Walking up Sixth Avenue recently, I noticed that the bike lanes had been changed. Whereas before, cars were parked next to the curb, now they had been moved toward the center of the avenue, with the new bike lane taking their place. It was a visible marker of how, with just a few changes to the graphical notation of the urban environment, millions of lives were affected. Like so many 'invisible' apparatuses, these lines are used to dictate and control the way we move through the city. And sure enough, motorists and cyclists obeyed without so much a protest, providing a perfect illustration of Foucault's ideas of how law and order are so deeply inscribed into the streets we walk and the air we breath that they've become at once invisible, and at the same time, regimented, omnipresent, and oppressive.

The many marks on the avenue are textual, forming a complex palimpsest of interwoven semiotic ecosystems. The bike rider follows one set, the motorist another. Yet their white lines—laid upon the tarmac, thick as impasto—are visually similar to one another, each squeezed out of the same machine. Lyrically dancing on top of them is another set of signs, spray-painted orange, yellow, and red, resembling graffiti: symbols and bits of cryptic phonemes that playfully obfuscate the authoritative traffic lines, gently tickling their dominance. The street is covered with them; they dart about willy-nilly, here and there, moving in all directions. Lithe and agile, they are spontaneous and gestural compared to the traffic lines, which bear the stolid and authoritative marks of industry and bureaucracy. Yet somehow, the two systems peacefully coexist. In spite of the spray-painted squiggles, bike riders obey the solid white lines. It's as

if each system is addressing an entirely different audience—one, the motorists, the other, workers who in the near future, will be digging up this patch of road. These indicators are x-rays of what lurks beneath, cautionary maps intended for the excavators: 'f/o' accompanied by arrows signals the direction that the optical-fibre cables run beneath the street; 'shallow cover' and 'transit wireless' alert workers that the Wi-Fi for the Fourteenth Street subway station lies just beneath the pavement. The colors, too, are specific: orange denotes communications cables; red, electric; yellow, gas.

These marks feel fragile and impermanent; in a short time they'll be worn away by traffic, weather, and wear-and-tear, whereas nothing short of human intervention will eradicate the white traffic lines. The street still bears the scars from when the prior bike lanes literally had to be sanded off the surface. The incisions, a quarter of an inch deep, will outlast the painted lines. The street itself bears a history of surgical scars, recording upon its derma each minor incursion, a mad geometry of pitch and tar. The pavement itself is a skin covering a body beneath it, deep layers of veins and arteries (cables and wires), bones (sewers and water mains), and muscle (dirt and rocks). Above, street lamps and traffic signs rise like hair follicles from its epidermis; spent pieces of chewing gum dot the sidewalk like beauty marks; and oil skids mar its integument. Each morning, street cleaners attempt to restore the cutis to its virginal state, resulting in a deeper ingraining of its filth.

As different as they are, these two systems are sanctioned by city bureaucracy, permitting them to legally exist in the public sphere. Abutting them is an illicit one: crawling up the side of an abandoned HSBC bank on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street is graffiti which, at first glance, appears identical to the spray-painted utility marks. While each has similar colors, gestures, marks, and symbols, they speak entirely different languages to entirely different audiences; one is lawful, the other proscribed. Both are temporary, each gestural. Born of identical material, they share spontaneity; created quickly, they will vanish equally as fast. As a material, spray-paint has an aesthetic leveling quality. With the exception of belabored graffiti art, most hastily scribbled spray-painted gestures bear similar marks. A standard mechanism (the nozzle) determines the form (a consistent line weight), while the hand holding the can determines the gesture (expressionistic). Because of the thinness of the medium—whether on the sidewalk or on the side of buildings—spray paint-drips and splatters, each mark in dialogue with an abstract expressionist discourse.

The former HSBC hosts several types of semiotic ecologies: graffiti, stickers, street art, and spent signage. The last remaining bit of HSBC officialdom is a piece of paper taped to a filthy window announcing that the location has been permanently closed. To the right are two pieces of street art: an oversized xeroxed bottle of insulin and, a few feet below that, a plaster cast of man's face with his tongue sticking out, appended to the building's surface. Just beneath, on street level, a group of kids gazing at that same wall through their

smartphones are playing an augmented reality game, catching virtual cartoon characters hovering on the building's façade.

Watching them play, I also feel compelled to take out my phone. Calling up this identical scene on Google Street View, I note that the app hasn't yet updated the new bike and parking lanes, nor are any of the spray-painted utility marks present. Navigating to the left, I see an outdated representation of the HSBC still in the peak of its glory days, emblazoned with bright red and white signs, bereft of graffiti and street art. The windows are sparkling and customers are visible inside. Moving my phone back to the street, I notice several augmented reality additions that don't actually exist in real life; in particular, the words 'AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS' are emblazoned in the middle of Sixth Avenue in large, white sans serif letters. They are so perfectly matched to the typography and scale of the street that they appear to be part and parcel of the landscape itself. Pushing my thumb upwards on my screen, navigating northward on the app, the words 'AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS' follow me to the middle of the next block. I could 'travel' all the way up to Fifty-Ninth Street on this app and those words would accompany me for the entire journey. Google's AR markup is both similar and different from the fluorescent squiggles and graffiti tags. On one hand, Google is as official as the city agencies marking up the streets, but on the other, theirs is a type of graffiti, an overlaying of the landscape that both augments and scars it. It's hard to imagine that Google asked permission to amend the city streets, unexpectedly aligning them as much with the outlaw taggers as with the official bureaucrats.

Next to the HSBC is a subway station with its own semiotic ecosystem, notable for a recent signage scandal when the three lines that run through that stop—F, M, and L—were colluded and emblazoned in that order over the entrance. The public swiftly reprimanded the agency for displaying the signage that read 'F M L,' slang for 'fuck my life.' Today, it's corrected with M and F, far to the left, and L, pushed to the extreme right. At the entrance to the subway station is a tidal pool of language: an overflowing trash can, containing everything from candy wrappers to newspapers. Mashed together into a great heap, it's a time capsule of that particular day.

The urban landscape is a battleground of marks that are divided between official (traffic patterns, signage) and unofficial (graffiti, tagging, postering, stickering). Yet it's more complicated than that. In addition to augmented reality, in many urban areas rife with unstoppable gentrification—a force particularly strong in New York—graffiti tagging has also been by halted by wealth and surveillance, as well as the commodification and legibility of street art, a practice that began as subversive but has since became popular and marketable. Whereas once graffiti tagged everything, today in Manhattan it's mostly found only on buildings—like the HSBC—waiting to be torn down to make way for new condos.

ABCA

A few weeks later, I'm on my way uptown to an exhibition by Stefan Brüggemann, an artist who somehow manages to distill the entire complex semiology of the urban landscape into a few succinct ideas. As I exit the subway on the Upper East Side—a tonier neighborhood than Fourteenth Street—I notice the identical spray-painted public utility markings on the street, often scuttling up onto the crisp, freshly poured sidewalks, which are miraculously free of chewing gum. There's little graffiti in this part of town, but for my entire walk to the gallery, those cryptic fluorescent spray-painted squiggles, arrows, and numbers accompany me, captioning my walk the way a news crawl incessantly scrolls across the bottom of CNN. As I approach the gallery—Hauser & Wirth—I note that its façade, too, is constructed from the identical limestone as the graffiti-besmirched former bank downtown. In sharp contrast, I note the absence of graffiti or other types of unofficial markings on this building.

Opening the door and entering the space, I'm stunned to see that this pristine white space has been tagged floor to ceiling with silver, black, and orange spray-paint. These marks—legible words—are a cross between the utility notations and the graffiti on the HSBC, but moved indoors, they take on an entirely different meaning. The action feels like dangerous, a bit like vandalism, if a gang of kids broke into the gallery and tagged the hell out of it. It's messy

and aggressive, creating a shattering cognitive dissonance between the high polish of the floors and the rawness of the expression on the walls.

Looking closer, I discover that the text is dialogue grabbed from *Citizen Kane* combined with headlines snatched from online news websites, painted live spontaneously as the installation was being made. Apparently Brüggemann was looking at his phone and spray-painting the headlines as they appeared, giving a new twist to Ezra Pound's famous dictum that 'literature is news that stays news.' By combining the classic (*Citizen Kane*) with the contemporary (data-scraped headlines), Brüggemann puts into play two opposing temporal metrics, fast and slow. Just as Charles Foster Kane churned the news headlines of his day, now algorithms automatically spit out the news. With one foot in the twentieth century and the other in the twenty-first, the result—part graffiti, part conceptual art—is jarring. Imagine kids tagging subways in the early eighties with headlines from the *New York Post* and appropriated lines from *Taxi Driver*, and you start to get where Brüggemann's coming from.

Proceeding upstairs, I find that the same graffiti which had been slathered directly on the walls on the ground floor gallery has now been applied to huge marble panels. It's got a similar feeling, but it's as if Brüggemann broke into a millionaire's home and slathered graffiti all over the pricey kitchen counters. While the wall pieces downstairs felt temporary, these feel permanent—postcards from two hours ago, hastily tagged onto marble, the most eternal of materials. These works combine vanity, mortality, and

vandalism, resulting in the sort of thing that happens when kids break into cemeteries and tag up mausoleums. The spray-paint will fade, but the marble will last forever. The acquisition of luxury, after all, is a way of fending off death; in this way Brüggemann's works are riddled with death. They're also critiques of gentrification and consumerism, recalling the poetic graffiti scrawled across the walls in Paris during the May 1968 uprising: 'In the decor of the spectacle, the eye meets only things and their prices,' or 'No replastering, the structure is rotten,' sentiments which echo Brüggemann's own: 'To be political, it has to look nice.' He's a mad bomber of language: by combining the discourse of the street with the discourse of high culture, Brüggemann turns spaces into semiotic battlefields. His works are powder kegs of conflicting ideologies which can't help but implode.

ABCA

It wouldn't be wrong to call Brüggermann a twenty-first century situationist. His primary artistic tactics, displacement and *détournement*, (the repurposing of preexisting objects into new circumstances) come from their playbook. He's also acutely sensitive to textual microclimates, lending an aspect of psychogeography (the meshing of mental states with geographical ones) to his practice. His interventions are demonstrative 'situations,' concrete constructions of momentary ambiences of life and their subsequent transformation into superior passional qualities.[1] Brüggemann's *détourning* of marble slabs into art instead of kitchen counters, for instance, is an action akin to Guy Debord's

wandering through Paris while blindly following the directions of a map of London.

In the midst of his exhibitions, Brüggemann will often include a stack of sealed, mirrored trash receptacles. They're reminiscent of Warhol's functionless Brillo boxes and his Time Capsules, which consisted of 612 sealed cardboard boxes filled with flotsam and jetsam from everyday life at his studio. Over the course of thirteen years, Warhol kept boxes open at The Factory and indiscriminately tossed just about anything into them, from used Kleenex, to autographed first edition LPs, to hamburger wrappers, to wads of cash. When a box was filled, it was sealed, signed and numbered, a readymade edition. He kept the project secret until his death; to his studio assistants, he looked like he was just throwing stuff into boxes. Brüggemann's trash bins are similar except that by removing the artists' curatorial hand from the project and replacing it with an automaton—the mirror—everything that passes before it (including images of his own work in the same room) is sucked, as a representation, into that receptacle. Unlike Warhol, there is no treasure within (in fact, there is no within or interiority), only images fleetingly reflected upon its exterior surface.

The coldness of Brüggemann's trash receptacles plunged me into a meditation on the climate change in New York City, not the forthcoming global warming meltdown, but rather how much the city's visual hues have shifted over the past few decades. Years ago, the city had a warm glow, fed by the dim WALK / DON'T WALK signs and balmy haloes raining down from the street lamps

above. The city, dense with shadows, encouraged soft, clandestine activities. Then, a few years ago, in the interest of legibility and public safety, the analog lighting system was swapped for harsh energy-efficient LEDs. For weeks after the old signs were replaced, the new ones burned my eyes. Simultaneously, the traffic lights and street lamps were also swapped for LED bulbs to similar effect. Coupled with the ubiquity of CCTV cameras, New York in the twenty-first century was transformed into a high-voltage media spectacle, one which Debord famously theorized as "capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images.'[2]

A Brüggemann exhibition often has similarly harsh lighting, illuminated by fluorescent fixtures hung from the ceiling. But these aren't regular tubes: instead, they're sculpted remakes of Dan Flavin's *Tatlin* series, *détourned* from functionless art into functional lighting fixtures. Like Debord, Flavin referred to his fluorescent light sculptures as 'situations' rather than as 'sculptures,' since each place and individual viewer's experience varied according to time of day and environment into which they were placed. Flavin felt that light, as a material, is by nature situational. The irony is that his pieces themselves became spectacles around the accumulation of capital; a few years ago, his *'Monument' for V Tatlin* (1967), was sold at auction for $950,000. While historians consider Flavin's alchemy the recontextualization of a humdrum item of everyday life into art, Debord might view Flavin's alchemical process more cynically, from light to gold, thereby fulfilling his definition of spectacle. In fact, collectors of Flavin's works are known not to plug them today in because the original bulbs are no

longer manufactured; once they burn out, collectors fear that the sculpture will lose its value. Brüggemann short-circuits this entire discourse by restoring fluorescent lights as art back into actual fluorescent lights, a proletarian gesture. Reflected in the mirrored trash boxes on the floor below, they too are sucked into the endless spectacle of trash.

The blinding light of the twenty-first city goes hand-in-hand with a presumed sanitization. But even a gentrified city is filthy. Layers of grime cover window sills and coat the streets. The HSBC's windows which, just a few months ago were clean, are now smudged and splattered. It's amazing how fast things decay. A week after the HSBC vacated its space, it was covered in dust. Behind the teller's counters are mirrors. Dusting off the glass and pressing my nose up against it, I see they are now coated in grime. The technology through which we navigate our cities also suffers from oleophobia, a fear of oil. After a session of swiping our finger across the glass of our devices, the pristine screens are tracked with grease. Removing the glass plate from our ear, we find an unsightly impression marring the surface. We're constantly mopping our bodily fluids from our technologies. It's the same with bathroom mirrors— smeared with lipstick and splashed with water, the mirror doubles each stain. On another floor of the Upper East Side gallery, Brüggemann presents a series of mirrors smeared with paint and broken poetic phrases about time. By taking something meant to be functional and rendering it functionless, these works are meditations on urban decay, blight, glamor, and narcissism. They have a

debauched glamor, not unlike Berghain's infamous restroom at 5 a.m., mirrors smeared by lipsticked graffiti and trails of cocaine.

A few weeks after I began this essay, I found myself riding my bike up Sixth Avenue. It seems that I can't pass the corner of Fourteenth Street without thinking of Stefan Brüggemann. It's a psychogeographical moment, one where my memories are inextricably intertwined with the city's streets. As I approach this corner today, I see that the former HSBC bank is still abandoned and covered in even more graffiti that it was then. Stopping at the traffic light, I glance down at the pavement to check on the status of the spray-painted squiggles. To my surprise, they're completely gone, covered by textured billiard-green paint which connotes that this is, indeed, now an official bike lane. I'm slightly saddened, and perhaps hit with a pang of nostalgia to see that those marks, which I spent so much time thinking and writing about, are gone. Glancing to my right, I notice a traffic island under construction which, following the recent bike lane changes, is growing up from the pavement, cement upon cement. What were once white lines is now a permanent urban structure. As the light turns green and I move up the avenue, I'm gently reminded of O. Henry's famous line that New York City will be a great place if they ever finish it.

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1. Guy Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action,' July, 1957 [online], .

2. Guy Debord, 'The Society of the Spectacle,' (Paris, 1967) [online], .