



“Pleasure stolen from the poor”: Community discourse on the ‘theft’ of a Banksy

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Abstract:	<p>The removal of street art from community walls for private auction is a morally problematic yet legal action. This paper examines community reactions to the removal of Banksy’s No Ball Games for private auction. 500 unique reader comments on online newspaper articles reporting this controversial event were collected and analysed. An emerging set of urban moral codes was used to position street art as a valuable community asset rather than as an index of crime and social decay. The latter discourse informed a repertoire that depicted No Ball Games as unlawful graffiti that was rightfully removed. Here, the operations of ‘the police’ (Rancière, 1999) in the distribution of the sensible are evident in the assertions that validate and depoliticize the removal of No Ball Games. This repertoire was used to attribute responsibility for the work’s removal to deterministic external forces, while reducing the accountability attributable to those responsible for the removal of the work. A contrasting anti-removal repertoire depicted street art as a gift to the community, and its removal as a form of theft, and a source of harm to the community. The pro-removal repertoire incorporates and depoliticizes elements of the anti-removal repertoire, by acknowledging the moral wrong of the removal, but yielding to the legal rights of the wall owners to sell the work; and by recognizing the status of street art as valuable, but asserting that the proper place for art is a museum. The anti-removal repertoire counters elements of the pro-removal repertoire, by acknowledging the illegality of street art, but containing this to the initial act of making unsanctioned marks on a wall, after which point the work becomes the property of the community it is located within. This analysis reveals an emergent set of urban moral codes that positions a currently legal action as a form of criminal activity.</p>

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8 legal action. This paper examines community reactions to the removal of Banksy’s No Ball
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10 this controversial event were collected and analysed. An emerging set of urban moral codes was
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26 moral codes that positions a currently legal action as a form of criminal activity.
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43 Graffiti; street art; Banksy; stolen art; community attitudes
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2 At 1.10pm on Tuesday the 23rd of July, 2013, police were called to the scene of a reported crime
3 at the Alex BG convenience store, on the corner of Tottenham High Road and Philip Lane in
4 Tottenham, North London. A local resident had reported that two men were trying to remove an
5 artwork from the side of the building, which faces onto a public thoroughfare. The officers
6 arrested and detained the men on suspicion of causing criminal damage, but were later forced
7 to release them once it had been established that the building's owner had consented to the
8 work being removed from the exterior wall. A spokesman for the Metropolitan Police said the
9 men had been "de-arrested" (Tottenham Journal, 2013).
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17 The artwork in question was *No Ball Games* (see Figure 1. below) a stenciled piece by the street
18 artist Banksy that first appeared on the wall in 2009, and had been protected from the elements
19 and from defacement by others by a large Perspex shield placed over the work since that time.
20 Apart from an infamous amendment to the work in 2010 by King Robbo (who adapted the
21 wording of the children's sign to read, "Banksy has no balls") *No Ball Games* had remained
22 untouched on the wall since 2009.
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56 Fig. 1. No Ball Games. Photograph © Joe, LDNGraffiti.co.uk
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2 This was the second time that year that a work by Banksy had been taken without notice from
3 the walls of properties in the London borough of Haringey. In February of 2013, a stenciled piece
4 entitled *Slave Labour* was removed from the side of a Poundland Building on Whymark Avenue
5 in Turnpike Lane, in Wood Green. Both areas are relatively socio-economically deprived, and
6 Tottenham still bears the visible scars of the 2011 London riots. Tag or signature graffiti, rather
7 than more aesthetically pleasing street art, visually dominates these areas. Whilst graffiti is
8 often regarded as a sign of urban degeneration and social problems, street art is commonly
9 viewed as an index of urban regeneration and gentrification. Islington Council (2014: n.p.) warns
10 that, "graffiti can be the catalyst for a downward spiral of neglect... and encourage other more
11 serious criminal activity." Such aesthetic socio-moral judgments are based on long-held
12 associations between graffiti and criminal activity, as a visible index of social deprivation and
13 urban decay, and as a form of abjection and territory marking akin to public urination, as dirt or
14 filth, or "matter out of place." (Douglas, 2002: p.36) Cresswell (1992) argues further that this
15 discourse of disorder is grounded in graffiti's transgression of the authorities' more regulated
16 visions of the city. As such, street art and graffiti offer a visible challenge to our notions of public
17 and private space, and to the rights of property owners and other agents to alter our shared
18 urban environment (Young, 2014).

19
20 Both street art and graffiti are a now ubiquitous part of many contemporary cities. Graffiti
21 represents an older tradition than street art, and is often experienced as indecipherable by the
22 general public, as it involves the calligraphic practice of tagging the complex and highly stylized
23 names of the writer or their crew, often in as many places within the city (and across other
24 cities) as is possible so as to achieve a level of subcultural fame and recognition (McCauliffe,
25 2012). Some (e.g., Ferrell, 1996) have asserted that street art has a wider and less subcultural
26 audience than graffiti in that street art is often designed to engage the everyday viewer, and
27 indeed street art murals are now commissioned by some cities to revitalize drab urban areas
28 and to attract art tourism. However both street art and graffiti are ordinarily uncommissioned
29 and unauthorised, that is they are illegal in that they are marks made on private property
30 without permission, thus both graffiti writers and street arts engage in a certain element of risk
31 when inscribing their work on the surfaces of the city, though graffiti writers often face heavier
32 penalties when apprehended.

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2 Iveson (2014: 26) asserts that the policing of graffiti on the walls of a city is accomplished not
3 just by its erasure by authorities, but also crucially via the discourses used to categorise work as
4 'vandalism' or as indecipherable nonsense, which effect "the reduction of graffiti writers to
5 people who write but have nothing to say... [and thus have] no place/part in the city." It may be
6 argued that the rushed and indecipherable aesthetic of 'visually offensive' graffiti tags is in part
7 a response to the increased level of surveillance and punishment that graffiti writers, relative to
8 street artists, are subject to. That is, the offensive aesthetic of graffiti tags is produced by its
9 policing – in Foucault's (1982) sense, this is a form of productive 'repression'.
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17 Public attitudes towards graffiti and street art are complex and not well researched. Community
18 based approaches designed to assess people's experience of their urban environments offer us
19 some insights into people's views on unauthorized street art (e.g., Andron, 2014) and graffiti
20 (e.g, Vitiello & Willcocks, 2011); whilst Gralinska-Toborek and Kazimierska-Jerzyk's (2014) street
21 based surveys of city dwellers examine their aesthetic responses to the murals commissioned by
22 the city council as part of an attempt to regenerate the city. An affective divide appears to exist
23 in that responses to graffiti appear more commonly marked by revulsion and distaste as
24 something which diminishes the value of a community, whilst responses to street art are often
25 more positive, with some describing it as an unexpected pleasure, or 'gift', yielding delight upon
26 discovery or as work that brightens up the city (Waclawek, 2011). For Young (2014) viewers'
27 positive and negative responses to graffiti and street art in situ may be incorporated within the
28 broader notion of 'enchantment', which for her coheres in the arresting of the spectator's
29 passage through the city, and which represents a moment where other potential ways of being
30 in the city become visible.
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43 The Sincura Group, a London-based company specializing in high-end lifestyle and concierge
44 services, claimed responsibility for the removal of both *No Ball Games* and *Slave Labour* (with
45 the authorization of the respective buildings' owners). In both cases, the company released
46 statements asserting that the works had been "salvaged for renovation" given concerns for their
47 safety in their local environments. Tottenham in particular is a markedly socio-economically
48 deprived environment and is still recovering from the significant damage caused by the riots
49 that occurred there in August 2011. This rhetoric of precautionary protection against the
50 dangers posed by the original location of the works was augmented by the Sincura Group's
51 further claims that the works had "not been appreciated in situ" (BBC, 2013). While
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conservation and protection are established practices traditionally associated with the recognition of, and duty of care towards, fine art and cultural heritage, the Sincura Group's assertion that the excised works were not appreciated in situ, and the implication that proper appreciation could only occur in a sanctioned gallery space or museum seems extraordinary, given that street art's very existence, as such, has been argued to be dependent on its in situ nature, and ongoing dynamic relationship with the community it exists within (Young, 2014).

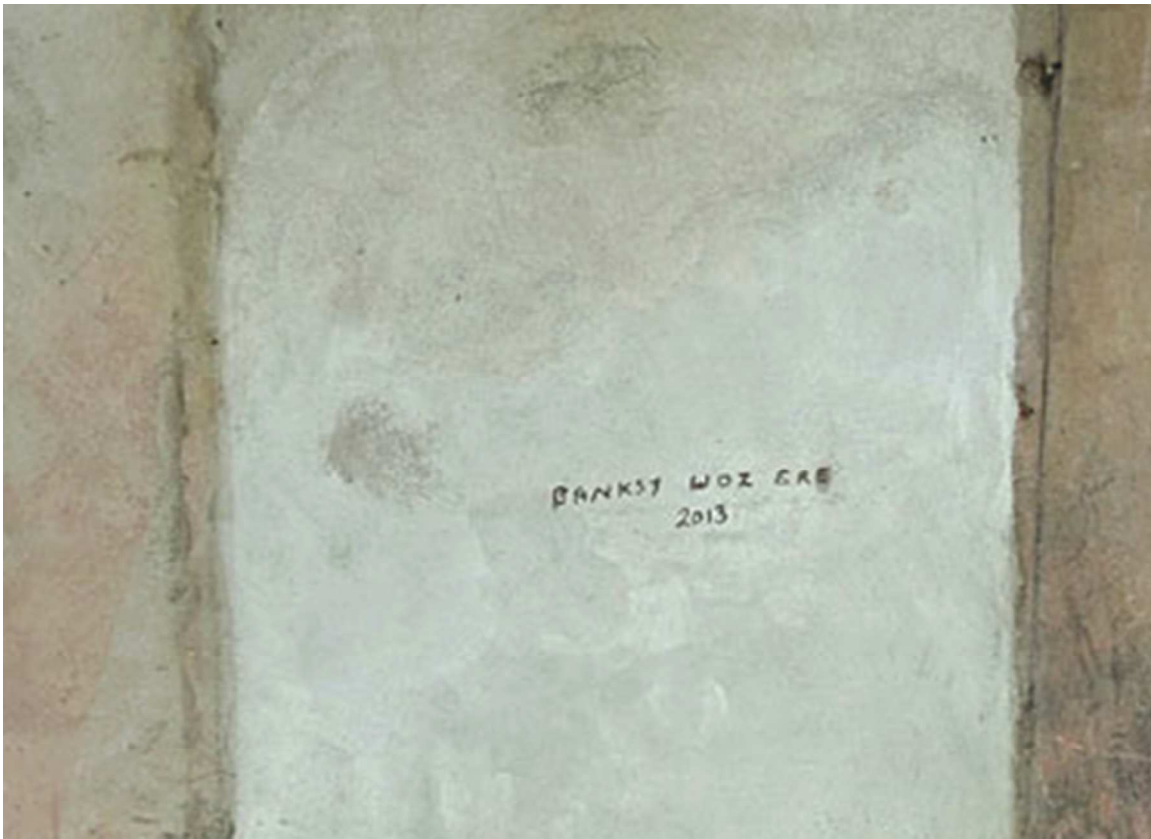


Fig. 2. The site post extraction of No Ball Games. Photograph © Joe, LDNGraffiti.co.uk

After *Slave Labour* was removed, the local community launched an initially successful protest that demonstrated the level of community attachment to this work. Vigils and demonstrations were held at the site of removal, and Local MP Lynne Featherstone released a statement directed at the agents responsible:

You have deprived a community of an asset that was given to us for free and greatly enhanced an area that needed it...I call on you, and your consciences, to pull the piece from both potential sales and return it to its rightful place (Tottenham & Wood Green Journal, 2013: n.p.)

1 The crowds that gathered at the site of removal held signs that read “Bring back our Banksy”,
2 appearing to assert community ownership of the work. This protest was grounded in the
3 community’s originally recognized claim over the work as belonging in – and to – its community
4 of origin. However, as Young (2014: 128) points out, while communities’ experiences of, and
5 belief in, ‘public space’ persists, the reality is that in many cities, apparently public spaces are
6 legally comprised of a grid of privately owned spaces. As a result of this highly publicized
7 community protest, *Slave Labour* was removed from auction in Miami, before it was later
8 returned to the UK and successfully auctioned several months later, for £750, 000. The strength
9 and volume of the community protest at the removal of these works appears to challenge the
10 Sincura group’s controversial assertion that these works were not being appreciated by their
11 communities of origin. Further, that the police also seemed to share the sense that the men
12 removing *No Ball Games* were committing a crime – in that they did initially arrest the workmen
13 at the site – demonstrates the cultural currency of this logic, in their policing of socio-moral,
14 rather than legal, geographies. Here, a focus on the policing of apparent transgressions to novel
15 socio-moral geographies – especially as these may conflict with existing legal boundaries – may
16 allow us to explore our shifting understandings of the proper uses, and patent abuses, of our
17 shared urban environments (McCauliffe, 2012: p. 191).

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33 Street art fans and collectors represent key cultural intermediaries in the relationship between
34 communities, street art and commerce (Dickens, 2010). Bengsten (2014) examined online
35 postings made by street art fans and found references to street art’s removal for private profit
36 as a morally problematic form of theft, and a counter rhetoric that characterised the removal of
37 street art as a positive means of preservation. This paper seeks to expand on Bengsten’s
38 observations, by examining the discourse of the wider public, rather than a smaller group of
39 collectors and enthusiasts, as this also seems an issue of significant local relevance for
40 contemporary urban communities. Indeed, Dickens (2008) has noted Banksy’s ongoing influence
41 in provoking community debate on the ‘value’ of street art. Elsewhere, the varied visual and
42 material responses of the local communities to the removal of these works have been
43 documented and analysed (Author names removed, 2015). The aim here is to investigate
44 community attitudes towards the removal of street art, as a morally problematic, yet patently
45 legal, action that is informed by the complex affective identifications and disidentifications of
46 communities with regard to street art and graffiti.

Analytic Materials

500 unique reader comments on online newspaper articles reporting the removal for auction of No Ball Games were collected. Newspapers include the Tottenham & Wood Green Journal; The Haringey Independent; The Huffington Post UK; BBC News London; The Daily Mail; and The Guardian. These media sources were selected to allow for the expression of both local and national community opinion, across both broadsheet and tabloid media.

Analysis

The following analysis is organized according to the extent to which the discourse either condones and/or condemns the removal of *No Ball Games*. This analysis also draws on the concept of interpretative repertoires, which are “recurrently used systems of terms used to characterise and evaluate actions, events and other phenomena. They are constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 149). In addition to identifying the repertoires employed by readers, the uses and rhetorical functions that they achieve, and the consequences set in motion by their use, will be explored. Two interpretative repertoires are discussed: a pro-removal repertoire, which depicts street art as vandalism, and its removal as an action that restores order and value to the community; and an anti-removal repertoire, which regards street art as a gift to the community, and its removal as a form of theft.

The pro-removal repertoire represented the majority (65%) of The Daily Mail reader comments; close to half of Huffington Post (53%) and Guardian comments (47%); and just over a third (36%) of BBC reader comments. The anti-removal repertoire was most popular amongst BBC readers (64%) and was least commonly endorsed by readers of the tabloid newspaper, The Daily Mail (35%) who drew most frequently on the older discourse of street art as vandalism. Notably, the opinions of the readers of the broadsheet newspaper, The Guardian, were evenly split (47/53) however when pro-removal, these readers’ comments drew less on the discourse of criminality and vandalism than did The Daily Mail’s readers, and more on the discourse of the rights of property owners in offering support for the removal of *No Ball Games*.

Street art as vandalism: removal as restoring order and value to the community

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4 The pro-removal repertoire positions graffiti as criminal activity and its removal as a morally
5 appropriate response. Despite the familiarity of this repertoire, it bears detailed examination
6 here, as the more historically recent anti-removal repertoire is rhetorically constructed to
7 counter specific elements of this often unchallenged and historically dominant discourse.
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12 A recurrent theme in the pro-removal repertoire involved the characterization of the work as
13 unwanted and illegal vandalism. Many readers supported the removal of *No Ball Games* by
14 portraying the work as the criminal destruction of public property, and the artist as a vandal
15 who should be prosecuted:
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19 *It's a pity someone hadn't painted over it. "Banksy" is just a vandal who should be*
20 *prosecuted. What an example we set to young people when we allow graffiti to blemish*
21 *our streets.*
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24 These accounts tended to describe the piece as an unsightly eyesore to which the appropriate
25 response is buffing or painting over by authorities. Thus the removal of *No Ball Games* was
26 praised as of positive benefit to the community:
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29 *surely the best option would have been to simple paint over the graffiti. or sand blast it*
30 *off. removing this illegally painted on graffiti, should have been done ages ago. good job.*
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34 Within this pro-removal repertoire, Banksy was cast as a criminal at large, and not a 'real artist':
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37 *= a criminal, not a real artist (cos not on canvas)*
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40 Here the category of 'real artist' is refused due to the form and placement of Banksy's
41 unauthorized work. 'Real art', by this common sense logic, is that which appears in the
42 sanctioned forms (e.g., paintings on canvas) found in museums and galleries (and not on the
43 street). Others considered Banksy's chosen method of stenciling to be outside of the proper set
44 of skilled activities constituting artistic practice:
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47 *If I caught so called Artist (Really, a criminal) Banksy defacing my wall, his teeth would*
48 *be embedded in it along with his "Art". Graffiti thugs are NOT artists. They are criminals.*
49 *Notice this Banksy does not actually draw or paint, more like uses stencils then calls it*
50 *art.*
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53 This group of readers often further claimed that street art was not art. That is, in addition to
54 endorsing descriptions of the work as vandalism or graffiti, they acknowledged the available and
55 potentially applicable category of street art, however they tended to refuse street art
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1 membership in the category of 'art' proper, thus dismissing its value and re-incorporating it into
2 the criminalized category of graffiti:
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5 *I am sick of "street" and "public" so-called art. If I want to see art I'll go and look for it. I*
6 *hate, loathe and detest the way some people believe they have a right to deface*
7 *property and then claim it is "art." Let's see how they like "art" sprayed on their*
8 *property, shall we? And what gives them the right to force their art onto everyone else?*

9 Here the categories of "street" and "public" art are acknowledged as candidate descriptive
10 categories, only to be ironized by their description as "so-called" art – that is, as illegitimate and
11 externally imposed false categories strategically claimed by those who "deface property" and
12 "force their art onto everyone else". Art is characterized as something that the viewer should
13 actively seek out (presumably in a museum or gallery) only when and if they wish to see it.
14 Street art is represented as forced encounter, as an uninvited visual assault on the everyday
15 viewer, and as an infringement on the rights of everyday people to make their own aesthetic
16 choices and manage their own walls/properties:
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26 *Who do the "arty" people think they are, to force their ideas on other people and tell*
27 *them what should be on the walls of their properties? I have the right to my own*
28 *individuality without someone tell me what art I supposed to like.*

29 The discourse of individual rights is invoked here to link freedom of aesthetic judgment and
30 preference to the expression of one's very identity – or the neoliberal consumer's complement
31 to freedom of expression, where the art one likes should not be imposed on one's senses by
32 others, but should rather be freely chosen, as an expression of one's individuality.
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40 Some readers denied that *No Ball Games* was art on the grounds that it represented an abject
41 affront to the viewer:
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43 *It's not art, not when it is analogous to territorial marking, not unlike a dog pissing on*
44 *every corner... It's unsightly and ugly.*

45 Such negative aesthetic socio-moral judgments are based on commonly held representations of
46 graffiti as a form of abjection and territory marking similar to public urination, or as dirt or filth
47 (Douglas, 2002, p. 36). However, not all aesthetic responses were as strongly worded. Indeed,
48 some viewers employed a rhetorical move familiar to public discussions of 'puzzling'
49 contemporary art, and declared that "my kids could do better", thus dismissing the aesthetic
50 value of (and political commentary provided by) the work, and denying *No Ball Games'* status as
51 'proper art' (and Banksy's status as a 'proper artist'):
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2 *Give the local school kids 20 mins and a few cans of spray paint and loads of stencils and*
3 *will be just as good.*
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7 Banksy's moral and professional status was further undermined by readers who characterized
8 him as an undesirable influence on young people, on account of his widespread and
9 indiscriminate acts of vandalism:
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11 *By doing graffiti all over the place, Mr. Banksy is encouraging young people to break the*
12 *law. His place is in prison, alongside corrupt MPs and pick pockets.*
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15 The notion of criminal activity being contagious to young people is a key element of the
16 persuasive rhetoric of moral panic (Hall et al., 1978). To contain this threat, readers often
17 recommended Banksy's incarceration, here in the nefarious company of petty street criminals
18 and corrupt politicians. In an appeal to the common sense logic of graffiti as an illegal act, some
19 appealed to other readers to acknowledge Banksy's criminal status as a fundamental, if seldom
20 admitted, truth, by defining the essence of the category "graffiti artist" as a criminal, and not an
21 artistic, identity:
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27 *Can we just for one moment acknowledge that as a graffiti artist, Banksy is a criminal,*
28 *albeit one that has not yet been caught.*
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31 Readers here also tended to focus on the undeniable illegality of the initial act of vandalism that
32 created the work as a means to subvert the applicability of the category of 'art':
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34 *Surely it was a crime when he made this 'art' piece?*
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38 Others appeared more positive towards Banksy's work, but depoliticized the removal of *No Ball*
39 *Games* as congruent with the ephemeral nature of street art – another form of the deterministic
40 rhetoric of the inevitable removal of graffiti and street art, albeit one less hostile towards the
41 work and the artist. This was accomplished by collapsing various different forms of removal
42 together as fitting with the expectations of both street artists and the public that street art will
43 ultimately be 'fleeting':
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48 *Street art is not supposed to be permanent. [It is] often written over by*
49 *others/vandalized by other writers*
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52 This ephemerality was described as an essential feature of street art, and for some, this was key
53 to its aesthetic appreciation:
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55 *That's the beauty of street art: If it's painted over, that's not fatal. Another will appear*
56 *somewhere else. Leave the valuation and the worshipping in front of artworks to galleries*
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2 *and things. The hallowed art thing is great too - don't get me wrong - and these*
3 *Sinewhatsit people nicking walls are evil sods - but for the Banksy stencils, it doesn't*
4 *matter. Art of the people, for the people, in public places. If it goes, well do another one.*
5 *It's just the same as someone saying "Oh! The magnificent deer racing across the*
6 *highlands! Here, I'll shoot it, so I can stick it on my wall". By taking the stencil out of the*
7 *street, and sticking it in a gallery, they're destroyed it and turned it into something else:*
8 *A stuffed deer's head in one case, and a stencil on some bricks in a room in another. In*
9 *the real world, there's more deer (hopefully) and more Banksys in public places to look at*
10 *and often laugh at. So no big deal. Just a bit irritating that some stupid greedy people*
11 *are as they are.*

12 Here, the erasure or removal of street art is described as an expectable fate, and one that
13 should not be mourned or protested, though milder responses of "irritation" at the "stupid
14 greedy people" responsible for the work's removal for auction are admitted. The ways in which
15 art is encountered within galleries and museums (the valuation and commodification of work;
16 the reverential "worshiping" of "hallowed" work by museum visitors) are marked here as
17 entirely inappropriate, and indeed inapplicable, to the everyday experience of street art in
18 public places. This reader incorporates many elements of the anti-removal repertoire, including
19 the claim that "taking the stencil out of the street, and sticking it in a gallery... destroyed it."
20 However, this allegation is softened by their additional claims that while the original work has
21 been destroyed by its removal, it has also been "turned into something else", and that, back in
22 the "real world", more works will appear in the street for people to encounter and enjoy. Here
23 the everyday encounter, rather than the objectified singular work, is prioritized as constituting
24 the 'beauty' of street art in differentiating it from the corporate artworld.

25 Some supported the removal of street art as a means to protect work that would otherwise "be
26 left to rot outside." Like Bengsten's (2014) street art fans, these viewers accepted the
27 ephemerality of street art, but considered the removal of work for profit as a means to
28 "preserve and protect" pieces of value against their inevitable decay or destruction:

29 *Better to be preserved than left to rot outside.*

30 A related series of comments supported Sincura's controversial claim that *No Ball Games* was
31 removed as it had not been "appreciated in situ":
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It didn't seem to be appreciated when someone graffitied over the sign with "Banksy has no Balls" a couple of years ago. It's better off off of the street and in a gallery where it can be protected properly whilst still being appreciated.

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This reader provides a reference to King Robbo's 'defacement' of the original *No Ball Games* in 2010, as collectively remembered evidence of Banksy's work being not appreciated in situ. Here graffiti, or material interventions on or around the work are seen as evidence of a lack of appreciation and respect, rather than a form of critical engagement with, or commentary on, the work (or in King Robbo's case, an amendment made as part of an ongoing series of visual retaliations directed at the artist, by visually altering a number of Banksy's works). This logic – of additional graffiti as proof of a lack of appreciation – was also adopted by the anti-removal repertoire, however conversely, for those readers, the apparent lack of graffiti and defacement of the work in situ was cited as evidence of its appreciation.

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Some considered that pieces like *No Ball Games* have already been preserved via digital photographs available online and that people should not expect to see the original work, as valuable original works of art are not intended for everyday people to experience directly. This rhetoric dismisses the act of removal as something that should be regarded as irrelevant, and not something to be concerned about, let alone protest against, as copies of the original are in circulation and are readily accessible:

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*The only way some artworks will ever be seen again is by photographs of them so what difference does it make if they are in a millionaire's vault or turned to ashes?
You and I will never see the original regardless of whether it still exists or has been destroyed.*

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Further, by this logic, responsibility for the work's removal was attributed not to individual agents, or even (as with the anti-removal repertoire) to structural forces such as capitalism, but rather to human nature itself, or "our destructive nature". This is a deterministic and essentialising strategy that provides for the necessity of digital copies of works of value, to counteract the harm of the work's removal by saving "digital representations for future generations":

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It is good that works like this have been saved digitally. With our destructive nature at least there will be digital representations for future generations to study... With digital recordings things can be truly preserved for future generations.

1
2 A further set of comments acknowledged that it was morally problematic to remove the work,
3 but adopted the deterministic and realist discourse of legality to accede to its lawful removal.
4

5 *Legally it's very simple. Morally it's more complicated.*
6

7 The persuasiveness of this rhetoric was further augmented by reference to the Sincura group's
8 promise to donate the profits from the sale of the work to charity, thus offsetting the
9 acknowledged moral wrong of taking the work from the community by "giving back to the
10 community":
11

12
13 *I resent the suggestion that this artwork, 'had not been appreciated in situ'. I live in
14 Tottenham and passed this artwork daily. I, and I'm sure many others, did appreciate it
15 and am saddened to see it go. That said, I am heartened that profits from the sale are
16 going to a local Haringey children's charity.*
17
18
19

20 While this reader identifies as a member of the local community, and resists the claim that it
21 was not appreciated in situ before praising Sincura's undertaking to donate profits from the sale
22 of the work to a local charity, others characterized local residents in a more negative light,
23 describing the area as a 'slum' and the act of giving to charity as 'more than most... residents
24 would do':
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29 *the fact that they are donating the money to a local charity is more than what most if
30 not all of the residents of this area would do which is a slum to put it mildly.*
31
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33

34 Others drew upon a metaphor more commonly found within the anti-removal repertoire, to
35 acknowledge that the work was a 'gift' from the street artist, however these writers
36 individualized the notion of the gift (rather than treating this as a gift to the collective
37 community) and thus incorporated it within the profit economy, declaring that as a gift it is the
38 property of its new owner.
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43 *It was painted on the side of someone's property without permission. If anything, it is a
44 gift and therefore can be disposed of freely.*
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48 Those who accepted this notion also often focused on the rights of wall owners, and the work as
49 private property with the logic that, "who owns the wall, owns the art." Such comments not
50 only depoliticize the act of removal, but also defend the innocence of the procurer and the
51 other parties involved in the work's removal for auction. These accounts tended to use 'bottom
52 line' logic and to draw on idiomatic (and thus unarguable) statements, such as, "nothing is free",
53 and "you cannot expect something for nothing."
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2 *Reading comments stipulating that Banksy's pieces belonging to the public makes for*
3 *infuriating reading. Anything found on land (good or bad) belongs to the entity which or*
4 *person who owns the land and not the community... no community has the right to*
5 *expect anything for nothing!!*
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10 Here, profit or personal greed is presented as an understandable motive, and the sale of the
11 work as a legitimate means of gain for the wall owners. Some positioned the decision to sell the
12 work as normative and reasonable, through the use of honesty phrases that interpellate the
13 reader with the inclusive pronouns us and we, which coopt the agreement of the reader, even if
14 they might deny that they themselves would act in such a manner:
15
16

17 *Let's be honest, we'd all do the same.*
18

19 Some readers oriented to the possibility that they might be accused of advocating a morally
20 problematic action and listed the socially understandable and morally defensible
21 personal/family uses to which they would put the profit from the sale of such work if placed in
22 this position:
23
24

25 *If it was painted on my house I'd flog it in a heartbeat, pay off the mortgage and set up a*
26 *nest egg for my children. Nothing morally wrong with that whatsoever.*
27

28 The reader below draws on what Sacks (1995) termed an 'at first I thought X, and then Y' device.
29 This operates by presenting an initial normative moral reaction, before presenting a less
30 normative or palatable reaction – in this case, the realization that if placed in this situation, one
31 would inevitably succumb and remove the work for personal financial gain:
32
33

34 *i am shocked but then, i started to think, if i woke one day with a banksy on my wall, and*
35 *that simply could bring me 500k! let be honest, i think i would cut it, sell it and justify it*
36 *saying that its place is in a museum!*
37

38 This formulation wards off potential accusations of naked greed, as presenting an initial reaction
39 of being "shocked" provides for a less motivated realization of the likely course of one's actions,
40 rather than a premeditated and calculated exploitation of circumstances. Also of note here is
41 that the rhetoric of the 'proper place' for art being in a museum is explicitly invoked here as a
42 reasonable excuse (with cultural currency) for potentially morally problematic (financially
43 driven) actions in removing street art for personal profit.
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55 **Street art as a gift to the community: Removal as theft**
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2 In contrast to those who supported the removal of *No Ball Games*, those who contested it
3 regarded street art as something that enhanced the value of the community it was placed
4 within. Within this anti-removal repertoire, street art was described as a gift to the community –
5 “for the public to enjoy” – and removal was portrayed as demonstrating a lack of respect for the
6 local community and more broadly, for “the people of this city”. Street art was regarded as
7 belonging to a community, and as something that augmented the value of the community, while
8 its removal was described as an action that diminished the community’s worth, and which
9 provoked feelings of sadness, anger, disgust and loss:

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15 *This disgusts me on a level I can't even word... It should be protected, the only person it*
16 *belongs to is the artist himself and he left it for the community to enjoy.*

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21 *I have to admit this saddens me. I appreciate the comments that the works were done*
22 *illegally initially, but the fact is they become pieces of art that everyone walking past can*
23 *appreciate and comment on, and so provide a point of interest for that community.*

24
25
26 *Surely these makes them property of the community and should be protected as such,*
27 *rather than cashed in.*

28
29 The reader above shows a concession to the logic of the realist pro-removal repertoire in not
30 contesting the fact that street art is illegal in the circumstances of its initial appearance,
31 however they counter this repertoire by asserting that “these works...[then] become pieces of
32 art”. That is, the criminality of street art is here contained to the initial act of making
33 unsanctioned marks on a city wall, after which point the work undergoes a transition to become
34 both art (as evidenced by the positive responses of the local community, in appreciating and
35 commenting on the work) and the property of the community it is located within and who thus
36 have a duty to protect it. Some readers also noted that street art could bring positive practical
37 benefits to a neighbourhood and that removing street art could have economic consequences
38 for already socially deprived communities in terms of reducing the number of visitors to the
39 area:
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48 *It's a shame because the block where I live has very little footfall because of a dangerous*
49 *main road which people don't like to cross; when the Banksy was in situ sightseers would*
50 *cross to see the Banksy and spend some money in the area. Nobody comes now.*
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1 Many of the readers who were against the removal of *No Ball Games* also took issue with the
2 Sincura Group's claim that the work had not been appreciated in situ, and offered their own
3 direct positive experience of the work in situ as proof of the local community's appreciation:
4

5 *I do not see how the Sincura Group can possibly know that the artwork was not*
6 *appreciated in situ. I am a local resident and enjoyed seeing it every day on the way to*
7 *work, and... many other people were happy to have it in Tottenham too.*
8

9 Others offered the condition of the work when in situ on the wall as evidence of the
10 community's appreciation:
11

12 *The fact that this 'graffiti' did not attract further 'graffiti' is evidence enough of*
13 *everyone's appreciation.*
14

15 Here, the absence of 'graffiti' obscuring the piece or defacing the wall it was placed upon is
16 presented as proof of 'everyone's appreciation' and respect for the work. It would appear that
17 'untouched' work is accepted within both repertoires as evidence of appreciation and that
18 graffiti (as opposed to street art) is regarded as a sign of disrespect and vandalism. However,
19 while the reader above categorizes *No Ball Games* as 'graffiti', they ironise this negative
20 categorization by placing scare quotes around the term, unsettling the commonsensical
21 judgments of the relative worth of street art vs graffiti adopted by many readers:
22

23 *Much of the graffiti you see are 'tags' done by teenagers. There is a difference between*
24 *that and street art. One needs to be stamped out the other needs to be protected.*
25

26 Other readers contextualized their everyday appreciation of *No Ball Games* within an account of
27 the daily visual pleasure it provided amidst the grim desolation of the post-riot destruction of
28 Tottenham, where many local buildings had been damaged and burned:
29

30 *shame! I used to walk past No Ball Games, on my way to work every morning. It's not a*
31 *particularly attractive part of town, and we don't have a lot to get excited about (not*
32 *since Lidl burned down, anyway) – [it] gave my dreary walk to the tube a bit of a focal*
33 *point.*
34

35 Such accounts illustrate the implications of the work's removal for the everyday lives of local
36 residents, and amplify the morally shameful consequences of the work's removal from a socially
37 deprived community who had recently experienced a damaging social upheaval:
38

39 *As if Tottenham hasn't had a hard enough time. Do they have to steal its art too? Give*
40 *the area a break, for Christ's sake.*
41

42 In this repertoire, removal was not considered a neutral act. Indeed some readers described this
43 in evocative visceral terms as "an attack on the community" or as a "violation":
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I feel like Tottenham has been violated. That piece of graffiti was for the community, it put a smile on people faces and it's been taken without any consideration for the community... [and] with no respect for the people of this city.

Further, many of those protesting against the removal of *No Ball Games* described its removal as a criminal act – as theft; criminal damage or vandalism – and offered the opinion that those removing it should be fined and/or imprisoned:

As Banksy has created this in a public place, I consider this is meant to be FOR the public. If this is then removed - by an individual or a company - for subsequent sale, that is theft ... Theft and/or vandalism charges should be brought.

"Graffiti" in a public place is quite obviously a public thing, done with public intent. The public "owns" all graffiti... graffiti is morally public property, even when it's on private property in a public place... it's morally wrong to remove public art and flog it in a gallery.

Here, the logic for considering *No Ball Games* 'stolen' rests on the claim that as it was created in public space, it is clearly intended for the public, and that its removal for private sale thus constitutes theft. That the police were called during the work's removal, and that they initially apprehended the workers on site, is testament to the cultural currency of this logic. However, as Young (2014: 128) points out, while communities' experiences of, and belief in, 'public space' persists, the reality is that in many cities, apparently public spaces are legally comprised of a series of intersecting privately owned spaces.

Some readers further argued that the act of removal 'destroyed' *No Ball Games*, in that it compromised the context and power of the work and neutralized its site-specific impact. These assertions provide an effective rhetorical counter to the pro-removal repertoire's rhetoric of removal as a form of preservation and conservation.

public art is destroyed and morphs into something completely different the moment you remove it from the public place it was made for. So dumb. Poor rich people: Buy art, and in so doing, destroy it.

1
2 *when you remove his art from the street, you're destroying the context of the work and*
3 *removing all of its power.*
4

5
6
7 Others extended the notion of theft and criminal damage beyond the remit of the community to
8 a national scale, describing the work's removal as the "destruction of a national treasure." This
9 heightens the transgression and immorality of the act of removal, as it renders it a crime against
10 the nation, and not just the local community. Street art is here considered not just the property
11 of the community, but as an asset – or treasure – of national significance worthy of protection:
12
13

14
15 *Whoever is doing this needs to be prosecuted for destroying national treasures.*
16

17
18
19 *I wonder if this sort of pillaging could be stopped if all his works were given listed status?*

20
21 *Then anyone defacing or removing them would face a heavy fine and / or imprisonment.*

22
23 *These works do not belong to any one individual or company, they belong to the people.*
24

25
26 Webster (2012) has argued that, with the support of the communities street art is located
27 within, there is in fact a strong case for Banksy's work being listed as heritage, despite its
28 relative 'newness', as many communities clearly value the aesthetic qualities and political
29 commentary provided by Banksy's work, and wish to protect it. However, Merrill (2015) notes
30 that attempts to protect street art as heritage may ultimately prove problematic as they would
31 unsettle its foundational illegality, which is regarded by many as a key measure of the very
32 authenticity of street art and graffiti as such, and further that such measures would likely be
33 resisted by graffiti subcultures along with (paradoxically) those adhering to a pro-removal
34 repertoire.
35
36

37
38 For proponents of the anti-removal repertoire, the sale of "public art for private profit", was
39 highlighted as running counter to the "point" of the work and the intention of the artist that it
40 remain in situ... rather than being taken from the community and contained in an art gallery to
41 be appreciated by very few privileged people.
42

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45 *It's sickening this is happening. The work was made for local consumption not a gallery*
46 *or private collectors and is a statement against those very people. Money, no morals and*
47 *certainly no class.*
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The whole point of Banksy's mural was to put across a message 'in situ'. It is a masterpiece for the community. What a pity that it will go into an art gallery to be appreciated by so few people!

Many readers characterised the 'art world' as exploitative, unethical and exclusionary in its commodification of 'public art' in placing profit before people's wishes:

The Art (business) World has nothing to do with ethics, morality or even good art and everything to do with hype, scarcity and making even more easy money. It's sad that Banksy's work should end up in this horrible sordid business...

Within this repertoire, the motivation attributed to those responsible for removing *No Ball Games* diverged from the pro-removal repertoire, where individual financial gain was accepted as a normative and defensible motive. Here, in contrast, greed was given as the driving force behind the work's removal, with this motivation being portrayed as particularly morally problematic as it involved the exploitation of ordinary people:

Greed pure greed - you can feel their eyes roving over you, yours and your territory checking to see how much they can make out of you or from you - may the person buying this piece artwork taken from the view of ordinary people have the most miserable time - if I believed in curses I would be putting a curse of every bit of pleasure stolen from the poor to be enjoyed only by the rich!

Note here that the focus is not on the robbery of *No Ball Games* as a valuable object in isolation, but rather on the theft (by the rich, from the poor) of the ordinary viewer's affective aesthetic pleasure in experiencing the work.

Readers suggested a range of strategies for protecting street art such as *No Ball Games* against removal for private profit. Besides heritage measures, it was commonly suggested that work be protected in situ, via the Perspex shields often seen placed over Banksy's work:

Surely this piece of art should have been put behind toughened glass and preserved for all to enjoy. But instead a profit will be made from something made to be enjoyed by all. They should be ashamed removing it.

Others promoted a more novel strategy of protection through forms of devaluation of the original work. Some readers suggested that Banksy should eschew authorship to make *No Ball Games* effectively worthless:

1
2 *Banksy should now make a statement that the mural wasn't one of his creations. That*
3 *leaves Sincura with a worthless chunk of plaster and a repair bill.*

4
5 Others were critical of Banksy as having contributed to, and even encouraged, the
6
7 circumstances under which his work might be 'stolen' for profit. Such comments referred to the
8
9 activity of "selling out" and accused Banksy of "driving up the price of his work."

10
11 *Banksy should not put work on private walls, only public walls or landmarks – he is*
12 *encouraging that which he dislikes.*

13
14
15 *I think Banksy needs to find better places to put them, so that they can't be turned into*
16 *profit so easily.*

17
18
19 It was also suggested that Banksy should make many copies of *No Ball Games* in order to render
20
21 the original worthless, or that he should restencil a further 'copy' in situ:

22
23 *Just stencil multiple copies of the work around the country as soon as it's sold, instantly*
24 *devaluing the original.*

25
26
27 *banksy should just use the old stencils for this piece and make 50 more copies. making*
28 *this one worth zero.*

29
30
31 *banksy should go back and put it back up, it would make a mockery of the sale*

32
33
34 Some readers went further in advocating the destruction of street art of value to render it
35
36 'worthless' and thus protect it from theft:

37
38 *If anyone had any brains they would graffiti over the graffiti to make it worthless... It*
39 *would be shame to lose it, but I would prefer to deny unscrupulous companies from*
40 *profiting by it.*

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45 *Banksy does the art for nowt and it belongs to the people of the area it is in. If there*
46 *were one near me I would be destroying it now before the money men moved in on it.*

47
48 Here, readers presented the local community as having the right, as the collective owners of
49
50 street art, to proactively destroy works of value in order to save them from being taken from the
51
52 communities where they belong. The destruction of street art is here presented as a paradoxical
53
54 form of appreciation rather than (as was more commonly expressed in both repertoires) as
55
56 evidence of a lack of appreciation by the local community.

Conclusion

This analysis explored the logic of two positions taken by community members in the aftermath of the removal of *No Ball Games* from a wall in Tottenham for private auction. These interpretative repertoires are divided according to whether readers were pro- or against- the removal of *No Ball Games* and further, whether the original work was regarded as a form of vandalism or a form of art; whether street art was considered to belong to the community or to be private property; whether the removal of *No Ball Games* constituted a restoral of the community's worth, or whether it was a theft that violated an already vulnerable local community; and whether the profit made by the work's sellers was immoral or could be considered legitimate. In addition to identifying the two main interpretative repertoires employed by readers, the uses and functions that they achieve, and the consequences set in motion by their use, were discussed. Specifically, it is clear that through the employment of a realist repertoire of *No Ball Games* as graffiti that was rightfully removed, community members work to attribute responsibility for the work's removal to deterministic external forces, while simultaneously reducing the accountability attributable to the agents responsible for the removal of the work. A contrasting anti-removal repertoire depicts street art as a gift to the community, and its removal as a form of theft, and a source of harm to the community.

However, these are not mutually exclusive repertoires. The older pro-removal discourse incorporates and depoliticizes elements of the anti-removal discourse, for instance by individualizing the notion of street art as a personal gift, rendering it private property that can then be freely disposed of by its owner; by acknowledging the moral wrong of the removal, but yielding to the bottom line 'reality' of the legal rights of the wall owners to sell the work; by recognizing the status of street art as valuable art rather than criminal vandalism, but asserting that the proper place for art is a museum, and not the street. Similarly, the anti-removal discourse assimilates and counters elements of the pro-removal repertoire, for example by acknowledging the illegality of street art, but containing this to the initial act of making unsanctioned marks on a wall, after which point the work becomes art and the property of the community it is located within.

We can see here the operations of what Rancière (1999) would call the police in the distribution of the sensible. In the pro-removal repertoire in particular, this is evident in the assertions that

1 validate and thus depoliticize the removal of *No Ball Games*. Rancière defines the police, not as
2 a uniformed authority, but as “the series of assumptions that structure life in common
3 [consensus] with the aim of avoiding politics” (Tanke, 2011: 46). He argues that the discourse of
4 realism is a powerful form taken by police operations in justifying inequalities and providing
5 grounds for difficult decisions by invoking necessity. Within the field of discursive psychology,
6 Potter and Wetherell (1987) regard this as a form of bottom line rhetoric that absolves the
7 speaker from responsibility for their views by invoking deterministic forces – for instance by
8 attributing the work’s removal to internal forces (e.g., “our destructive nature”); external forces
9 (the art market, or capitalism itself); or by reference to the intrinsically ephemeral nature of
10 street art and graffiti as a form of public art destined to disappear.
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21 These findings add to the themes identified by Bengsten (2014) whose analysis of the online
22 postings made by street art fans found references to street art’s removal for private profit as a
23 morally problematic form of “theft”, and a counter rhetoric of removal as a positive means of
24 “preservation”. However the focus here, on the comments of a wider public, rather than a
25 smaller group of ‘fans’ gives a sense of both the breadth and the complexity of community
26 attitudes on this matter. The strong affective responses by readers from both the pro- and anti-
27 removal repertoires demonstrates that this is an issue of significant local relevance for
28 contemporary urban communities, and bears witness to a socio-moral challenge to the division
29 of the sensible in documenting the emergence of a persuasive set of urban moral codes that
30 construes a currently legal action (removing street art for private auction) as a form of ‘criminal’
31 activity.
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