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Defacer With Mystery Agenda Is Attacking Street Art

By [COLIN MOYNIHAN](#)

Someone out there has a problem with art. Or at least a certain kind of art and artist.

The evidence is the bright green and purple splashes of paint that began appearing on walls in Brooklyn and Manhattan more than a month ago. The carefully aimed blobs obscured or disfigured dozens of pieces of street art created by people who may not be household names, but who have achieved the esteem of peers and some recognition from the mainstream art world. The targets of the paint attacks have included posters, paper cutouts pasted on walls, and images stenciled on the sides of buildings.

Many of the paint splatters were accompanied by messages printed on plain white sheets of paper and pasted near the splatters. Those communiqués appeared to condemn the commodification of art, but it is difficult to be sure what the messages really mean. One reads, in part, “Destroy the museums, in the streets and everywhere.” The author has kept his or her identity a secret.

Word of the covert actions spread quickly through the street art community. Web logs began documenting the splatters. Soon the unknown protagonist was named the Splasher.

Marc Schiller, who runs a Web site about street art called the Wooster Collective, woostercollective.com, and who organized a large show of street artists in an unoccupied SoHo building in December, said that he was disturbed by the ease with which art could be destroyed by a anonymous figure.

“There’s some speculation,” he said about the perpetrator’s identity. “Until they admit it or until you catch them in the act, which may happen, it’ll remain a mystery.”

Nobody has yet reported the splatterings to the police, perhaps because city laws say that the art that was defaced is just as unlawful as the paint splashed onto it. Street artists usually put up their work without permission, and some people consider the work itself to be vandalism.

The term street art is thought to have originated in the 1980s, when it was used to describe the work of well-known artists like Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf. Their artistic descendants work in practically any

medium, from paint to stickers to carefully fashioned metal sculpture. Many use aliases and install their work at night, usually in spots where it will elicit little complaint even if it was put up illegally.

In recent years, some of these young artists have been embraced by galleries, museums and collectors, and there are those who fear that the practice might become perceived primarily as an avenue to greater recognition.

The pasted screeds that appeared with the splatters seem to stem from such concerns. They are headlined “Avant-Garde: Advance Scouts for Capital” or “Art: The Excrement of Action.” Statements at the bottom of the pages warn that the paste used to affix them has been mixed with shards of glass.

Some have tried to deconstruct the documents. One blog writer suggested that the author had drawn inspiration from an essay by the English writer Jeannette Winterson called “Product is the Excrement of Action” in which she laments the primacy of material goods in society.

Of course, whoever is responsible for the paint and the notices could have less rarefied motives, like jealousy, a desire for notoriety or simple destructiveness.

Among those whose work has become a target is Shepard Fairey, a Los Angeles artist who is known for stenciled images of the wrestler Andre the Giant that have appeared with the word “obey” in cities around the world; and Banksy, a reclusive English artist who stenciled images of a girl jumping rope and a boy reaching upward on a wall in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, last summer.

Another is a New York artist who goes by the name of Swoon, whose intricate paper cutouts and relief print portraits have been visible on the streets of the Lower East Side and Brooklyn for more than six years. The Museum of Modern Art has shown some of her pieces, but she still places others in public spaces where they can be viewed free.

On Tuesday afternoon, some passers-by on Rivington Street stopped to gaze at three life-size figures created by Swoon that were pasted to a wall. The faces of two of the figures had been hit by blobs of green paint. David Brockman, 46, who runs a nearby vintage shop, said he was saddened by the paint assault.

“That was a revered and respected piece of art,” he said. “This is just vandalism.”