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UK street art and the meaning of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020-21

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to social and cultural geographies of the COVID-19 pandemic through an exploration of the role of UK street art in documenting the remarkable shifts in the practice of wearing facemasks, the tensions and emotions involved, and the transformations in the meaning of facemasks during the pandemic. Street art has become an important outlet for political critique and social engagement, capturing the public mood in response to policies and recommendations attempting to stem viral transmission, including the requirement to wear facemasks in some public places. Drawing primarily on image analysis of street artworks produced during 2020 and sourced using online search tools, and qualitative interviews with UK street artists in 2020 and 2021, the paper first explores the changing geographies and politics of street art during the pandemic. It then examines the ways in which street art portrays mask-wearing simultaneously as reassuring, protective and fear-inducing, and reflects the meaning of masks in relation to protecting public health, managing anxieties concerning health risks, boosting morale, and symbolising solidarity and public spiritedness. The paper argues that pandemic street art contributes to public dialogue by articulating emotion and deeply held concerns, and communicating the intimate politics, semiotic meanings and social properties of objects associated with disease.

RESUMEN

Este artículo contribuye a las geografías sociales y culturales de la pandemia del COVID-19 a través de una exploración del papel del arte callejero del Reino Unido en la documentación de los cambios notables en la práctica de usar cubrebocas, las tensiones y emociones involucradas, y las transformaciones en el significado de los cubrebocas durante la pandemia. El arte callejero se ha convertido en un medio importante para la crítica política y el compromiso social, capturando el estado de ánimo del público en respuesta a las políticas y recomendaciones que intentan detener la transmisión viral, incluido el requisito de usar cubrebocas en algunos lugares públicos. Con base principalmente en el análisis de imágenes de arte callejero producidas durante 2020 y obtenidas a través de herramientas de búsqueda en línea, y entrevistas cualitativas con artistas callejeros del Reino Unido en 2020 y 2021, el

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MOTS CLEFS

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artículo explora en primer lugar las geografías y políticas cambiantes del arte callejero durante la pandemia. Luego examina las formas en que el arte callejero retrata el uso de cubrebocas simultáneamente como tranquilizador, protector e inductor de miedo, y refleja el significado de los cubrebocas en relación con la protección de la salud pública, el manejo de las ansiedades relacionadas con los riesgos para la salud, el aumento de la moral y el símbolo de solidaridad y espíritu público. El artículo argumenta que el arte callejero pandémico contribuye al diálogo público al articular emociones y preocupaciones profundamente arraigadas, y al comunicar la política íntima, los significados semióticos y las propiedades sociales de los objetos asociados con la enfermedad.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article apporte sa contribution aux domaines des géographies sociale et culturelle couvant la pandémie de COVID-19 avec une étude du rôle que l'art urbain a joué au Royaume-Uni en documentant les changements extraordinaires autour du port de masques de protection, les tensions et les émotions que cela a suscitées et la transformation de la définition de masque pendant la pandémie. L'art urbain est devenu un moyen d'expression important pour la critique politique et pour l'engagement social et a capturé l'opinion publique en réponse aux réglementations et aux recommandations pour essayer d'enrayer la propagation du virus, notamment l'obligation de porter des masques de protection dans certains lieux publics. En s'appuyant principalement sur une analyse d'images d'art urbain produites en 2020 et découvertes à l'aide d'outils de recherche en ligne, et des entretiens qualitatifs avec des artistes urbains britanniques en 2020 et 2021, cet article passe tout d'abord en revue les changements dans les géographies et les politiques de l'art urbain au cours de la pandémie. Il étudie ensuite les façons dont l'art urbain illustre le port du masque comme à la fois rassurant, protecteur et aussi une source de peur, et contemple la signification des masques par rapport à la protection de la santé publique, la gestion des anxiétés envers les risques pour la santé, le maintien du moral, et le symbole de solidarité et de l'esprit civique de la population. L'article soutient que l'art urbain pendant la pandémie a contribué au dialogue public en articulant les émotions et les inquiétudes profondes et en communiquant les politiques intimes, les sens sémiotiques et les propriétés sociales des objets associés à la maladie.

Introduction

Geographical scholarship has established a need for diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches covering wide-ranging thematic foci to better understand the complex and uneven geographies of the COVID-19 pandemic (see, for example, Rose-Redwood et al., 2020; Sparke & Anguelov, 2020). This paper contributes to this endeavour by exploring the role of UK street art in documenting the remarkable social and cultural shifts in the practice of wearing facemasks, the tensions and emotions involved, and the transformations in the meaning of facemasks during the pandemic.

The early days of the pandemic inspired a surge in street art around the world (Tapiés, 2020). As Bloch (2021) argues, 'Walls are where people have looked for centuries to gauge public reactions to and personal perspectives on major events that cannot be left to those in power to convey' (p. 2). The COVID-19 pandemic is one such major event during which street art has become an important outlet for political critique and social engagement. As governments and public health organisations around the world introduced policies and recommendations to attempt to stem viral transmission, including confining people to homes, closing public spaces, and mandating the wearing of facemasks in prescribed places, street artists¹ captured the public mood in response. In the UK, the requirement to wear facemasks in some public places – an uncommon practice that previously met with suspicion or was discouraged in the name of secular values and security (Eli, 2020) – has been a particularly potent source of tension. While debate raged among medical experts, public health specialists and social scientists about the effectiveness of mask-wearing in preventing viral transmission (Greenhalgh et al., 2020; Javid et al., 2020), from the early days of the pandemic, street artists around the world have been prominent in depicting people wearing facemasks. In response, this paper seeks to contribute to social and cultural geographies of both the pandemic and street art by examining interventions in debates about mask-wearing as a specific response to a particular event (the COVID-19 pandemic) in a particular place (the UK).

Geographical research has tended to focus specifically on graffiti (e.g., Brighenti, 2010; Chmielewska, 2007) – a graphic practice of (mostly urban) lettering – and its potential to transgress and redefine normalized understandings of both art and space (Bonnett, 1992; Cresswell, 1996) through association with subcultures (MacDonald, 2001). In contrast, our attention is on street art, a different cultural practice (Young, 2016), neither always straightforwardly transgressive nor subcultural, comprising 'illustrative artworks and murals rather than lettering, incorporating spray painting, stencils, stickers, and paste-ups' (Waddacor, 2020: 265). The everyday geographies of street art are varied and complex, since it can be both illicit and commissioned, sanctioned and unsanctioned. Cresswell (1992) noted graffiti's 'metamorphosis from crime to art' and 'displacement from the street to the gallery' (p. 339). In recent years, changing municipal policies have seen street art less as a social problem and more as an aesthetic practice and saleable commodity (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017; Young, 2016). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has displaced some artists from studio, gallery and exhibition spaces, which have been closed during lockdowns, onto the streets.

The pandemic is also continuing the process of connecting the material spaces of the street with virtual online spaces of mainstream and social media (MacDowall & de Souza, 2018). These platforms have been especially significant during the pandemic as access to public spaces has been prohibited or severely restricted. What was once ephemeral, often illegal, and consumed in streets now travels, endures, and is legitimised in digital spaces. The prominence of COVID-19 street art in the virtual spaces of global mainstream news and social media has helped to ensure that the facemask has become 'a now-iconic image of the global crisis' (Speare-Cole & Richman, 2020, n.p.).

Research in the context of HIV/AIDS has demonstrated that the arts can raise awareness and inspire both debate and dialogue about the fear and stigma associated with disease (Marschall, 2004; Nabulime & McEwan, 2011). However, the role of artists in articulating the semiotic meanings, social properties and embodied politics of *objects*

associated with disease, including the deeply held fears, anxieties and other emotions they generate, remains unexplored. This paper argues that in the context of pandemics, a facemask is more than simply a mask. It draws attention to how politics of pandemics 'are expressed and enacted through and by bodies' (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017, p. 629) and acts as a boundary object communicating between three different communities of practice: a biomedical community initially cautious, but increasingly advocating mask-wearing to prevent transmission; a government initially discouraging mask use, then legislating for compulsory use in specific public places; and a public initially reluctant, but increasingly wearing masks to navigate everyday experiences of the pandemic. In what follows, we first outline the research design and data collection methods and analysis, before examining the changing meaning of facemasks in the context of pandemics. We reflect further on the politics and spaces of UK pandemic street art before discussing three major themes emerging from our research: the symbolic meaning of facemasks in relation to fear and safety; masks symbolising humour and hope in attempts to boost public morale; and the meaning of masks as symbols of solidarity and public spiritedness.

Methodology

The research design informing this paper was conditioned by COVID-19 travel restrictions and social distancing measures, and the ethics of internet-based data gathering, necessitating a reliance on publicly available data (Kozinets, 2002).² Consequently, we focused primarily on analysing textual, graphic, and photographic data across online platforms and channels, which allowed us to track both images and artists, the creation and dissemination of artworks, and the emergence of debates and dialogue during the first year of the pandemic. To obtain a sense of the COVID-19 street art milieu we tracked online discourse via media coverage, street art blogs, specialist online street art websites, and numerous relevant hashtags on Instagram (e.g., #coronastreetart) and accounts of individual street artists. Online street art images have also been captured by photojournalists and used to illustrate stories about the pandemic on digital mainstream news websites (often the same image supporting multiple stories). The audiences for images analysed thus range from a few hundred followers on social media to potentially hundreds of thousands consuming global online news media. Analysis of this imagery and narrative provided an understanding of the broader global pandemic street art landscape and facilitated the design of a specific data collection strategy relevant to the UK. This comprised image-gathering via online search tools and online qualitative interviews with UK street artists.

Using three criteria – the image could be evidenced as located in the UK, was created during the pandemic, and depicted mask-wearing – we sourced 102 images for close analysis. This data-set comprises: 28 images from a citizen science project on international COVID-19 street art (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/>)³; 67 images sourced via a geo-controlled, time-limited search (between 16 March – the date of start of the first lockdown in the UK – and 20 December 2020) using relevant Boolean search terms on Google Image; and, 7 images found only on UK street artists' Instagram accounts. Images were analysed using visual methodologies (Rose, 1991). General content analysis focused on style and composition, with images coded by theme (e.g., emotion, humour, politics,

hope, and solidarity), and interpreted in terms of the wider context of the image, including time, location, and circulation. Specific iconographic and semiological analysis focused on the representation of facemasks as icons and symbols, which enabled discourse analysis of the rhetorical strategies, intertextuality, and assumed audiences of street art images (*ibid.*). Analysis of artists' social media commentary about their artworks, as well as their reproduction and interpretation in online media sources, provided information on the wider social context of their production and circulation.

Between December 2020 and April 2021, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with UK street artists who created artworks within our data set. The artists were identified through Facebook, Instagram and personal websites, and purposively selected because their work focuses on masks and is visible in social and online news media. Seven interviews were conducted via phone or video calls, and three via email. Interviews explored artistic intent in depictions of pandemic-related mask-wearing and meaning derived from the resulting artworks. Analysis of transcripts relied on thematic coding. Whereas publicly available images are attributed to specific artists, we have followed best practice guidelines on protecting anonymity of interviewees when quoting them directly. Permission is not required to use quotes from artists' Instagram pages as these are public sites (Kozinets, 2002).

The limitations of an artist- and online media-focused study risks decontextualising images from the streets in which they are produced, and we are unable to gauge audience reception beyond responses on social media. However, analysis of key themes emerging from both the street art images and interviews with artists enable reflection on the social significance and cultural meaning of mask-wearing in the UK during the pandemic, and the contribution of street art in documenting public debates about and responses to facemasks.

More than a mask: cultural responses to facemasks

Face coverings are deeply embedded in cultural identities, from the civic identity and religious values in Greek theatre and Roman funerary practices (Ike et al., 2021), to the opera-going experience in China, to rituals in parts of Africa (Mac Diakparomre, 2010). In 17th and 18th century Europe, plague masks worn by doctors 'communicated disease, death, and suffering' (Lynteris, 2018, p. 2). Modern medical masks came to signify and communicate antiseptic practice and the containment of respiratory pathogens (Ike et al., 2021). For many western commentators, mask-wearing in China during the 2003 SARS outbreak was associated with compliance, regulation, and government opposition to freedom of speech (Burgess & Horii, 2012). The idea of the facemask as a signal of submissive 'herd' behaviour (Sin, 2016) and an embodied expression of oppressive political ideology continues to resonate in the COVID-19 context, with Orientalist, racist and xenophobic undertones (Ma et al., 2020; Zhang, 2021).

In the context of pandemics, masks are material objects that can make visible the performance of a moral and civic duty in preventing the spread of infection; they can either stimulate panic and heighten fear concerning health risks (Lynteris, 2018) or play a positive role at the frontline of protection; and they can make individuals rhetorically responsible for problems over which they have little control (Burgess & Horii, 2012,

p. 1195). During 2020, political debate about mask-wearing in some countries descended into divisive culture wars, pitting those who believe facemasks communicate oppression and government overreach against those who believe they communicate trust in medical science and willingness to protect others (Ike et al., 2021). Some public figures, including government leaders, initially refused facemasks, viewing mask-wearing as a sign of emasculation and weakness (Harsin, 2020; Kahn, 2020).

As the pandemic took hold and more became known about how COVID-19 is transmitted, an increasing number of countries began to make wearing facemasks mandatory in public spaces to slow the spread of the virus, with fines for those transgressing. A shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) coupled with libertarian ideology delayed adoption of facemasks in the UK. In May 2020, the government advised that facemasks, reframed as primarily home-made 'face coverings,' be worn on public transport and in enclosed areas to counter widespread concerns about re-entering public spaces as the first lockdown was eased (*The Guardian* 11/05/2020). On 5 June 2020, WHO issued guidance advising that governments should encourage the public to wear facemasks to prevent community transmission. On 15 June, the UK government passed legislation making the wearing of facemasks compulsory on public transport and in hospitals (House of Lords Library, 2020); from mid-July, facemasks were required in shops, and from late August in schools (Coughlan, 2020). In July 2021, legislation was replaced with government advice that members of the public make 'personal risk-based judgments' to protect 'ourselves and others around us,' including wearing face coverings in crowded and enclosed spaces (UK Government, 2021).

Mandatory face coverings have been interpreted by some as an infringement of civil liberties and autonomy (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2020). This was not helped by masks being stigmatised as worn by social outcasts or deviants, including street artists, criminals, and terrorists, to hide their faces. Several western European countries have increased stigma by imposing full or partial bans on wearing religious face coverings in public spaces. While there is no ban in the UK, religious face-coverings have faced scrutiny from politicians (Dwyer, 2008), including Boris Johnson who, in 2018, compared Muslim women in niqab to 'letterboxes' and 'bank robbers' (Zempi, 2019, p. 2588).

Despite stigmatization, which created some confusion and hesitancy, and the discomfort, impracticality, and communication barriers presented by facemasks (Chodosh et al., 2020), members of the public in many countries began wearing them voluntarily long before their use became mandatory. This suggests that social responses to COVID-19 are not driven solely by government policy, scientific evidence, or evidence of universal effectiveness (Burgess & Horii, 2012), and that powerfully entrenched cultural ideas are being overridden by specific pressures and other influences. We suggest that street art both reflects and constitutes one of these influences, making mask-wearing visible as an embodied response to the pandemic as street artists insert themselves into public debate.

Politics and spaces of UK pandemic street art

The pandemic has undoubtedly influenced the politics and political-economy of the kind of art that appears in the street, its ephemerality or otherwise, and its reception. Well-known street artists including, Banksy and John D'Oh (both Bristol), ADee, Nathan Bowen,

Frank Riot, Deanio X, and Zabou (all London), Akse (Manchester), Horace (Chichester) and Rebel Bear (Glasgow), have responded to the pandemic with representations of mask-wearing. Their social media sites suggest that their street art is mostly unsanctioned and illicit, often created anonymously (using pseudonyms). As one artist explains, lockdowns made it 'easier to go out undetected' and restrictions could be circumvented by considering spray-painting as 'one permitted form of exercise a day' (D'Oh, 2020a, n.p.). Such illicit images are free of any formal or informal editorial control, either in the street or as they circulate through social media. Other full-time street artists like Gnasher (Royston), Pete Barber (Manchester), Chris Shea (Croydon), Lionel Stanhope (London), and MandyMixUp (Paisley) operate commercially as muralists, signwriters, billboard artists. Some of their pandemic artworks have been commissioned by local authorities, charities, or private businesses/individuals, and they have used social media to promote work produced at home while commercial opportunities have been limited by the pandemic.

The closure of studios, galleries and exhibition spaces during lockdowns saw studio artists (e.g., Thomas Croft, Caroline Walker, Dan Walls and Rachel List) moving beyond their traditional confines into the streets. While much of their street art has been commissioned, several interviewees explain that it still often involves transgression, such as entering prohibited public spaces at dawn to paint to circumvent lockdown rules. This continues a process that has seen an increase in legal graffiti walls, and the blurring of boundaries between fine art and street art, and between sanctioned and unsanctioned use of public space (Andron, 2018; Bacharach, 2015). It can no longer be assumed that street art is 'likely to be ... illegal [and] anonymous' (Riggle, 2010, 246), morally unacceptable or socially undesirable, not least because of its incorporation into urban tourism, branding strategies and gentrification (Andron, 2018). Illegality and anonymity are not always a feature of pandemic street art, and the prominence afforded even illicit street art in mainstream and social media suggests that during 2020 its moral acceptability and social desirability increased. In addition, the spaces in which street art appears often intertwine the life world of the public with the systemic, bureaucratic, political sphere (specifically, in the context of COVID-19, government, civil society and public health). Thus, the pandemic street art we examine is complex, both illicit and commissioned, and appearing in both sanctioned and unsanctioned spaces of cities.

Street art mediates and influences embodied and lived relationships to and with different spaces, both material and virtual (Maddrell, 2016). In recent years, the audiences for and exchanges of street art have expanded dramatically due to the enthusiastic adoption of Instagram and other social media channels by street artists, who have incorporated these into their everyday practice to document, share, and distribute images of their work (MacDowall & de Souza, 2018). As discussed, virtual spaces have been especially significant during the pandemic. All the artists we interviewed noted significant interest in their COVID-19 artworks, with higher-than-usual numbers of comments on Instagram, and photographs circulating in social media and mainstream media. Thus, while some critical street art studies suggest that social media is widening the gap between the public and the exercise of creative practices (Bengtson 2020, in Steinfeld 2020; MacDowall, 2019), it appears that in the context of the pandemic, the siting and experiencing of street art simultaneously in the street and on social media enhances proximity between artists and audiences.

In what follows, we explore street art as a multiple constellation of practices that reflect and document public opinion. As both a physical act and a cultural practice, street art brings together the material and immaterial (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017) and connects both physical and virtual spaces to ensure that the facemask has become an iconic image of the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine the ways in which street art reflects wider influences shaping understandings of facemasks, capturing the public mood and the normalisation of mask-wearing, and documents the functions performed by masks in terms of a psychological and physical need to feel safe, public morale, and symbolising public-spiritedness (Martinelli et al., 2021; Tones, 2010). We also reflect on how street art draws attention to the expression and enactment of the intimate politics (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017) of a pandemic through and by bodies.

Facemasks, fear and feeling safe

As objects with social and material properties, the association of masks with fear is rooted deeply in the western psyche. The English word 'mask' derives from the medieval Latin 'masca' ('spectre' or 'nightmare'; Ike et al., 2021). Enlightenment-era doctors rejected plague masks because of the terror they generated, but medical masks still signify 'traumatic medicalization ... in which contact between the doctor and the patient could entail a risk and a danger for both' (Leone, 2021, p. 2). During the COVID-19 pandemic, facemasks bring into focus the agential power of coronavirus and are a potent symbol of existential risk posed by an invisible threat (Lynteris, 2018).

At the beginning of the pandemic, illicit UK street art reflected a public mood of fear. For example, Horace's stencil in Chichester depicts an image of child with hands raised to her face with two masked figures in black robes and blue medical masks towering over her (Horace, 2020); John D'Oh's (2020b) stencil of a masked Grim Reaper on a Bristol wall urges people to 'Stay at Home'. Several interviewees speak of the fear that inspired their artworks:

Nothing tells you something's massively wrong more than having to put unnatural stuff on and realize that you are protecting yourself from something incredibly catching and incredibly dangerous ... And ... the lines that you get on your cheeks from wearing it for hour after hour, a very tight mask, you realize that the reason it's left that dent is because you're wearing it so tight because you're bloody terrified about catching it. (Male artist, Oxford, 19/01/21)

Debate has intensified as to whether facemasks represent and communicate fear, or make people feel too safe so that they disregard other protective measures such as hand-washing and social distancing (Greenhalgh et al., 2020). UK street art images have often projected more subtle messages, capturing the ambivalence that many people feel about wearing masks, but reinforcing their necessity for safety. For example, in the March 2020 lockdown, Gnasher created several images on the side of his garage, subsequently disseminated on social media, encapsulating people's uncertainty and unease with masks, but also the realities of the threat of COVID-19. One image, which circulated widely on social media, depicts a figure in yellow biohazard suit and black military-style gas mask

holding out a bottle of Corona beer with text above reading ‘Cheers’ (Gnasher, 2020). Another popular Gnasher artwork entitled ‘Unity’ (Tapias, 2020, p. 48), depicts two figures in profile wearing black biohazard suits and gas masks, nose to nose in a half-embrace.

In both these images, the protective facemask becomes a gas mask, a metaphor for the boundary between life and death with the face entirely effaced. Both artworks are mournful expressions of the emotive experience of mask-wearing during the pandemic, simultaneously depicting the mask’s prohibition of physical contact and the way it brings an unwanted other – the virus or another person who may be carrying that virus – into being, forcing the wearer to experience its presence. The gas mask appears in numerous other illicit street artworks including by John D’Oh (2020a) in Bristol and anonymous artists across London. It symbolises the intimate politics of facemasks, which not only work through bodies, but also reconfigure intimacies across space and between people, and the unsettling presence of an invisible hazard by turning the ‘culture of hygiene’ associated with PPE into a ‘stylisation of death’ (Lai, 2016, p. 290). These images illustrate the ways in which masks can be experienced simultaneously as reassuring/protective and fear-inducing. However, the symbolism of fear, which some critics argue can become entrenched in the habit of wearing protective facemasks in public (Rossolatos, 2020), is tempered by the deep irony of these images. Gnasher’s Instagram post alongside the ‘Cheers’ artwork reads: ‘Cheers, stay safe people ... I’m not eating pasta or wiping my arse tonight ... but I have plenty of Corona beer #corona #coronavirus #washyourhands’. The image conveys the threat of COVID-19, but also a humorous message that life (and beer-drinking) can carry on if people take measures to stay safe, including mask-wearing; Instagram comments alongside remark ironically on people hoarding pasta and toilet paper at the beginning of pandemic, and the inherent tension in traversing personal safety and collective responsibility.

Images of masks capture the fear, uncertainty and desire for safety in the early days of the pandemic, but mask-wearing became more normalised as the pandemic wore on. As one interviewee explains:

[I]t’s not really the same climate like you couldn’t ever reproduce that moment, that response ... I mean ... people don’t feel the same, like even from my own perspective when we first went into lockdown I were really scared. We were a lot more frightened. It’s not that COVID is not serious anymore but it’s becoming more the known ... it’s becoming everyday life. It’s really not, not the same sort of atmosphere ... maybe we feel a bit safer. (Female artist, West Yorkshire, 10/12/20)

Even before the UK government was advising that facemasks be worn, more playful street art reflects this normalisation, for example, in parodies of famous artworks. An illicit image that had appeared in Bristol in 2014 attributed to Banksy and known as *Girl with a Pierced Eardrum* – a parody of Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* – had a blue surgical mask added during the pandemic. Lionel Stanhope’s (Ladywell, London) copy of Van Eyck’s *Man in a Red Turban* wearing a medical mask (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/1>, retrieved 15/03/21) was circulated in social and global online news media in April 2020. MandiMixUp (2020) created a series of commissioned poster-style images in Glasgow from June 2020, based on famous portraits, including Magritte’s *Son of Man* with his face obscured by a mask dotted with green apples, and da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and Munch’s *The Scream* also wearing masks. Gnasher was commissioned by a London optician to paint

John Lennon's face in surgical mask on a window shutter (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/361>, retrieved 16/12/20) and Horace painted David Bowie in surgical mask on the door of a public house in Chichester (StreetArtBio, 2020a). As humorous commentaries, proliferating images of masks reflect their increasing prevalence as everyday items of apparel and counter the association of masks with fear.

Street artists often wear respirator masks for protection and/or face-coverings to hide their identity and are therefore more aware than most of the symbolism of wearing facemasks. In many different contexts, masks are invested with political meaning and invoke fear because of their historical associations with criminality or violence, their protection of anonymity, or their inhibition of social intimacy and phatic communication by precluding the 'performance of face work', which demonstrates 'willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction' (Goffman, 1967, p. 31). As one respondent told us:

As a street artist, I am well-aware of the imagery and political significance of face-wear. I have had to wear a mask to protect my identity from authorities and thus they have allowed me to create art without the fear of being apprehended. However, even if I am painting on a legal wall ..., wearing a mask makes the act appear transgressive and illegal. (Male artist, Bristol, 15/01/21)

This perhaps explains why in several UK pandemic street art images the surgical mask is replaced by a respirator mask. The inversion of the meaning of masks in relation to transgression has ramifications, since not wearing a mask – a once normal behaviour – became transgressive for some people in prescribed spaces.

Street artists have also commented on the ways in which the pandemic and legalisation of facemasks has increased public acceptance, challenging embodied politics of exclusion and conceptions of what counts as public space and civility. For example, several are critical of the apparent hypocrisy of governments objecting to or regulating religious face coverings as dangerous or socially destabilising, while simultaneously mandating their use in the COVID-19 pandemic on public health grounds. According to D'Oh, 2020a, n.p.):

The transition from face-coverings being socially unacceptable to socially enforced suggests that the distaste towards face coverings, whether on Muslim women or street artists, was less about safety and legality and more about cultural and political desirability ... [P]erhaps concerns around religious facewear were more about intolerance than safety.

John D'Oh's illicit stencil image of a public notice comparing 'suitable' medical masks and 'unsuitable' balaclavas was posted onto a window of a Bristol bank to highlight the contradictions concerning compulsory mask-wearing. It was made in response to reports, particularly in the USA, that banks were fearful of the potential increase in robberies due to the legalisation of face coverings in public life. Critical of a desire to prioritise money over public health and a 'clichéd fear of the working class as potential criminals' (ibid.), the image received a positive reaction on social media. Several images of Muslim women have also appeared, especially in London street art 'hotspots' like Shoreditch and Brixton, juxtaposing facemasks with Islamic dress.

Facemasks in street art occupy a fertile position between being tools, icons, and symbols of humanity's struggle against invisible forces of existential risk (Lynteris, 2018). COVID-19 street art is thus able to document the constant reinvention of PPE as masks: as

devices of categorical transformation aimed at keeping people safe, albeit precariously, in the midst of a pandemic; as contradictory symbols whose meanings can be deployed for political purposes in different contexts to either generate fear (as in the case of criminality or terrorism) or a sense of security (as in the case of people being encouraged to wear them for public health purposes). UK street artists also play a significant role in reflecting the symbolism of masks in relation to public morale.

Public morale: facemasks, humour and hope

Unlike other art forms, street art can capture the visceral emotions and moods felt by ordinary people when faced with an existential crisis (Tapies, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, UK street artists have sought to boost public morale by countering fear with positivity and normalising mask-wearing. As one interviewee explains, 'street art helps reconnect people with their local community and ... is a great way of staying positive through difficult times' (Male artist, Bristol 15/01/21). Another explains her poignant yet hopeful mural, created for the inaugural London Mural Festival in September 2020, of a masked woman touching hands with an unmasked, smiling man on either side of a window:

The pandemic has been incredibly tough on so many levels but socially maybe even more ... I wanted to depict an image of that, a positive one, that will reflect and remind us of this particular time. (Female artist, London, 15/02/21)

A playful critique of political and social responses also runs through much of UK street art, with sardonic humour used to counter fear and panic. Commenting on 'Cheers', Gnasher (2020) writes: 'I honestly just wanted to make a few people smile in this pandemic.' John D'Oh's stencil (Bristol, April 2020) – of masked parents and child buying toilet roll underneath the injunction: 'Coronavirus: There is No Need to Shit Yourself' (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/94>, retrieved 16/12/20) – evokes a 1950s western culture of consumption and puns on the rush to hoard toilet paper as the pandemic was announced, 'as if our terror would cause us to need it more often' (Tapies, 2020, p. 37).

At the same time as it was mocking the lesser aspects of humanity, UK street art has played a significant role in ensuring that new forms of heroism have been recognised during the pandemic, with healthcare workers elevated to the status of angels or superheroes (Figure 1). Depictions of healthcare workers in blue surgical masks dominate these images in which PPE is transformed into a symbol of heroism and hope. In the UK, much of this street art is celebratory in tone, but often more subtle than government and media discourses invoking military analogies of heroic 'frontline' medical staff. Instead, in these artworks the surgical mask transforms the wearer into a simultaneously vulnerable yet heroic figure. For example, a mural in Whitstable by Catman (2020) depicts an exhausted medical professional adjusting his facemask while his shadow takes the form of a caped superhero and is dedicated to medical staff 'working tirelessly to keep us and our loved ones safe and well'. Another example is John D'Oh's stencil image of a woman in surgical scrubs and mask above an NHS logo in which the S is fashioned as the iconic Superman logo:



Figure 1. Rachel List mural, Pontefract. Source: Author 2, 07/12/19

I re-appropriated superhero imagery and applied it to the public sector to highlight how society can protect itself by working collectively together, which is in contrast to the Marvel and DC movies that ... promote the idea that the public must depend on a few supernaturally gifted or insanely rich people to save society. (D'Oh, 2020a, n.p.)

By recognising healthcare workers as superior to heroes traditionally mythologised, street art offers momentary respite from the constant news barrage and psychological weight of the global COVID-19 crisis (Mitman, 2020), and performs an important function of boosting public morale.

Street art has also captures how facemasks have come to symbolise collective hope, resilience and positivity. For example, Deanio X's series of illicit masked cartoon figures on boarded pub windows in Shoreditch urge people to 'stay strong' (Urban, 2020). Nathan Bowen, self-styled 'artistic gangster' who spray-paints on building site hoardings and closed down shop fronts, painted masked images in Shoreditch (Hitchcock & Cotter, 2020) paying homage to healthcare workers and urging people to 'think positive, stay safe and help others'. As another street artist explains:

I would rather send sort of hopeful messages rather than politics and all that ... and uplifting people's spirits is the main thing for me. (Male artist, Croydon, 29/02/21)

Chris Shea's 'Rainbow Boy' series of stencil images around London depict a small boy wearing a blue surgical mask watering a rainbow – in western cultures a symbol of hope and of better times to come, now representing the NHS (but seen by some LGBTQ+ commentators as an unwelcome appropriation that threatens to erode the distinguishing symbol of their fight against homophobia – see, D'Oh, 2020a, n.p.). Shea explains his motivation: 'During these unprecedented times I'm aiming to lift people's spirits with my artwork' (StreetArtBio, 2020b). Significantly, in all these images, the facemask is normalized and symbolically loaded with hope at a time when the government had yet to mandate its use in public spaces.

In painting more positive, hopeful images, street art helps reimagine the work that masks do on the face. Drawing on Levinas (1991, orig, 1979) idea that the face is a site of responsibility, the locus through which a person encounters another, and a site of relation, Sikka (2021) argues that the mask disrupts relationality, anonymizes self and Other, and attenuates the responsibility we might feel towards the Other. Masks facilitate an ethos of separateness by undermining a sense of connectedness enabled by the presence of the face and are assumed to symbolise the isolation caused by physical distancing. In contrast, street artists are reflecting, and perhaps helping to entrench, the ways in which the ground rules of social interaction have needed to change to accommodate mask-wearing, which in turn subtly changes the meaning of masks. For example, Glasgow street artist Rebel Bear's illicit stencil image of a couple in blue surgical masks (Olito, 2020), which are pulled beneath their chins in order to kiss, communicates that masks do not preclude physical intimacy and expressions of love. The accompanying Instagram post reads: 'A time will come when; the masks can be pulled down, the borders will reopen, and connections can be remade – hopefully stronger than ever'. Rebel Bear says he wanted to 'provoke hope of life after lockdown' (BBC News, 2020). Similar sentiments are expressed by Unify Artist, whose stencil on hoardings in Shoreditch from March 2020 depicts a couple embracing and kissing whilst masked alongside the words 'one love' in large red lettering (<https://www.unifyartist.com/street-art>, retrieved 16/12/20). Far from undermining a sense of connectedness, therefore, masks in street art symbolise hope and collective solidarity.

Street art, solidarity and public-spiritedness

At the start of the pandemic, street artists were prominent in expressing solidarity with healthcare workers and holding the UK government to account in illicit street artworks, especially for poor pandemic preparedness (Dyer, 2020) and chronic shortages of PPE. For example, John D'Oh's stencil image depicts the then UK Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock, behind bars alongside text demanding 'Show your support for the NHS Matt, don't clap just give them PPE' (D'Oh, 2020a, n.p.). Another stencil depicts a doctor with a grocery box on his head – a parody of reports that hospital staff were resorting to makeshift PPE with cardboard and plastic to protect themselves – alongside text demanding 'Give the NHS PPE not excuses' (ibid.). Both images coincided with reports that the UK government was preparing to fight negligence claims over NHS staff deaths, and echoed criticism of the government's handling of the early stages of the pandemic. Similarly, Frank Riot's artwork in East London features a woman's eyes and a facemask with the text '#Protect NHS Workers' and 'PPE' (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/385>, retrieved 16/12/20). Riot made the image available as a free download poster to demonstrate support for the EveryDoctor #ProtectNHS campaign demanding better protection for healthcare workers.

Mask artworks symbolising solidarity with NHS healthcare workers are one of the most iconic features of UK street art during the pandemic (Figure 2). Almost half of the street art images we analysed express solidarity with the NHS, pay tribute to or express gratitude for healthcare workers, or urge people or the government to 'save the NHS'. These images, most of which are illicit and unsanctioned, reflect the outpouring of public emotion and gratitude towards those who risk their lives saving others, which



Figure 2. Rachel List mural, Pontefract. Source: Author 2, 07/12/19

was echoed in other performative practices of thanks such as weekly clapping for carers. For example, one respondent explains his choice to paint a cartoon image of a nurse in PPE: 'It was more to show ... we have solidarity with them, that we do actually care ... and we are behind them' (Male artist, Bishop Auckland, 5/01/21). Expressions of solidarity also saw some street artists create artworks to raise money for the NHS. Most famously, Banksy's 'Game Changer', depicting a young boy playing with a superhero, masked nurse doll, raised more than £16 m for NHS charities after appearing in a foyer at Southampton General Hospital, then being sold at auction in March 2021 (The Guardian, 2021). Rebel Bear's stencil image in Glasgow's West End of a masked nurse shaping a heart with her hands raised money on Instagram for Covid-19 charities (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/530>, retrieved 12/10/20). Chris Shea also fundraised for NHS charities by charging pubs, cafés and homeowners £50 to reproduce 'Rainbow Boy' (Edmonds, 2020).

The many expressions of gratitude to NHS healthcare workers are also sometimes conjoined with expressions of solidarity with overlooked groups and social movements in which facemasks are also symbolically loaded. A notable example, widely circulated social and online news media (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/219>, retrieved 16/12/20), is Artful Dodger's (a.k.a. A.Deer) mural in Elephant & Castle, London, featuring a woman wearing hijab and a blue surgical mask inscribed with 'NHS'. As A.Deer comments on Instagram:

[T]he government & media launched a campaign to inspire the nation in their 'war' on Covid-19. As in all wars there are heroes, villains, casualties & the forgotten. Rightly so, the heroes are the NHS & other care workers ... When most of the british press featured photos of the 'heroes' of this new war on the front cover of their newspapers & I struggled to see one melaninated face, I thought, 'Hmmm ... here we go again!'

Symbols designed to invoke and materialize solidarity occasionally evidence tensions between embodied unity and multiple differences and inequalities. For example, street artist Shepard Fairey's poster images of a Muslim woman in a U.S. flag hijab, which were used in a women's protest march in 2017 against Trumpist politics of exclusion and normative white supremacy, met with much criticism, highlighting the dangers of using symbols to embody the folding of minorities into a national narrative (Gökarişel & Smith, 2017). While Covid images of women in hijabs make street art similarly fraught as a space of protest, it is also a crucial site for articulating the intimately political nature of facemasks and for forging new forms of solidarity. In contrast to the flag hijab, A.De'e's image challenges the erasure of ethnic difference in celebratory national discourses by making the diversity of the NHS workforce visible in the public sphere.

Similar images of medics from minority ethnic groups appear in London, such as Graffiti Life's image of a woman in surgical mask on a legal wall in Shoreditch (<https://www.shoreditchstreetarttours.co.uk/covid-19-shoreditch-street-art/>, retrieved 12/10/20) and Atila8t4's mural of a woman in profile wearing a medical mask on a shopfront shutter in Barry Road (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/388>, retrieved 16/12/20). Zabou's mural on a legal wall in Spitalfields, depicting a young man wearing a mask decorated with the words 'Racism is a virus' (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/459>, retrieved 16/12/20), combines COVID-19 mask imagery and a message of solidarity with Black Lives Matter.

Public solidarity resonates strongly in street art images, especially in illicit artworks created during the first UK lockdown. Street art depicts mask-wearers as altruistic or even as protectors, creating new symbolism 'based on social responsibility and solidarity against a common threat' (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2020, p. 4). For example, in April 2020, Nathan Bowen created several murals across London urging public solidarity. One piece in South East London features an abstracted figure of a construction worker wearing a blue mask and holding a sign saying 'a big thanks' alongside text reading 'We Can Beat This Together' and 'NHS' (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/222>, retrieved 16/12/20). Another depicts a besuited figure, under the NHS logo, wearing a blue facemask alongside text again stating 'We can beat this together' (<https://covid19streetart.omeka.net/items/show/221>, retrieved 16/12/20). These images captured a moment in public sentiment that has perhaps changed over time as the pandemic has worn on. As one interviewee explains:

I think I painted what I felt ... we were all feeling similar things. Whereas now, if I painted what I felt it would be vaccine debates and I wouldn't be able to paint the 'we're all in this together' because it feels like we're fragmented now. (Female street artist, West Yorkshire, 10/12/20)

On occasion street art has been defaced with graffiti claiming, for example, that 'COVID isn't real' (Speare-Cole & Richman, 2020, n.p.). However, we found only one newspaper report of anti-mask graffiti in the UK (Jackson & Moody, 2020), and no examples of street art that could be interpreted as explicitly anti-mask. We acknowledge that heavy reliance on social and mainstream media may have influenced the kinds of artwork that have come to our attention. Formal and informal editorial decisions are constantly being made across these media about which street artworks capture the mood, and of course these platforms are far from neutral in the forms and works that they privilege (MacDowall & de

Souza, 2018). However, the social signifiers contained by masks in street art are remarkably consistent, irrespective of whether the artworks are commissioned or illicit. Far from being divisive, or symbolising weakness, illness, authoritarianism and a culture of fear, UK street art has depicted the facemask as symbolic of care, responsibility, and solidarity.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to contribute to social and cultural geographies of the COVID-19 pandemic by illustrating the role played by UK street artists in documenting the changing social and cultural meaning of masks during the pandemic. This role is significant in a context in which mask-wearing was previously uncommon, stigmatised, and symbolic of counter-culture, criminality and social exclusion. Through its interface with social and mainstream media platforms, street art has recorded the work performed by facemasks as boundary objects mediating between a biomedical community concerned with disease prevention, a government that procrastinated in recommending mask-wearing, and a public increasingly willing to wear facemasks to navigate everyday life during the pandemic. Analysis of UK street art reveals how it is attuned to, and encapsulates, the social and cultural functions performed by masks. While Sikka (2021) argues that facemasks are 'mediating technologies that shape our experience of life under social distancing' (p. 5), we suggest that street art can capture a broader range of functions performed by facemasks, including meeting a psychological and physical need to feel safe, boosting public morale, symbolising solidarity and public-spiritedness, and drawing attention to the expression and enactment of the intimate politics of a pandemic through and by bodies. Street art also reflects rapid, collective attitudinal shifts concerning mask-wearing. Indeed, it could be argued that UK street artists have played a role in ensuring that the facemask has been transformed from object of alienation and ridicule into an heroic signifier in an unfolding public health crisis (Kahn, 2020).

Street artists are an important barometer of public mood because their opinions, particularly when expressed in illicit or unsanctioned artworks, are not subject to editorial control, nor do they seek authoritative permission to be expressed (Mitman, 2020). Significantly, even at the beginning of the pandemic, very little street art is explicitly didactically public-health oriented (beyond reinforcing government messages such as 'stay at home'). Instead, street artists convey emotion, especially fear of the disease and a desire for safety, and the everyday reality of mask-wearing. Many street artworks represent this new norm, even before the formal change in government advice and policy. This positive reinforcement is significant given the frequently counter-cultural tone of street art and its tendency towards subversion. While there is some critique (for example, of government mishandling of the crisis or capitalism triumphing over public health), hardly any of this is anti-mask in nature. Instead, UK street art encapsulates the ways in which masks can be experienced simultaneously as reassuring and irritating, protective and fear-inducing, but also advocates mask-wearing to protect public health, manage anxiety concerning health risks, and signify grateful solidarity and hope.

Exploring a particular response (representing mask-wearing) to a particular event (the COVID-19 pandemic) in a particular place (the UK) provides important insights into the social and cultural geographies of contemporary street art. However, our ability to understand the reception of COVID-19 street art is limited by the constraints imposed by the

pandemic, especially our inability to experience street art in the context of the street because of lockdowns. In the early stages of the pandemic street art was critical of the government, but once facemasks were mandated, in many cases it aligned with governmental agendas. As Iveson (2017) argues, street art is not necessarily politically transgressive, democratic, or just. We cannot know if residents view street artists as outsiders reshaping their neighbourhoods over which they have no say, or spokespeople for the communities in which they work. Further research is required to understand if the alignment of some Covid street art with public health agendas was *experienced* as contributing to an atmosphere of solidarity and care, or part of a broader public communications, even propaganda effort. Moreover, while street art allows us to document how the facemask has come to symbolise the responsabilisation of individuals in managing health risks over which they have little control, it offers little critical commentary on this. Nor does it offer much criticism of under-funded health systems that struggle to provide effective pandemic responses that require treating, testing, and supporting vulnerable populations.

We can conclude that street art has played a significant role in the reinvention of PPE as *masks* (Lynteris, 2018) – objects of categorical transformation that allow people to persist during a deadly pandemic. The pandemic has seen the spaces of street art intertwine everyday life worlds with the bureaucratic, political sphere of government, civil society and public health. It has also changed these spaces, continuing processes that connect the material spaces of the street with virtual online spaces of mainstream and social media, while simultaneously displacing art from studios, galleries and exhibition spaces onto the streets and into virtual spaces. Once considered a disease, epidemic, contagion and plague (Cresswell, 1992), our evidence suggests that in the context of an actual pandemic, street art contributes to public dialogue by articulating emotion and deeply held concerns, and communicating the intimate politics, semiotic meanings and social properties of objects associated with disease.

Notes

1. Mindful of sensitivities concerning who self-defines or is defined as a street artist, we use 'street artist' to refer to *creators of street art*, which might include those who self-define as street artists, muralists and graffiti artists/writers.
2. The research received ethical approval from Durham University Ethics Committee (GEOG-2020-08-11T16:34:44-dgg0cm).
3. This is a citizen social science project led by academics at University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

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