

IMPACT 7: Intersections and Counterpoints  
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### **The Wall: Substrate and Substance**

*“The hermaphrodite art of the alleys is taking on the status of a criterion. Its law is binding, and it throws all the cleverly reasoned principles of aesthetics straight out of the window”*

Brassaï (Gyula Halász) *Minotaure*, no 3, 1933, Paris

At the time Brassaï walked the streets of Barcelona accompanied by Picasso in search of graffiti, the walls of the gallery represented a place hermetically sealed from the troubled world outside. Brassaï’s photographs of urban walls provided impetus for artists to be receptive and responsive to the outward signals of society. Posters, billboards, flyers, graffiti and adverts constitute the domain of urban communication ranging from the corporate to the subversive. The unifying factor in all cases being their public accessibility, free to view.

Take a walk around most cities, perhaps a kilometre from the centre, and you will find such expositions. The potency of artworks produced for urban walls (distinct from graffiti or corporate communication) is in the constant ebb and flow of text and image pasted and painted. The architecture in each case remains unchanged, a palimpsest upon which the flux of material overlaps and eventually cancels itself out. Friedrich Engels must have observed a similar dialectic with the commercial bills, Chartists’ flyers and public announcements on the walls of London’s east end and the outlying urbanisation of mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Manchester. Historian Simon Gunn refers to Engels ‘developed style of grimly detailed reportage in order to extract meaning from the profusion of sense impressions’ of which the printed material pasted to walls would have surely constituted a significant visual onslaught.

The development of mechanised printing at the outset of industrialisation subsequently resulted in an equalled proliferation of printed material. The reproduction of books, maps, charts, engravings and all manner of visual information, coupled with the philanthropy of the public library and education reforms, brought about a greater social knowledge and accelerated socio-political

change. The political posters and flyers that survive from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are indicative of social mobilisation and communication but are in themselves a by-product. Their material significance is negligible in so far as they served their function within the brief period of their relevance, a rally, a meeting or march. But like the recent archaeological discovery of a discarded 'postbag' of writing tablets at the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman settlement of Vindolanda, the socio-historic insight of commonplace communication transcends the carefully orchestrated histories. To this end, much of the social cohesion of Manchester's 19<sup>th</sup> century working class (as evidenced in posters and pamphlets that survive) is conveniently unattended in Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

Industrialisation has evolved into globalisation, aided by digital technology and cyberspace. Communications are ever increasingly viewed on screens, be it on a computer, television or mobile phone. The material nature of our communications is almost redundant as we strive towards the paperless society and the archiving of such material is an unknown entity. And yet we maintain the rhetoric of the physical, real, first-life world through functions such as the 'wall' in Facebook and the notion of 'tagging' images and locating them geographically. The digitally sanitised space of web, satellite and telecommunications is a roaring cacophony of communication, information and seemingly trivia messaging. It simultaneously invades our lives whilst remaining ultimately vulnerable, a network that relies on energy and corporate providers. If the electricity goes off, we lose our identities and can no longer talk.

The streets are still full of communications, visual, text, legal, illegal, corporate, social. All temporary but potentially more stable than their cyber-space counterparts. Artists such as Banksy, Swoon and Josh MacPhee adopt this space for their work, exploring the hinterland between illegality and public acclaim. MacPhee talks about:

“...an attempt to actualize both a community of printmakers and a more specific audience for our work...” (J. MacPhee, *Paper Politics* PM Press, 2009).

The implication of bringing the politics of the public wall into the space of the gallery is brought into question. Whilst many may view Banksy's elevated status within the orthodoxy of gallery art, MacPhee's view that new gallery audiences can be found seems viable. An early example of this is Toulouse Lautrec's use of lithographic printing to produce complex multi-coloured posters advertising the lavish productions at the Moulin Rouge. His stylistic personifications of Louise Weber, Jane Avril and Aristide Bruant captured the essence of the belle époque. These posters are significant not least because Lautrec pioneers the use of industrial premises in the manufacturing of artworks, but also because they had obsolescence built-in. The use of public spaces, the

street architecture and the walls that these posters were adhered to represents a prescient engagement with issues around the traditional viewing space of the gallery. Lautrec's lithographic posters bridge a gap between art and the everyday (of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bohemian Paris culture). They are both a part of the fabric of contemporary society and eventually through their demise become a bi-product, an element of social detritus.

Tangible evidence of culture such as a poster on a wall complete with social context serves as a life affirming sign. As an aftershock to the seismic shock of Marcel Duchamp's readymades, artists such as Kurt Schwitters and Francis Picabia appropriate the abject and sluffed remnants of the everyday from which to make their art. It is within the emergence and spirit of Existentialism following the second world war that Brassai photographs the calles of Barcelona and speaks of the 'universe of walls'. In doing this he influences Antoni Tàpies to produce his paintings depicting the scrawled and impacted interventions of human activity on wall-like surfaces. What both Brassai and Tàpies manage to do is to bring the physicality and context of the street into the space of the gallery and interrogate the seemingly hermetic space around the viewer. Arguably this paves the way for Robert Rauschenberg's harnessing of press photographs, commercial imagery, logo and ephemera in his screen paintings of the 1960s and 1970s.

The crux of what retains the validity of such works is contained within their inherently fugitive and impermanent physical nature. Posters and other paper-based ephemera can of course be archived (thankfully some of Lautrec's posters survived the cruel Parisian winters) but when a work is conceived as temporary or mass-produced and given away or destroyed upon removal, the impact of its message is concentrated. The erosion of the work can be an intrinsic part of the concept such as Felix Gonzalez-Torrez's stack works. Moreover, the inevitable destruction of the work can be a device for avoiding commoditisation as powerfully demonstrated in Carl Pope's billboard project *A Celebration of Blackness*, Alabama 2006.

Pasting or printing works directly onto a wall, be it in a public place or in the gallery, signifies a different space to that of pictorial space. As Brian O'Doherty states:

"Now a participant in, rather than a passive support for the art, the wall became the locus of contending ideologies: and every new development had to come equipped with an attitude toward it" (B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* University of California, 1976)

O'Doherty's 'wall' is still located in the context of the institution. It is still influenced by the strong gravitational reading of art and as such, can enjoy a hybrid existence. Daniel Buren has explored this duplicity through his printed and pasted stripe works. Produced lithographically and adhering to the standard 870mm width, the sheets are adhered to both interior and exterior gallery walls and windows. The installation for *Conception – Conceptual Documents 1968-72* at Norwich Gallery in 2001 followed instructions to print and paste panels over all but one of the gallery windows. The interior/exterior dialogue was with the gallery's internal space (including the other works on display) and the road including pedestrians, street furniture and exposure to the elements. In a sense, the gallery was turned inside out whilst simultaneously being de-institutionalised.

Gallery walls pasted with images and texts become viable surrogates for the urban wall. It is not even necessary for the artist to be altruistic when mechanical reproduction makes it possible for the work to exist in multiple iterations. The symbolism of impermanence is strong enough to evoke a particular reading of the work. However, one thing remains consistent with Brassai's observational photographs of walls in the early twentieth century, you may take away images or memories of the wall but you can't take the wall without it losing its context. Small fetish-like fragments of the Berlin wall with just visible forensic evidence of paint stand as testament to the almost immediate evaporation of meaning upon dislocation. The monumental implication of this, plays into the hands of the printmaker as much as it does the street artist. The wall becomes a permanent place upon which transient dialogues can take place.

Kennardphillips (Peter Kennard and Cat Picton Phillips) manage to embrace all of this. Their large inkjet print and mixed-media works combine potent socially relevant imagery with the context of its location. The gallery, whilst playing a subordinate role in the work, nonetheless becomes a temporary context or location for the imagery. Like a Skype conversation, the photographic images reach out of a crumbled, shattered and smashed background, albeit somewhat remote and second-hand. The gallery wall is integral to the works, sometimes allowing images to appear from behind tears in the upper surfaces, suggestive of billboards or heavily pasted walls. It is with the 'street' works that Kennardphillips distil all that is discussed in this text. Their use of public billboards and walls upon which to show work that relates directly to its geographical and socio-political serves as a public voice. A powerful example of this is 'Who's Paying for This' 2007, a monumental digital print that was adhered to the 'apartheid wall' dividing Palestine and Israel. The photographic silhouette image of a lone soldier patrolling under a giant dollar bill is as provocative as William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress*. The image is surrounded on either side by political graffiti, dry, bereft of superficial aesthetic or recreational vandalism. John Berger in his book *Hold Everything Dear* writes:

“Today there is not a wall in the town centre of Ramallah, now the capital of the Palestinian Authority, which is not covered with photographs of the dead, taken when alive and now reprinted as small posters... These faces transform the desultory street walls into something as intimate as a wallet of private papers and pictures... Around the posters, the walls are scarred with bullet and shrapnel marks.”

What Kennardphillips do is to bring that wall to us. That degree of artifice is possible because of journalism, global communication and knowledge. It works because of our ability to be somewhere else through art.

Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* 1892

Simon Gunn *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class*. Manchester 2000

Barbara Catoir, *Conversations with Antoni Tapies*, Prestel 1991 (p 30)

John Berger *Hold Everything Dear* verso 2007 page 59