



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

A building at Spring and Elizabeth Streets has street art that includes Mao Zedong, a bird's head and a "Polaroid scene." The city regards all forms of street art, including stickers, paper cutouts, painting and metalwork, as vandalism.

Lawbreakers, Armed With Paint and Paste

Underground Artists Take to the Streets

By KIRK SEMPLE

Swoon frontloads her days with caffeine and works on her art late into the night. It can take her two weeks to produce a series of the large, intricate paper cutouts and hand-pulled block prints that have gained her considerable renown in one particular sector of the art world. When she is done — her arms aching and her clothes and skin speckled with paint and ink — she takes her pieces outside, slaps them up on old walls around the city, then disappears on her bike.

That is when her work, now left to the mercy of the elements and public taste, comes alive. "You know, it's weird, but I love it," she said. "I don't feel they need to be kept in a vault as precious art."

Swoon, 26, is a luminary in a movement known, at least among many of its proponents, as street art. Two decades after the heyday of graffiti, the spray can has given way to posters, stickers, stencils and construc-

tion tools, and the streets of New York and other cities around the world vibrate more than ever with the work — some say the destruction — of guerrilla artists like her. (Swoon is a *nom de peinture*; like many other artists interviewed for this article, she asked that her real name not be used for fear of prosecution because unauthorized graffiti is illegal.)

The movement is sustained and driven by Web sites, magazines, word of mouth and its practitioners' self-righteousness.

At one end of the spectrum are doodles, icons and designs, often drawn or printed on stickers, a medium that allows for pre-strike preparation at home and quick, furtive execution in public.

Others are using more complicated art techniques, such as the meticulous printing and paperwork preferred by Swoon, ceramics, lithogra-

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Michael Kamber for The New York Times

An artist who calls herself Swoon pastes one of her paper cutouts on a wall on Union Street, near the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn.

AS he can scrub toilets? Given the choice, the toilets offer more bang for the buck. Maids make \$14.03 an hour, while child care workers scrape by on \$10.59 an hour, the study found. Butchers do ever so slightly better than bakers (the survey does not in-

clude a waitress's wages).
"What it shows me is the tremendous range of different jobs in New York City," Mr. Dorfman said. "In New York, everyone thinks of finance and things like that. But people make respectable livings in a lot of areas you might not think of."

ger, a Republican hotshot, is the nominal host of a welcoming party for New Yorkers and Californians with Governor Pataki on Sunday night. (Will Mr. Schwarzenegger show up? His people are not talking.) Convention officials expect hun-

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Lawbreakers, Armed With Paint and Paste, Take an Art Movement to the Streets

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phy, silk screening, painting, leathersmithing and woodworking. Some have even used welding torches, notably the once-ubiquitous New York graffiti writer known as Revs, who has installed three-dimensional versions of his stylized name, or "tag," around the city. Darius (also known by his graffiti tag, Verbs) and Downey, a Brooklyn tandem now living in London, turn old street signs into sculptures or small billboards for provocative messages and reinstall them, often in the plain light of day. "We're using the city against itself," Downey, 23, said in a recent interview.

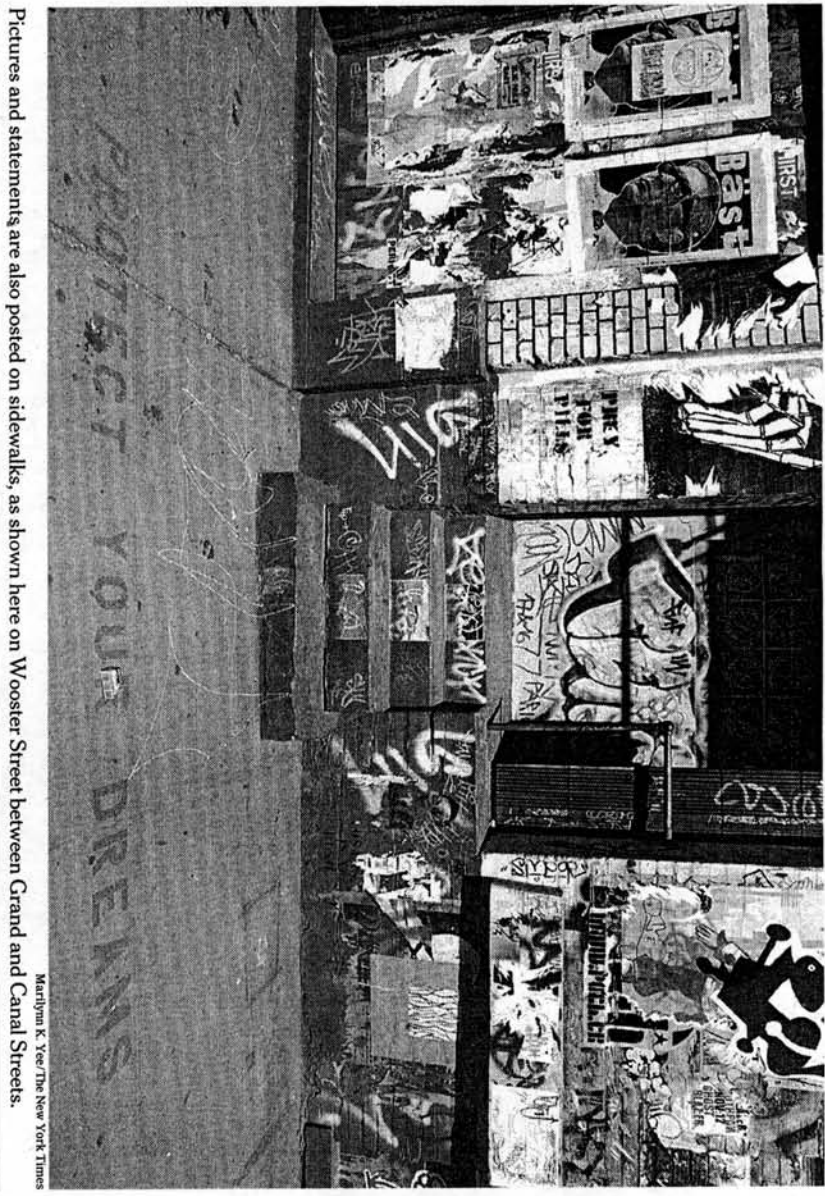
Any surface goes: the more visible and the less frequently buffed the better: walls, doors, the backs of stop signs, the base of light poles, utility boxes, trash bins, sidewalks, rooftops, the frames of subway car advertisements.

In New York, the streets of the Lower East Side and SoHo, Dumbo and Williamsburg are filled with fresh work. Even in the most closely policed neighborhoods, rare is the city block where some visual mischief has not been unleashed.

"Size is not what it's about," said Marc Schiller, 40, a New York marketing executive who, as a hobby, runs the Wooster Collective, a curatorial Web site for street art around the world. "It's about being clever. It's about being unique." (One unknown artist has arrayed 18 luggage locks, each decorated with a baby's picture, on a fence on Crosby Street in SoHo. Periodically the artist will rearrange the locks to make a new design.)

And while much of the work seems to be art for art's sake — or at least humor's sake — street art occasionally resonates with overt social and political commentary. In one arresting series that recently appeared (and just as quickly disappeared) in Lower Manhattan, an artist replaced the advertisement dancers in the current iPod advertisement with silhouettes of Abu Ghraib torture victims. The tag line "10,000 songs in your pocket, Mac or PC" became "10,000 volts in your pocket, guilty or innocent."

Like any artistic movement, the origins of street art are nebulous, though it is clearly an outgrowth of the stylized graffiti writing that began in New York in the 1960's and became emblematic of hip-hop culture. According to Tristan Manco, a graphic designer in Bristol, England, and author of the street art compendium "Street Logos," the term "street art" was first used in the 1980's



Pictures and statements are also posted on sidewalks, as shown here on Wooster Street between Grand and Canal Streets.

in reference to urban guerrilla art that was not hip-hop graffiti, and described the pioneering work of New York painters like Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf, and Parisian stencil artists like Blek and Nemo.

Street art has since spread around the world, from the East End of London to Tokyo, Moscow to Johannesburg, Melbourne, Australia, to São Paulo, Brazil. And in spite of the movement's underground nature, the work of today's most prominent street artists is increasingly sought by galleries and collectors around the world, though the pieces are not yet fetching the sums attached to the art of New York's graffiti pioneers. (Mr. Haring's chalk drawings on black subway-advertisement placemarkers command thousands of dollars at auction.)

Ask street artists to talk about why they do what they do, and brace for a torrent of

rationalization. Shepard Fairey, a 34-year-old artist who is famous for his global "Obey Giant" sticker campaign featuring the glowing mug of the late World Wrestling Federation star Andre the Giant, has even published a manifesto in which he calls his work "an experiment in Phenomenology," the first aim of which, he says, "is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment."

Artists and their supporters say they are simply responding to what they regard as a visual assault by corporations and commercial interests. "Why is the ad I see in the Gap more acceptable than any art that I hang on a public lamppost?" Mr. Schiller asks. "Let's balance the scales a bit. We're talking about anybody having the right to express themselves." (If Mr. Schiller's message seems incongruous with his profession — marketing — he says he hopes his passion

for street art has made him better at his job by making him more sensitive to the negative effects of advertising.) But many street artists will admit to a less noble motivation: the urge to go out and break the law. The wait of fresh wheat paste, it seems, can inspire a night of vandalism. "That's something that people really love about it: getting over on the man," said Kelly Burns, 38, the author of the book "INY," a photographic exploration of New York street art.

The law does not make a distinction between a tag scratched on a sticker or Swoon's cutouts. It is all vandalism. (The New York Police Department turned down a request for an interview.) Swoon, who has never been arrested, says she is "tully in touch with the ambiguity" of what she does — by which she means the il-

ON THE WEB

Audio Slide Show: Swoon narrates a tour of her work at nytimes.com/nyregion.

legality. So she picks her spots carefully, exploring what she calls "third spaces" — not really public, maybe private, undoubtedly neglected. Her backdrops include abandoned buildings, rundown warehouses, and broken walls. "There are so many spaces that don't really need to be brown," she said. Swoon first took her art to the street five years ago while she was a fine-arts student at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. She was compelled to take her work outside after suffering what she calls "the quiet, boring precociousness" of the gallery world.

"I wanted to jump out of my skin," she said. But the streets were free and open to a wider range of expression. "Because it's kind of an outlaw thing, you don't have to go through official channels," she explained. "It's trying to create a visual commons out of the derelict walls of the city." (She has since returned to the gallery scene, as the star of her own shows in Berlin, Miami and Cincinnati. "I need to make a living," she shrugged.)

On a recent afternoon, Swoon, a fit, enthusiastic woman with wavy, strawberry-blond hair and a small silver nose ring, interlarded her work on her most recent project, which was a day or two away from completion, to give a brief bicycle tour of some of the pieces that have survived in Boerum Hill and Prospect Heights. Her recent and most famous work involves life-size cutouts and block prints of people with which, she says, she is "populating the city." She stopped in front of the trash-strewn loading dock of an old warehouse on Bergen Street near Flatbush Avenue, across the street from a police station in Prospect Heights. A worn silhouette of a hooded, hunched man lurked on the wall. "It's a good place for him to hang out," she said warmly. "I want them to become part of their space, to interact in a human way. A sticker can't do that."