Ms Chiu’s thesis adopts a set of critical paradigms articulated in the work of Walter Benjamin (aura), the Situationist International (unitary urbanism) and Jean-Francois Lyotard (the postmodern condition) in order to address the ambiguous status of “street art” as a mode of cultural production situated between the Museum and the erstwhile “urban underground.” In addition to the necessity for carefully rethinking the paradigms borrowed here from thinkers who work anticipates but is not directly cognizant of the phenomena of “street art,” there is the task that remains central to Ms Chiu’s undertaking of navigating the difficulties of the term “street art” itself, and the easy elision of these two terms in light of the “institutional critique” they purportedly stand for. The obvious requirement here is to critically situate the prevailing conception of “art” as a complex of ideological and economic forces which masquerade as universals.

The thesis, among other things, examines the pertinence of Situationist thought for the critique of the contemporary Culture Industry and the institutionalization not only of the avant-garde, but of those formally “disenfranchised” subcultures around whom street art evolved. This raises questions of historicity as well as more subtle questions, such as: What is the implied institutionalization of such modes of critique as, e.g., Situationism, in advance of their being deployed in the context of contemporary institutional critique? Are not the same forces of expropriation at work in the institutionalization of “street art” already at work in the expropriation of Situationism and Situationist strategies, all of which are already ensconced in the academy (and commercially: there are even Guy Debord dolls).

The question of course is analogical: is the grammar of terms like “street” as it pertains to the Situationists concomitant with that of “street” as it is employed in the term “street art”? Is the “postmodern” condition described by Lyotard contiguous with that described by Fukuyama? In other words, is “street art” initially a manifestation of an oppositional culture, or is it—ab ovo—one of capitalism’s masterstrokes? In the post-Pop environment, how do we even begin a discussion of “authenticity”? And what is at stake when we do—if anything? In addressing such question, Ms Chiu evokes the idea of “icons of iconicity,” the cultural/economic feedback loop of commodity-capitalist
modes of “representation.” The intriguing element here is: how then to speak of the feedback loop of “criticism”? Since, if we are to take Fukuyama seriously as all, we need to understand “postmodernism” not only as a constellation of cultural phenomena, but also as the body of criticism that adheres to these phenomena and effectively canonizes them. Is thus, too, “postmodernist theory” not also “capitalism’s masterstroke”? Just as, e.g., the CIA-funded intellectual circles around such periodicals as Encounter facets of “capitalism’s masterstroke”—the long game-strategy of a cultural Marshall Plan?

By way of an afterthought, one last point of discussion: the Situationists were concerned not primarily with the making of art, but with actual modes of subversion. If “street art” is indicative of the success of “capitalism’s masterstroke” in expropriating all forms of authenticity, including those of political/economic opposition to the status quo, etc., what does this imply about the culture industry’s complicity in the suppression of internal dissent in the post-industrial West? Guy Debord argued for “poetry without poems, if necessary”—how do we account for Banksy’s continued practice of “street art” with the art still firmly attached? Can we see this as a re-appropriation of the art economy as a way of “subversive” wealth redistribution (e.g. his various guerilla activities in Central Park and elsewhere)?

My provisional recommendation for this thesis, dependent upon the candidate’s performance in his defence, is a grade between very good and excellent.

Louis Armand, PhD
15 May 2014