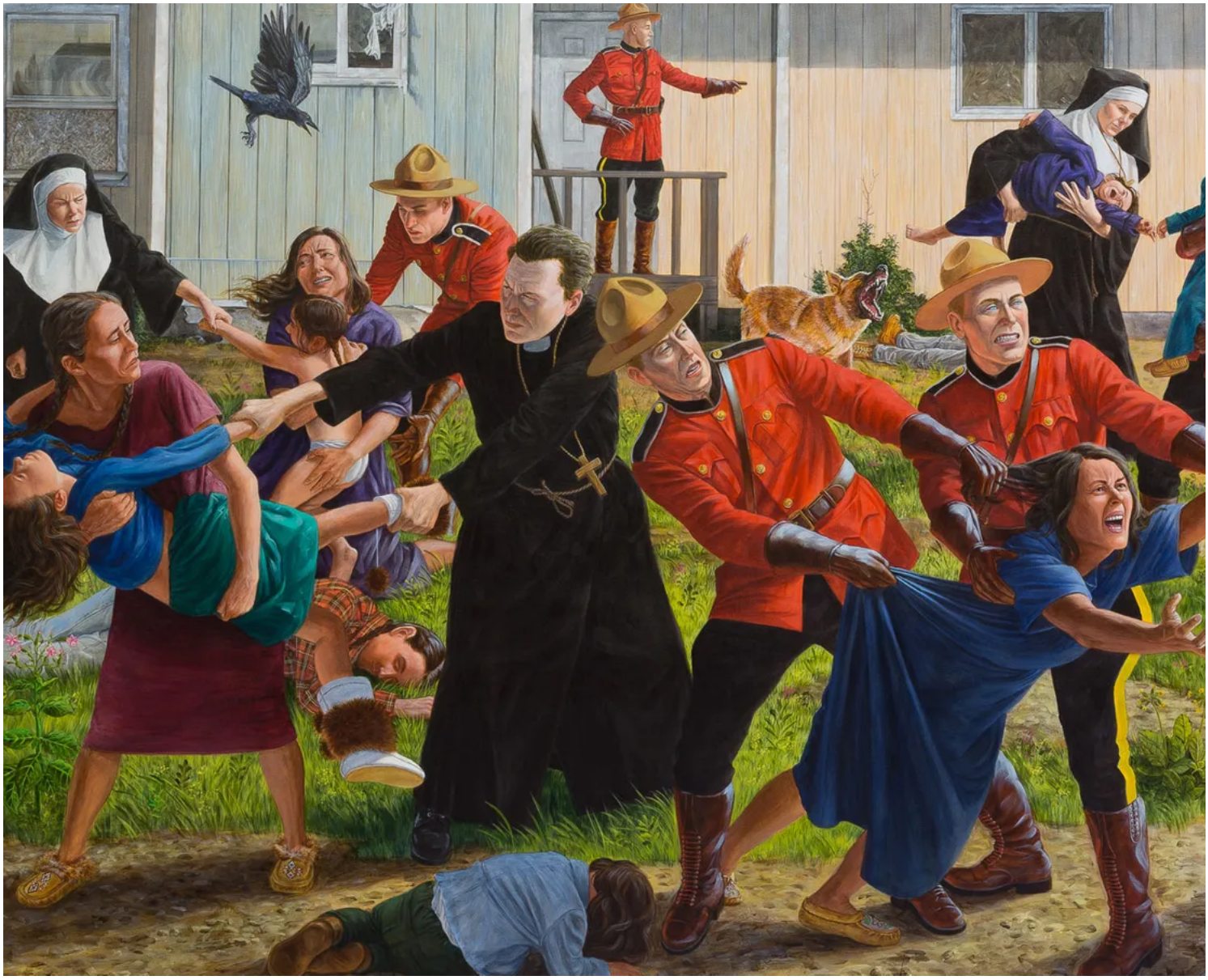
ART | ART HISTORY

Kent Monkman's The Scream: Images that define atrocities

(Image credit: Kent Monkman/ Collection of the Denver Art Museum)



By Karen Burshtein 7th July 2021

Some paintings have become the defining images of a social or political catastrophe. But can art really shape the narrative of war and atrocity, asks Karen Burshtein.

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Canadian Cree artist Kent Monkman's graphic and gut-wrenching painting The Scream (2017) depicts a chaotic scene. Mothers are held back by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Mounties) as they lunge toward their children, who have been snatched from their arms by Catholic priests. That scene encapsulates the anguish of the all-too real history of aggressive assimilation that saw children torn away from their families and taken to residential schools, and where untold other abuses, physical and sexual, took place. The practice was in effect from the 1880s to the 1990s, led by the Catholic Church with the approbation of the Canadian government.

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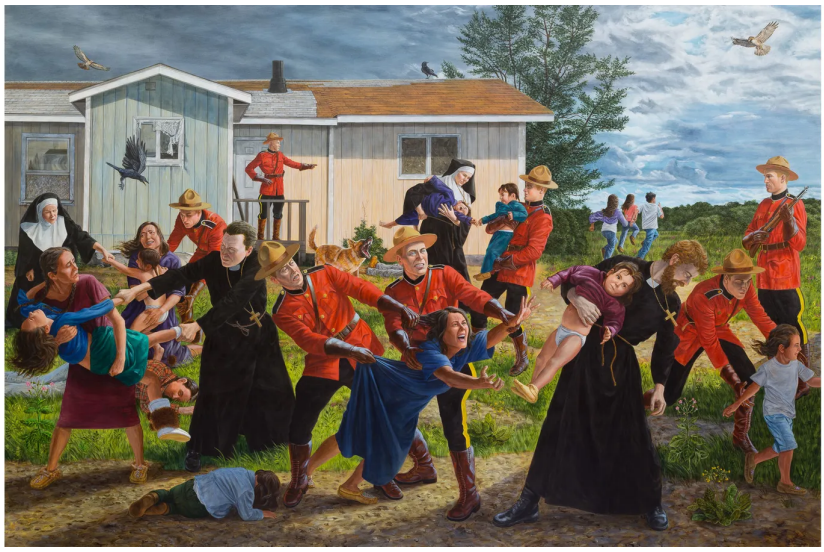
In May 2021, unmarked graves containing the remains of 215 children at a former residential school **were discovered in Kamloops, British Columbia**. Only weeks later, 751 unmarked graves **were found at another residential school** in Saskatchewan. And again: on 30 June, **another 182 unmarked graves were discovered** near a residential school in a different location in British Columbia.



Painted in 2017, The Scream has come to symbolise outrage and grief after the discovery of unmarked graves (Credit: Kent Monkman/ Collection of the Denver Art Museum)

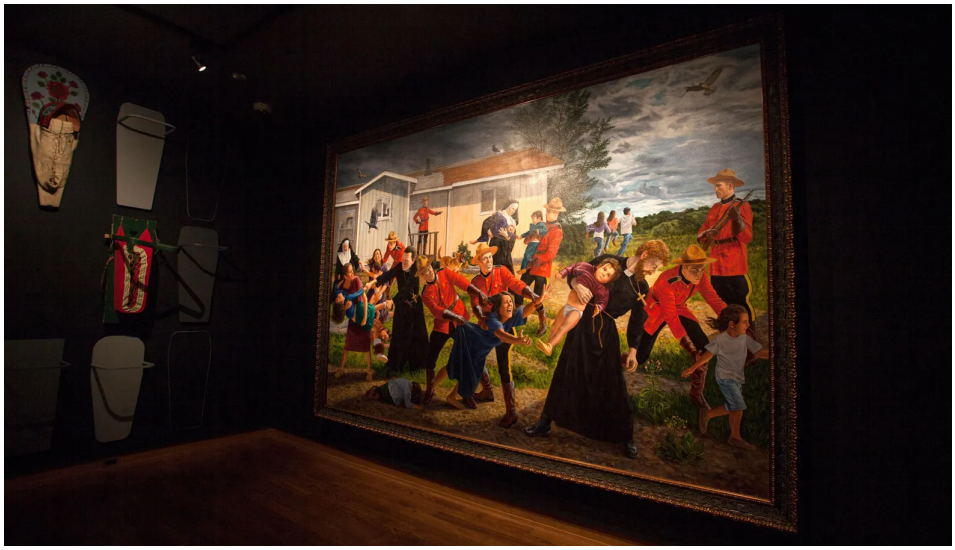
Since the first discovery in May, Monkman's painting has been shared widely, in posts reflecting the country's collective rage, grief and a sense of urgency. Thanks to social media, and the Covid-era practice of museums putting their collections online, images have never been more accessible to the public, to the point where they're often becoming symbols for the voice of moral outrage against atrocity.

It was while looking at Old World paintings at Madrid's Museo Prado about a decade ago that Monkman, one of Canada's most esteemed contemporary painters, began to see their emotional power. The artist purposely appropriated Western artistic traditions of history paintings (and bright colours) to tell the story of The Scream: this is a shared history, he seemed to be saying. (The painting was dedicated to Monkman's grandmother, who was a survivor of the Residential School system; the first time she spoke about her experience at the school was on her deathbed.)

Putting it in context

This information about the painting, like so much else, including context, and scale (the painting is a huge two metres by three metres) is likely to get lost when it's viewed on Facebook. "They were showing this image all over the internet and a lot of these places they weren't even saying it was made by Kent Monkman," says MaryLou Driedger, a Winnipeg author and teacher, who worked as a tour guide at Winnipeg Art Gallery when the painting

was on display as part of a cross-Canada Monkman exhibition, **Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience**. She tells BBC Culture: "If you don't know that this painting was made by a Cree artist who spent the first five years of his life on a reservation, you are losing a lot of the story. It's important to know that. And that he listened to every single one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's testimonies before he did the paintings and I think to just blast this picture over the internet you're not getting much context."



Much about The Scream – including its scale – is lost when it's viewed on social media (Credit: Kent Monkman/ Collection of the Denver Art Museum)

But The Scream is just one example of how, throughout history, artists' works have been used as tools of change. In some cases, the artists have made themselves proactive participants to effect social action and change, even hoping to drive policy decisions. Their work of art becomes a calculated creation, the artist abandoning allegory for activism. The artist hopes for a visceral impact so that the painting might raise an awareness of an injustice.

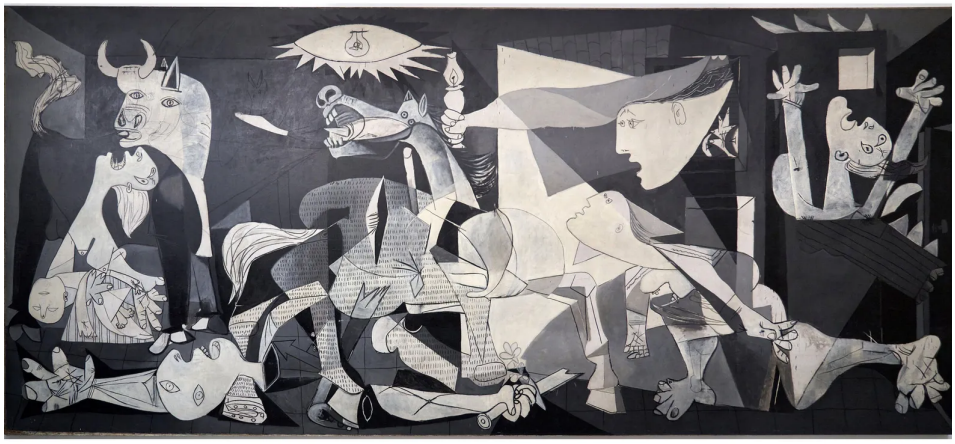
But how do artworks serve to interrogate an atrocity or an act of war? What happens when a painting goes from image to concept? And when the artist is asking the viewer not to be just the audience, but a messenger, to carry their outrage to the greater world, what does that do to the traditional relationship between artist and viewer? A more equal, or at least collaborative, relationship – partners in advocacy – has been suggested, one that reflects people's power when associated with an artist.

> *Art adds an ethical quality to the act of witnessing – Bracha L Ettinger*

"Since photography is seen as reality, images of violence are off-putting for an audience," Cameron Deuel wrote in **The Relationship Between Viewer and Fine Art**, a 2013 paper for Western Washington University. Art can be helpful by opening avenues that photography, or a text, can't. As Bracha L Ettinger, a visual artist, philosopher, psychoanalyst and author, said in **a 2016 discussion in The New York Times**: "Art works toward an ethical space where we are allowed to encounter traces of the pain of others through forms that inspire in our heart's mind, feeling and knowledge. It adds an ethical quality to the act of witnessing. By trusting the painting as true you become a witness to the effects of events that you didn't experience directly, you become aware of the effects of the violence done to others, now and in history – a witness to an event in which you didn't participate, and a proximity to those you have never met."

And despite the limitations of social media, there is often greater impact when a work is seen outside of its most traditional home, the gallery or museum. It takes the perceived or actual elitism out of art, further empowering the viewer. A research project by the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid explores the impact of what one of its contributors, art dealer Tony

Shafrazi, **called "the greatest war painting in the world"**: Pablo Picasso's Guernica. The project, **Rethinking Guernica**, contains more than 2,000 documents, essays and interviews. Little wonder that the way in which art can serve to tell an atrocity is called The Guernica Effect.



Picasso's Guernica helped garner support for the cause against Franco's Fascism (Credit: Alamy)

In 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, Franco invited the Nazi Condor Legion to drop bombs over a small town, Gernika, that was a symbol of Basque independence. In Picasso's jarring iconic oil-on-canvas painting of the aftermath, civilians scream in anguish; scattered limbs are strewn throughout. Violence and pain scream from the canvas.

While art critics scrambled to unravel the meaning of each figure represented in the piece, it could be argued that was beside the point. As Picasso wanted, this painting went beyond standard art-analysis dialogue of aesthetic, technique and style. Though it was rendered in the Cubist style, **as Shafri said**, "It's beyond Cubism." Picasso called Guernica the "property of the people".

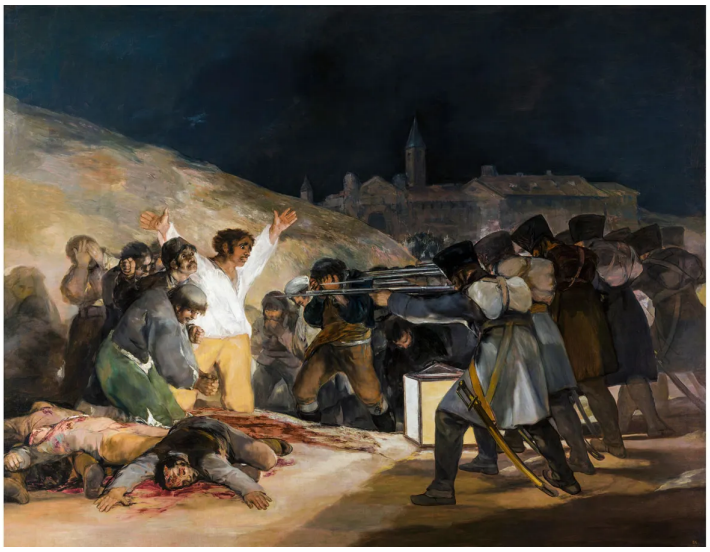
The artist, who painted the work in the immediate aftermath of the event to capitalise on news reports, sought to use the painting to influence changes in national policy, to galvanise world opinion, and to push viewers into being proactive participants in the outrage. Picasso toured Guernica in the UK and US, as a fundraising effort for Spanish Relief for Guernica in 1938. While still in exile in France, Picasso even used the painting as a bargaining chip for democracy. In later years, Franco's followers wanted the painting in Spain (perhaps owing to its celebrity), but Picasso decreed he would only allow it to hang in the country once democracy had been established.

The art of war

This idea of how well-timed art can shape the social narrative of war was explored by Nicole Dean, a US Army officer specialising in looted art. **In a 2020 article**, Dean proposed that Guernica could be used as a tool for leadership development: "This calculated creation of a powerful masterpiece should be examined and appreciated as part of a greater wartime narrative."

She even suggested that art could be used as a guide to the art of war. "The study of wartime art can be a valuable addition to the professional development of military leaders, generating options for professional dialogue about how societies see the victors, the vanquished, and the value of conflicts through the lens of artists and cultural patrimony."

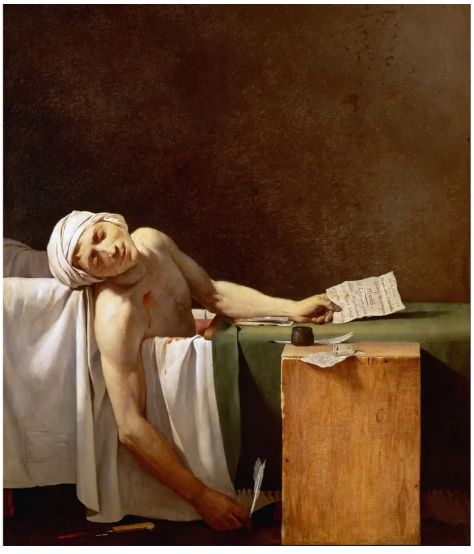
Before him, Picasso's fellow Spanish master artist, Francisco Goya, was a graphic eyewitness to the atrocities of his day – and his painting The Third of May 1808 (part of a diptyque with the Second of May, held by the Museo Prado in Madrid) continues to shock almost two centuries after his death, as a ground-breaking masterpiece of art – and a political tool.



Goya's The Third of May 1808 created a timeless image of violence from specific events (Credit: Alamy)

The painter was deeply affected by the disillusionment he saw during the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in May 1808, by widespread starvation among civilians and by their resistance – it was the first time the term "guerrilla warfare" was used – as well as their subsequent execution at the hands of Napoleon's troops. But it was the way Goya approached the painting that suggested the painter was focusing on a universal and timeless message. The troops, guns pointed straight at the masses, are faceless. Many of the civilians cover their faces. They could belong to any country, and any time. (The anonymity was radically avant garde, rejecting all the usual conventions of Baroque and Neoclassical history painting for its day).

And it did indeed transcend time and place. **In the words of art critic Robert Hughes**, author of a 2003 biography of Goya, The Third of May 1808 is "truly modern… the picture against which all future paintings of tragic violence would have to measure themselves… He speaks to us with an urgency that no artist of our time can muster. We see his long-dead face pressed against the glass of our terrible century, Goya looking in at a time worse than his." Later, Edouard Manet echoed The Third of May in tone and composition with his The Execution of Emperor Maximilian (1868-69).

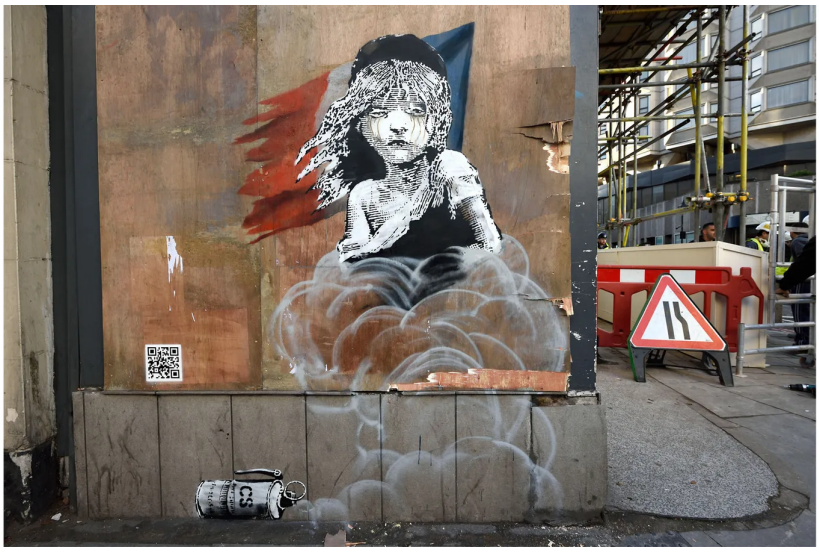


A 'propaganda painting', Death of Marat was widely shared in its time – and has become a meme today (Credit: Alamy)

Jacques-Louis David's Death of Marat (1793) might have been the first painting to shift public opinion in real time, or as close to real time as that day allowed. The painting depicts the murder of revolutionary leader and journalist Jean-Paul Marat who was stabbed in his bathtub. David one of the most prominent painters of his day, completed the work just several months after Marat's murder. Espousing academic techniques of the day, it's almost photographic in its simplicity. Art historian TJ Clark **called it the first modernist painting**, for "the way it took the stuff of politics as its material, and did not transmute it". This was calculated. David was an official artist of the Jacobins, and was asked to make Marat into a martyr to the cause. Marat was one of three "propaganda paintings" David painted.

Significantly, it was also turned into an engraving that was widely circulated among the public. (Its popularity only waned during the reign of terror but returned to glory by the 1820s with the help of **a flattering essay on it by Baudelaire**: "This painting is David's masterpiece and one of the great curiosities of modern art because, by a strange feat, it has nothing trivial or vile…"). Today, the painting is often used as a meme in response to contemporary conflicts, with a pepper-spraying policeman, for example, standing over the murdered subject in the bath.

German artist Käthe Kollwitz wanted her 1923 painting War (Krieg) to be seen through prints that were distributed, or shared, like pamphlets. The artist sought a suitable response to the "unspeakably difficult years" of World War One that saw the death of her soldier son, Peter, a loss she never got over. She began work on War in 1919, ultimately finding woodcuts as the right medium to give expression to the atrocities she experienced and saw. The finished work is seven woodcuts of unadulterated anguish – in one, a mother offers her baby up as a sacrifice to the cause; in another, a widow lies in anguish, near dead herself. "I have tried again and again to represent war. I was never able to capture it… These prints should be sent all over the world and give everybody the essence of what it was like," **Kollwitz wrote in a letter to Romain Rolland in 1922**.



Banksy's 2016 creation drew attention to the refugee crisis (Credit: Alamy)

There's perhaps no better present-day example of an artist giving agency to a viewer than graffiti artist Banksy's 2016 "Les Mis" image, part of a series of works criticising the use of teargas in the refugee camp in Calais, France. The graffiti – featuring Cosette, the young heroine of the film and musical Les Misérables, with tears in her eyes from CS gas used to clear refugee camps – appeared overnight opposite the French Embassy in London. The artwork was interactive. Under the image was stencilled QR code that could link viewers to an online clip of a police raid on the camp.

Two other Banksy works on the theme appeared, including in Calais. They were critically well received (and even embraced) by political authorities, including the mayor of Calais – who was not known for her leniency towards migrants or those wanting to help them. Perhaps in the same manner as Franco in Spain, she was responding to the prestige, and tourist potential, of having her town "Bansky'd"; she promised to preserve the graffiti under

glass while vowing to cover up or erase works by lesser-known graffiti artists. She even made it part of guided tours of the city. (Just as with political movements, political art has the potential to be hijacked.)

The question "What is art?" is certainly not just a question of aesthetics and technique. By giving form to outrage, art finds another purpose. But it has yet another: one of healing. As Ettinger **said in the New York Times discussion**: "When violence kills trust, art is the space where a trust in the other, and by extension of one's being in the world, can re-emerge."

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