renowned French playwright once said: “En art, point de frontière.” Yet the notion of art in the collective consciousness has long been grasped only under its most reductive acceptation: a work of art of any kind is supposed to last through ages.

Thus, the very concept of “ephemeral art” raises substantive issues. At first sight, the combining of these two terms is somehow disconcerting. Is it possible to produce a piece of art that is meant not to be lasting? Beyond this questioning on the deep nature of art, it must be noted that in the course of the 20th century, many groundbreaking artistic movements won fame by using the ephemeral aspect in their work. Street art, land art, performance art are all things that, thanks to their outbreak and the fact that they gradually gain in popularity, have given a new lease of life to art in general. The artist is no longer striving for producing a work that will withstand the test of time as it was the case back then. What matters now is less the finished piece of work than the process thanks to which it has been created.
URBAN ART

Nowadays, it is likely to come face to face at the corner of a street with a modern art work. This short-lived fresco, which might be erased within a few hours if not a few months, is part of an ever-growing visual means of expression which is spread in cities from all over the world. The urban art, that is to say the decoration of public spaces, is the combination of graffiti – this term was coined by the novelist Norman Mailer, thus the persons who used to devote themselves to such an art back then called what they did “writing” – and street art. Although this type of art was born in the working-class areas in which people from different cultures are both used to live together and share ideas, the urban art is, from now on, a widespread practice on an international level.

WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

Historically, the first drawings on walls appeared in caves thousands of years ago at Lascaux, in southwestern France. No less than 2000 images painted on ceilings and walls – abstract signs, people and animals dating back from the Stone Age – have been found. The emergence of modern graffiti dates back to the early 1960s in Philadelphia but it really took off in the 1970s, in New-York. These were turned into open-air playgrounds in which artists such as Taki 183 and Tracy 168 could state loud and clear their existence by both letting their imagination run wild and “marking their territory” with their pseudonyms. In the early days, graffiti was all about what we could name “a duty of representation”.

Source :
A MULTIFACETED ART

The lack of consideration for the environment, the dramatic increase in individualism and consumerism, the false political promises and the horrors of war are some of the themes tackled by street artists. Although the artistic means at the disposal of the artists to call the earlier-mentioned practices into question are many and varied, the fact remains that they are all serving a much more noble cause than just distorting, for a minute, the relationship that the spectator shares with its environment. This form of art sheds a different light on the world in which we live in order to raise people’s consciousness.

GRAFFITI VS STREET ART

The most common form of graffiti is a “tag.” Basically, this is the signature of a graffiti artist. Tags are text-based and most of the time indecipherable by uninitiated person, those who are uninvolved in the graffiti world. Street art is a sub-genre of graffiti. While graffiti operates within a rather closed community, street art is an open invitation for anyone to interact, consider and discuss. The latter is characterized with a pictorial focus rather than a textual one. Moreover, it is not purposefully destructive, unlike tag which is most of the time related to an act of vandalism, as it intends to enhance the beauty of the urban environment.

Source:

SUBVERTISING

The word is a portmanteau of subvert and advertising. It involves transforming in a satirical manner the logos, characters and slogans of corporate in order to question the credibility of the message there are delivering through their advertisements.
An African child is depicted standing in a Louis Vuitton handbag. This is meant to illustrate the dichotomy of the celebrities who crave being seen in ads promoting luxury goods but also in advertising campaigns which vigorously condemn child labour.

ICONS

A recent trend in the street art world consists in paying tribute to what is being called “icons”. Heroic figures, legendary bands, spiritual legends, characters from the gaming universe, the possibilities are indefinite! Whether they be depicted in a unique portrait or in a fresco which combines a variety of different figures – such as the one just below produced by Mr Brainwash – the symbolic value of the message they are conveying is in no way deteriorated. It is an ethereal invitation intended for the spectator to both get to know the artist better and to interfere one step further in the artist’s universe.
ANOTHER FORM OF STREET EPHEMERAL ART...

Ephemeral art now continues its journey in the street.

Our interest here is in another form of physical art performance taking place on the street which, by involving the human body's expression, embodies the very essence of ephemeral nature itself. The place calls into question the artistic expression by placing it outside specially designed areas. Therefore and because it takes place in various settings and before an ever-changing audience, it keeps searching for new connections with the viewer beyond the very codified confined areas' rules.

After the Paris's terrorist attacks in 2015, several young couples spontaneously went out dancing while kissing simultaneously on Paris's streets to celebrate love, as shows the picture below. Both their gestures and the place were very relevant to the nature of ephemeral art as their performance was unique and took place before random bystanders.
An older form of street ephemeral art

That being said, the criterion of repetition is not necessarily relevant for that art expression. We can draw a parallel between this dance art and the famous street theatrical genre of the commedia dell'arte, born in the XVI century. As well as Paris's dancers, five centuries earlier, it would use public spaces to stand for a protest, which was to stand out from the strict litteral theatre genre.

Delivering a message is not always necessarily the ultimate purpose of that art though: artists can be solely motivated by the inspiring potential of the place and perceive as a challenge the fact of using it to perform successfully their art, such as painting on difficult surfaces. They can also use public places to be seen and promote themselves.
A truly ephemeral art?

The commedia dell'arte's performances based on improvisation kept changing, and as they only survived through memories they unavoidably progressively faded away. The singularity of each performance could not last and the remembrance of their global artistic expression was only able to survive from that period onwards thanks to non-ephemeral works, such as writing or painting.

That way of surviving has changed however with the advent of new technology. What was purely ephemeral before is now paradoxically so: performances which were never twice the same in real can now be recorded. Ephemeral art can be forever captured in a picture or a movie.

In all likelihood, it will have to integrate this new technological aspect into its own definition in the future and that may throw into question the very essence of its nature.
Art into the wild: *Land Art*

The ephemeral art is not only represented in the urban environment. Artists are also interested in nature. It is the case of the *Land Art* or *Earth Art*. Born in the United States in the late 1960s, these creations are only composed of natural elements – wood, ice, rock, sand, leaves and so on.

The work and its environment are inextricably linked, landscape and seasons are essential for the artists of Land Art because they use the materials available. It explains that these elements are exposed to the natural wear and are destroyed progressively. This is why it is considered as an ephemeral art.

From complex constructions of wood or rock to drawings on snow or sand, the Land Art can be very diverse. Since 1960s, its development is still going on but it is not such a famous discipline. The first large-scaled exhibition of Land Art “Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974” has been organized on 2012 at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) of Los Angeles.

The artists who shape the Earth Art

The first major Earth artists were the British Richard Long and the American Robert Smithson who achieved considerable works.

Robert Smithson “Spiral Jetty”, Great Salt Lake, Utah, April 1970

Source: [http://www.robertsmithson.com](http://www.robertsmithson.com)
Since the 1970s, techniques developed and some artists specialized. Some built their names and their credibility. Andy Goldsworthy is one of these famous “land artists”. This British is a sculptor and photographer. He combines these two talents as when he has finished a work, he records it by photographing it.

He is the former of a discipline called the “rock balancing” which consists in balancing rocks on top of one another.
Some other artists work on snow as Simon Beck or on sand as Jim Denevan.

There are even representations of Land Art in Lorraine. For example, “Le Vent des Forêts” has been created in 19997 in Meuse. It is an open-air center of land art, long of 45 kilometers. It is the result of an association of six agricultural and forester villages to alert the general public to the environment notably.

Vincent Mauger : le théorème des dictateurs - Le Vent des Forêts © Guillaume Ramon

An environmental commitment

The works of these artists can be even more relevant nowadays with the global warming and all the ecological issues. For example, Andy Goldsworthy explains the Land Art conveys sensitivity of environmental impact:

“Nature is in a state of change and that change is the key to understanding. I want my art to be sensitive and alert to changes in material, season and weather. Each work grows, stays, decays. Process and decay are implicit. Transience in my work reflects what I find in nature.”

The artist suggests to adapt oneself to nature, which implies to be sensitive and respectful, particularly to its transitory aspect. Here ephemeral is illustrated by nature because it reminds people of its constant state of change.

More than aesthetic realizations, Land Art represents a real engaged art. The Earth artists adapts themselves to the place, the season and the available materials to create.

It challenges various contemporary issues as waste which is omnipresent in our society of consumerism. That’s why ephemeral is essential because it defines the Land Art and its end: preservation of the natural setting.

PERFORMANCE ART or INVISIBLE ART

As the Land Art, the Performance Art became a major movement in the 1960s. Several new art movements emerged in this tumultuous period as the society was experiencing a lot of changes. It is hard to define this art which is out of convention. It can be words, body movements or even an endangerment of the artist. Marina Abramović and her former partner Ulay were pioneers of such artistic performances in the 1970s.

Picture of a limitless artist

Born in 1946 in Belgrade, ex-Yugoslavia, Marina Abramović went to the Academy of Fine Art of her hometown. Since then, she explored both the physical and mental limits of human beings through painful, exhaustive and sometimes dangerous performances.
During this period I take full responsibility

In 1974, for a performance entitled *Rhythm 0*, she gave the instructions that she is 'the object' for six hours and that 'during this period [she takes] full responsability' for what will happen. 72 objects were placed on a table and could be used by the spectators on the artist as they want. Some of the objects like paint or wine were harmless, whereas others like a gun with one bullet and scissors were dangerous. At the beginning of the experience, spectators reacted kindly by offering her a kiss for example. Yet, after a while, some of them became more and more violent. One put the gun in her hand and pointed it at her. Another one slashed her neck and sucked her blood. She did not move even when some spectators cut her clothes and touched her intimately. *Rhythm 0* showed how far the audience can go and how far we are able to push the limits of the body and the mind.

Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present

In 2010, a huge number of visitors came to the Museum of Modern Art to see a retrospective of her lifelong work. If her recent works seem less dangerous, they remain extremely difficult. For this exhibition in the MoMA, she sits motionless and silently during the opening times of the museum for three months at a small table. 700 hours during which visitors could sit in front of her and stare at her.
This intense eye contact between the artist and her audience was unique and not reproducible. When a journalist from Indie Wire asked her about the importance of preserving her work, she explained that for her early performances she didn't want any documentation and that the ephemeral aspect of her work was necessary. She said that 'documentation is misleading, because the performance is dead'.

However, that would mean she wouldn't leave any traces of her work. As a result, a documentary film entitled *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* was made to present a retrospective of her artistic life and preserve her whole work.

Contemporary artists seem to give more importance to the ideas rather than the objects. They are often seeking to raise people's awareness on issues, and sometimes by shocking them. Performance art is a strong form of expression which is far from comparable to a traditional form of art as theatre. In a play, blood and pain are artificial whereas in Abramović's artistic performances for example, pain is real.