a site into the film's meaning cannot be street art. This negates the preceding A24 Public Access case as street art. Let's disregard for the sake of argument that the Public Access screenings are permitted and therefore consensual; that conceded, the films themselves do not make the street essential to their meaning. In an interview with Forbes, an A24 marketing executive stated that the decision was made in part because A24 films "are rooted in a sense of place" (Dawson, 2019). Showing A24's films on billboards in their respective environments democratizes the art, similar to street art, and engenders immersion. Yet, the environmental complementarity is just that: complementarity. Their films in and out of the billboard projection spaces are unchanged and utilize the same template. Cinematic street art requires that we find a film that transfigures the space it inhabits akin to the methods that other street artworks do, or more broadly that we find a means to transfigure a space cinematically.

Suppose that rather than projecting an existing film on the street, we projected a film intentionally created for a specific space. Say, for example, that there is a brick apartment building in Queens that we choose to make an artwork for. Every night, we notice that the man living in apartment 4A opens his window to get some fresh air. For a week, we project a video that we have made onto the window of apartment 4A. In it, a man falls out of the apartment and towards the ground, and the token is repeated in a thirty-second loop from the template movie we

created. The street is internal to the cinematic artwork's meaning in this scenario, both in its temporality and its dedicated use in the street, it checks every one of Carroll's boxes, and it can be produced aconsensually. However, even in this example it is not clear that the street is transfigured in the relevant sense. Indeed, LED throwies or sugar art, artworks that do not alter the surface, still hang from the street or adhere to it. Such artworks supply a fair counterpoint to concerns over transfiguration, but it does not account for the breadth of street art practices. In protest of defense contractors developing laser weapons, the legendary collective Graffiti Research Lab (GRL) designed a laser projection device called *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* (2007).¹⁴ In layman's terms, a high-powered projector recreates images that a person draws with a laser by tracking the movements of the laser with a computer program, creating the illusion of drawing with a laser. Street art of this variety reworks our concept of the medium with cutting-edge technology. If one denies that GRL's *L.A.S.E.R. Tag* is street art just because of its methods, they risk nullifying the avant-garde ethos of street art. We have made a foray into cinematic street art with the suggestion of a projected subcategory of cinematic street art, but surely there are more instances.

In 2009, the art collective Sweatshoppe premiered a new technology that allowed them to create the illusion of painting with video.¹⁵ With each stroke, a piece of the image emerges from the surface it is placed on, eventually coalescing into a single image or video. The technology behind their work is still unknown, but likely involves the use of certain light devices and reactive liquid placed on the surface. Sweatshoppe's marvelous work seems to check every ontological box for street art aestheticians and Carroll's definition of film. Take, for example,

¹⁴ Their artwork and website is available here: <http://www.graffitiresearchlab.com/blog/projects/laser-tag/#video>

¹⁵ My thanks to Sondra Bacharach for bringing this collective to my attention.

Sweatshoppe's *Repopulate* (2013) in the occupied Palestinian territory of Israel.¹⁶ Sweatshoppe member Blake Shaw travels to various historical locations in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Jaffa, and "paints" videos of refugees, symbolically "return[ing] the image of the refugees to their ancestral homes." The spatiality of the *Repopulate* video paintings gain purchase on the artwork's meaning. Only by situating these specific films in these specific locations do the video paintings become a compelling symbolic protest. They are also placed aconsensually, even if they incur no material consequences for the spaces they are placed in. So far, we seem to have the ideal candidate for cinematic street art -- until we reexamine the definition of film. Recall Carroll's five requirements for determining how a film must function: (1) as a detached display, (2) to give the impression of movement, (3) be a performance token generated by a templates, (4) performance tokens are not themselves artworks, and (5) be two-dimensional (Carroll, 2008, p. 73). Sweatshoppe's approach fulfills (1), (2), (3), and (5), but is antithetical to (4). The videos of Palestinian refugees in *Repopulate* are each performance tokens from a template, the template being a projection or light transmission that causes the chemical reaction in the projection liquid. What then negates (4) is the interjection of the painting performance itself. Part of the video painting's aesthetic value is that the video is revealed through an unpredictable combination of strokes. In *Repopulate*, Shaw pushes his roller at random, eventually coalescing into a painted block that reveals the face of a refugee. In order for video painting to conform with (4), each performance token would need to be an exact replication of the previous -- this is infeasible in Sweatshoppe's approach. Moreover, a hypothetical performance token of this variety would betray the core experience of video painting as an unpredictable multimedia spectacle.

¹⁶ A video of Sweatshoppe's work available here: <https://vimeo.com/65691265>

The remaining candidates for us to consider are two primitive forms of film that preceded the projected movie image: the zoetrope and the Mutoscope. Both devices rely on a manual crank that the operator spins in order to imbue still images with a sense of motion. The zoetrope is a cylindrical device inserted with images or 3D models that is viewed through a slit, while the Mutoscope is a coin-operated device that plays a reel of images in succession, like a flip book, viewed through a private window. Both devices lost their novelty with the advent of projected film, but are still used in special occasions or contexts.¹⁷ Of pertinence to our discussion is Bill Brand's *Masstransiscope*, a 1980 public artwork installed in the New York subway tunnels. The artwork consists of 300 feet of individual frames placed on the tunnel wall opposite the train, with a barrier in between that has 228 individual slits and fluorescent lighting to illuminate the frames. As the train moves through the tunnel, the gorgeous metamorphosis of shapes animates and brings aesthetic value to an otherwise mundane subway ride.¹⁸ Had *Masstransiscope* not been funded by government programs and permitted, it would be accordant with the standards we set forth for cinematic street art. But the prerequisites for zoetropes as cinematic street art need not be so elaborate; a common zoetrope installed on the street also fits the bill. Although a skeptic may counter that the zoetrope is three-dimensional and therefore contradictory to Carroll's requirement (5), the image produced from the zoetrope itself is two-dimensional. A movie playing in the cinema is witnessed in a three-dimensional space, yet we do not say that the film itself exists three-dimensionally. Mutoscopes could similarly be installed in the street. The skeptic might also offer the concern that neither of these artworks are subversive, one of the vital

¹⁷ The prolific animation studio Pixar created an intricate 3D zoetrope for the release of their landmark film *Toy Story* in 1995. The zoetrope has since toured many museums and been displayed in Disneyland, but it is currently on display at the Academy Museum: <https://www.academymuseum.org/en/toy-story-zoetrope>.

¹⁸ Brand thoroughly documents the making of *Masstransiscope* on his website here: <https://www.billbrand.net/public-art>

characteristics of street art that Baldini (2016; 2018; forthcoming) observes. Subjectivity plays a serious role in subversiveness. What is subversive is contextually-dependent, Ásta (2013) tells us, but something as antiquated and rare as a zoetrope or Mutoscope, especially located in the street, is generally unconventional. To what extent placing these devices in the street is subversive is up for debate, but it is intuitive and uncontroversial to assert that a zoetrope on the street subverts norms.

VI. New Kid on the Block

Street art, once on the cutting edge of avant-garde art, has now become a mainstream phenomena. Yet, as we create ontologies for the artform and, in doing so, partition the styles of street art that exist, new questions emerge. This article has answered one such question: what is film's place in street art? I have suggested multiple hypothetical and actual examples of cinematic street art that heretofore were not conceptualized as such, and disputed other examples that one may have initially demarcated as cinematic street art. If street art scholars wish to defend the likes of *MUTO* and video painting as cinematic street art, they bear the burden of amending the aforementioned street art ontologies or potentially reconceptualizing the artform entirely. An explanation for why we have such limited examples to reference at this time is that cinematic street art may be nascent. Its highly particular approach, combined with the recent advent of consumer film technologies, set a high bar for artists to clear before they have cinematic street art. I hope then that this article may engender a prescriptive template for street artists interested in experimenting with cinematic street art.

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