

## Virtual Graffiti: an Interview with Jordan Seiler of the PublicAdCampaign (2014)

*Questions: Christian N. Kerr*

Jordan Seiler is an artist, but his best art is his activism. In 2000, Seiler started the PublicAdCampaign, a collective of projects that challenge the commercialization of New York City's public spaces. He organizes advertisement takeovers, like the "New York Street Ad Takeover" (NYSAT) in 2009, where hundreds of volunteers whitewashed over 20,000 square feet of illegally pasted posters in Manhattan. His "Public Access" project makes and distributes the little metal tools that unlock the ad boxes on the sides of bus shelters; you can get one so long as you promise to use it to replace the ads inside with your art.

His newest project, the augmented reality app NO AD, is a step towards a real life ad blocker. Open the app on your phone and watch as art by Keith Haring, or photos by Sebastião Salgado pop up over the subway ads for plastic surgery or the newest sitcom. NO AD is a virtual looking glass into a future where the cacophony of omnipresent advertisements can be muted or filtered at the click of a button.



I met Seiler at a vacant lot turned community garden in Bed-Stuy, where we explored the intersection of art, advertisement, and technology he works within and against.

\* \* \* \* \*

CK: I think it's interesting that you use your full name, Jordan Seiler, instead of a tag name like many other street artists. Why do you do that, and have you had any troubles because of it?

JS: I've never had any troubles, and I use my full name because what I'm doing shouldn't be illegal. I'm making a political commentary on the state of how our public space is used,

and I think it's being used wrong. I want to comment on that as an individual and not a vigilante. I know some of what I do is illegal, and if you want to arrest me then we'll have that conversation in court.

CK: How would you describe the difference between art and advertisement?

JS: So it's not a black and white issue, but advertising has an end goal that's completely different from art, right? It uses visual communication to get you to have a single thought, which is to purchase something. Artwork – hypothetically – does the exact opposite. Its intention is not to make you think one particular thing, but to allow your mind to ruminate on the image and its potential meanings.

CK: You grew up in New York City, a bastion of both street art and advertising. How have these things changed since you were a kid?

JS: Sadly, I don't have strong memories of public space from when I was young. I don't remember graffiti covered trains; I don't remember what the advertising scene was like. But in the past five, ten years, the city has really cracked down on a lot of public advertisements: all along the BQE they've started to enforce the arterial highway ban, billboards within, like, 200 yards of parks now are all blank. It's not the Wild West of advertising it once was.

But, like every other city in the world, advertisers are a revenue source for NYC. So certain infrastructures have become a de facto space for commercial messaging. It's becoming more a part of how the city operates, which is really problematic. It's like, 'Oh god! How do we reverse *that* now?' *[Laughs]*

CK: So is your move into the digital realm a way to get around this problem? What inspired the transition from more tangible projects like NYSAT to augmented reality (AR) applications like NO AD?

JS: I met a guy who wrote a paper that included the NYSAT project, and we thought 'Wouldn't it be cool if we could do a virtual version of this?'. It just seemed natural to dive into the digital stuff. I'm getting older. I don't run around on the streets so much any more. This seemed like another viable way to attack the issue and just bring more people into the conversation.

CK: You seem pretty excited about the future of augmented reality. I think many people, myself included, worry that when everyone's wearing a heads-up display, some sense of a publically shared reality will be lost.

JS: Oh, that's absolutely a fear. If I can augment my world so that all I see is daisies and rainbows, when in reality there's homeless people and trash all around me, then I'm editing out what I need to understand our society's problems, and public spaces are where all these types of issues are made real. But this is our collective problem, because living in an augmented world is just going to be what we're doing. We need to be having the conversation of how AR will affect our public spaces now, before the technology is commercialized.

CK: Your work seems to be focused more on asking questions than finding answers. But if you had it your way, if you ran the city, what sort of legal changes would you make to further democratize public space in New York City?

JS: I would ban outdoor advertising, which would suddenly gray the city, which is no fun. There is something to be said about the visual cacophony it creates, I don't want to see that go away. I would want to legalize – not legalize graffiti, that seems so extreme – but kind of legalize the writing on walls, and watch as that experiment played itself out.

CK: Wouldn't the city turn into a bunch of crudely spray-painted cartoon penises and cuss words though?

JS: I actually think it would result in people taking more time to create stuff on the street, developing relationships with the communities that they were going to put these images in so that there was some sort of expectation that their work would stay. Then the act of making marks on the wall would become another way in which people would talk to each other. Yeah, I'd go for that. But I don't know, I'm not a politician, I might be crazy, I don't know. *[Laughs]*



\* \* \* \* \*