The passionate economy of graffiti and street art

Building social cohesion through art collecting

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Abstract

This study examines how social cohesion is built through exchange of urban art. Graffiti and street art are treated like dirt and washed away. Unsanctioned art is often perceived as alien to museums and private homes. Despite this, many graffiti and street artists produce art in studios that are sold in galleries as urban art.

Through ethnographic tools and site visits to homes of collectors in the United States and Sweden this study explores what it means to exchange and own urban art. Guided by Émile Durkheim’s theories on social cohesion and Georg Simmel’s writings on social boundaries, sociological implications of material things are investigated.

The analysis shows that exchange of urban art produces and affirms social bonds and passionate feelings about belonging to a specific art world. Artworks in private homes symbolically represent unsanctioned art; which makes collectors feel joy, purpose, and confidence. Urban art collectors dodge discursive definitions of art in favor of nondiscursive and pragmatic boundary work.

In contrast to a Bourdieusian perspective this study found that art is not as much about reproduction of social hierarchies as about making social life meaningful and connected. The results suggest further research on materiality in times of digital media.

Keywords

Economic sociology, social cohesion, boundary work, materiality, art worlds, graffiti, street art, sociology of emotions, cultural sociology.
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You know, that's why, man, I be tellin' you all the time.
Ya know, "love." That word "love" is a very serious thing.
And if you don't watch, I tell ya that (love's gonna get you, love's gonna get you)
Because a lot of people out here, they say "I love my car,"
Or, "I love my chain"
Or, or, "I'm just in love with that girl over there.
So, for all those people out there that fall in love with material items,
We gonna bump the beat a little some'n like this!

1. Introduction

The meaning and consequences of graffiti and street art have been much debated (Bengtsen, 2014; Kimvall, 2014; Young, 2014). Initially, graffiti was defined as illegitimate writings on walls and many argue that street art is essentially unsanctioned. However, paintings labeled graffiti and street art are frequently sold in art galleries and at auctions around the world. The same individual may be prosecuted for doing one painting and pay his bills selling another (Young, 2005).

Walking the streets of European and North American cities you are often disturbed by a prickling smell. Next, you need to watch out not to put your feet into a pool of paint being washed down the sewer. The prickling smell comes from the solutions of one of the many graffiti removal companies that tirelessly circulate the streets. Later that same day you might jostle at a crowded art show where canvases by the same artist are sold for thousands of dollars. These images look quite similar to those in the streets, treated as dirt. This study investigates how social cohesion is constructed around exchange of urban art brought into the homes of private collectors.

Perceived value of an image is not necessarily decided by how pleasant you find it to look at, or the amount of time and talent needed to create it. According to the law, a colorful piece of graffiti on a grey concrete wall along the train tracks is vandalism. And according to an art collector a canvas with a chaotic ravel of energetic black lines might have a strong emotional value. Depending on context, images with similar technique, from the same aesthetic

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1 Boogie Down Productions – Love's Gonna Get'cha
2 According to Howard Becker’s (1963: 9) labeling theory, crime is socially constructed: “deviance is not a
tradition, are socially constructed as either valuable or destructive. This is not possible to reduce to either aesthetics or law. There are plenty of examples within the sphere of contemporary art that violating the law will not disown a piece from the label “art”.  

In the home of individual collectors the aesthetics of graffiti and street art are preserved instead of being erased. This raises several questions. Which combinations of paint and surfaces are perceived as valuable? Which type of values do they have? And how do collectors create a feeling of belonging to an art world formed around specific subcultures? Commodities cannot be reduced to their use value, or to the time taken to produce them. The art market is an obvious example of how value is socially constructed through boundaries between different social sub-worlds (Becker, 1982; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Bourdieu, 1984; Fine, 2004; Gerber, 2014; Thornton, 2009). Graffiti and street art related art have been traded since the early 1970s (Kimvall, 2014). While economic value and status of graffiti and street art is unsettled, this study investigates how collecting urban art create feelings of belonging to a social community (Bengtsen, 2014; Thornton, 2009; Young; 2014).

Material things have great sociological importance (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b). Abstract ideas that create social cohesion are symbolically infused in tangible objects (Durkheim, 1995[1912]). A flag is not any piece of cloth; it is an icon that makes the idea of a nation present. According to Durkheim, ideas inscribed into things have religious aspects that are indispensable to any society. Exchange of things is not merely rational but also social and emotional (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b). Reciprocal relations materialized in exchange of material things are fundamental to economy (Mauss, 2002[1925]).

De La Fuente (2010) argues that we shall not leave the study of art to economists. Sociologists need to consider that sociology of art is much more than the study of valued art objects. The experience of art transcends the moments when we stand in front of a piece of art. It is incorporated in our leisure time through visits to museums, it is used in branding of cities and as tourist magnets, stories about artists and amazing art works are part of our

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2 According to Howard Becker’s (1963: 9) labeling theory, crime is socially constructed: “deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender.’ The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.” A parallel argument applies to labeling of art (Becker, 1982).

3 On the belief in value Durkheim (1995[1912]: 229) wrote: “A cancelled postage stamp may be worth a fortune, but obviously that value is in no way entailed by its natural properties. There is a sense, of course, in which our representation of the external world is itself nothing but a fabric of hallucinations.”
common references, and many of us make art ourselves. According to De La Fuente (2010: 8), the challenge for sociologists today “is to explain the many kinds of relations and networks of aesthetic, economic, emotional and technological ties that art-objects enter into.” Here also the juridical aspect can be added.

In previous studies the actions and motivations of graffiti writers and street artists and the reactions from authorities have been a principal concern. (Bengtsen, 2014; Dickens, 2010; Kimvall, 2014; Kramer, 2010; Lachmann, 1988; Macdonald, 2001; Shannon, 2003; Snyder, 2009; Young, 2005; 2014). Most studies have touched on graffiti and street art as objects to be sold without making this the main topic. Commissioned graffiti and street art has been discussed as a career opportunity that is opposed to illicit writing, and as something that might compromise the authenticity of these art forms. Several studies depart in a presumed conflict between “authentic” and thus illegal unsanctioned art and “sell-out” urban art (Dickens, 2010). Even if graffiti and street art are rapidly erased in many cities, there are plenty of possibilities to see graffiti along the railway tracks and other unsanctioned art in the streets. Still, some bring art by graffiti and street artists into their homes and make it a part of their lives and of themselves. The meaning of collecting for those who collect graffiti and street art has not thoroughly explored.

1.1. Research question and sociological relevance

How is social cohesion built through exchange of urban artworks? I investigate this question through in-depth interviews with collectors of art labeled “graffiti” and “street art”. The main data was gathered in the homes of collectors in New York and Stockholm. To understand the meaning of urban art for collectors I further consider how they perceive the symbolic meaning of the artwork they acquire. This includes aesthetics, perceptions of artists, ways of acquisition, and other attributes that contribute to the meaning and value of art.

I am interested in the different types of values that are associated with art and in how art with disputed value are incorporated into contemporary society and economy. I position this study within economic sociology since it is about how artworks are exchanged. But I will discuss additional aspects to those that are strictly economic. My interest is in the fundamental determinants of economic values as well as other values, this has several levels. First, what does collecting art mean in general? How is exchange of art organized and what gains are achieved? Second, what makes collectors particularly interested in graffiti and street art?
What is the relationship between unsanctioned art in the streets and artworks sold in galleries later to be found in living rooms and bedrooms of collectors? What gives these images value, in contrast to being perceived as destruction to the city?

This study is sociologically relevant because it contributes to a better understanding of how materiality such as art collecting can influence, change, and construct social cohesion. By studying an empirical case I aim to increase knowledge of how symbolic meaning infused in material things is of fundamental importance for social cohesion. The following literature review will consider theories on the interdependence of valuation and boundaries, concerning exchange of art in general and of urban art in particular.

### 2. Literature review

#### 2.1. Materiality and social cohesion

##### 2.1.1. Boundary work and Simmel’s door

The human capacity to make distinctions between things is fundamental for social life (Simmel, 1994[1909]). Humans construct boundaries in order to navigate the world. Durkheim (1995[1912]: 74) formulates this as language creates a new world of “spiritual beings” upon the physical world. Aspers (2001) claims that this is a social constructionist perspective that is not at odds with a realist perspective and that this is the only perspective we can apply to the social world. The world is there; the question is what it means for us. The ability to label things is, according to Durkheim, something we have developed through religious practices. The social meaning of the physical world is not given and concepts are thus built on shared beliefs.

Simmel (1994[1909]: 5) attests that humans “at any moment” are engaged in the activity of “separating” and “connecting.” He analyzes these practices as dependent on each other. We can only grasp the idea that things belong together if they are first defined as separate. Definitions construct boundaries between things and humans and have concrete results. By calling this “boundary work,” we acknowledge that it is a process that not only structures human action but is also shaped by us (Fine, 2004; Hannerz, 2015). In the fundamentals of social constructionism, Berger and Luckmann (1967) draw a boundary between objective
reality and subjective reality. The “institutional order” is hard for individuals to influence; it seems fixed and “objective”. The subjective reality is more open to influence, it constructs “sub-worlds” that are normative, affective, and cognitive. A corresponding boundary is expressed by Durkheim when he divides the world into a profane sphere and a sacred sphere. The first is practical while the latter is built on belief, social meaning, and strong emotions of social cohesion.

Simmel points out the ability to move between worlds and thus re-negotiate boundaries. He describes boundary work with a metaphor: while mute walls guard definitions, there is always an opening, a door that speaks. According to Simmel (1994[1909]: 7) we are always situated in this position of making distinctions: “the door becomes the image of the boundary point at which human beings actually always stand or can stand.” The door is an opening by which one can control space and decide what should be let inside or what should be excluded. This can be applied to symbolic meaning, such as when art collectors negotiate categories and values (Fine, 2004; Thornton, 2009). And it can be applied in concrete terms, such as when collectors bring artworks into their homes and rearrange concrete connections and hence boundaries between things. Simmel’s metaphor of a door has been rewarding when analyzing how urban art collectors become aware of, move between, and construct different sub-worlds.

2.1.2. Surface and depth of icons

As described above, the socially constructed meaning of material things is built on belief in boundaries that are shared intellectual constructions. The value of things can’t be limited to their ability to perform certain functions; they also have social meaning (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996[1979]). Things to which we establish emotional bonds can be understood as separated from the profane and practical perspective of the world, since: “sacred beings are beings set apart” (Durkheim, 1995[1912]: 303).

During my study I realized that the passion urban art collectors expressed toward material things was not reflected in the theories on stratification and struggle within fields of art as described by Bourdieu (1984) or in the practical routines of art worlds pointed out by Becker (1982). Sociology of art has focused on other factors than the actual artworks (De La Fuente, 2010). During my study I witnessed that urban artworks aroused strong feelings in collectors and gave them energy to cope with the demands of daily life.

The way we see or “feel” physical things has important sociological implications but sociologists have not paid much attention to this (Alexander, 2008a). When we touch or see
the surface of things it brings us in contact with the social ideas associated with the thing. This symbolic “depth” constitutes layers of social meaning that engages us emotionally rather than intellectually and is thus non-verbal, or nondiscursive (Alexander, 2008b). Consequently, things can function as “icons,” which are symbolic condensations of social meaning in matter (Alexander, 2008b). Icons signify shared ideas.

To perceive of things as icons is to acknowledge that when we experience them we understand their symbolic meaning by contact rather than by intellect and discursive communication. This corresponds to Simmel’s (1994[1909]; 2011[1900]) analysis of separating and connecting in regard to valuation of things. Intellectual reflection and categorization creates distance and desire toward objects while things we bring close can be enjoyed. “The distinction between subject and object dissolves” when we establish close and emotional relationships to things (Alexander, 2008a: 7). When we draw a precious or “sacred” thing close, we make it a part of ourselves and become part of the ideas of the icon. In this study Alexander’s discussion of the surface and depth of icons has been helpful to understand how urban artworks can symbolize the practices of graffiti and street art.

2.1.3. The magic of exchange

Things can seem enchanted because they are not only symbols; they also influence our actions and thus question our idea of rationality. They can have a kind of agency and initiate causal consequences (Alexander, 2008b; De La Fuente, 2010). Individuals in Western culture perceive themselves as rational beings. To act on emotions, and to ground our existence in matter and body rather than in spirit and reflection, has – since enlightenment – been rejected as primitive and feminine (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b). But social science, as well as people working within marketing, has long since known that things have these powers. We buy things “not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” (Levy, 1959). Such things are “sacred” (Durkheim, 1995[1912]; Mauss, 2002[1925]).

The colonial history of our “civilized” world is reflected in vocabulary when social scientists address how material things affect us. When Marx (1954[1867]) criticized the influence commodities have on us he wrote about the distortion on our minds from fetishes. Durkheim (1995[1912]) instead writes about how totems are symbols of social cohesion. Marx wanted to unmask the exploitation of capitalism and distanced himself from the primitive. Durkheim, on the other hand, argues that we still act on emotions materialized in things we believe are sacred. Marx brought attention to the fact that how we relate to material things is a question of
aesthetics; the way we see things is historically and socially conditioned and reflects social 
relations of power (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b). Both Simmel and Durkheim agreed that our 
sensations are tied to our capacity to make distinctions – what I, earlier in this literature 
review, called boundary work.

The religious and spiritual theme that Durkheim expresses in regard to socially constructed 
boundaries is mirrored by the many references and metaphors to mysticism and religion 
describing our relations to material things. The concept of materiality acknowledges that 
things can function as icons, totems, and fetishes, that they have aura and are sacred, magic, 
and enchanting (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b; Durkheim, 1995[1912]). This challenges Weber’s 
(1978[1905]) conclusion that society is increasingly being rationalized and thus disenchanted. 
Durkheim (1995[1912]) claims that our actions are guided by shared emotions rather than by 
individual calculation.

To exchange and trade with things such as artworks is to separate and connect (Simmel, 
(1994[1909]; 2011[1900]). When things change owners they are separated from one person 
and connected to another. At the same time, new connections or social bonds are established. 
Things create and preserve social relations (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996 [1979]. Sociology 
has established that economic exchange is embedded within social relations that are not 
 rational in a limited sense (Granovetter, 1985). Mauss (2002[1925]) identified gifts as the 
fundaments for economic exchange; they create social bonds and cohesion based on 
reciprocity, prestige, emotions, aesthetics, and excitement.

2.1.4. Social cohesion materialized in totems

In a society organized around trade, commodities materialize social cohesion (Alexander, 
2008a; 2008b. Their ability to do this is based on beliefs similar to religion, which I 
previously discussed as boundary work and social constructionism. According to Durkheim 
(1995[1912]: 220), the “world of sacred things” emotionally engages us. The profane world 
on the other hand does not elicit strong feelings; rather the necessities of daily routines and 
work, which put food on the table, make us languid.

Durkheim asserts that the joining force of a social group is situated in individuals, but it is 
collective and not individual. This can be exemplified by language, inventions, and values 
that are and passed from one generation to another. When we act in line with the collective 
force we are given confidence. Durkheim states that our energy and motivations in large part 
come from outside of ourselves, from our social community. We are aware of these “mighty
causes” that acts on us but we cannot grasp them since they are immaterial and volatile (Durkheim, 1995[1912]: 214). Because of this collective feelings are imagined into things, or “totems”, and thus made permanent. These “totems” can materialize the social community of a “clan” by “a bond of kinship […] of a particular sort” (Durkheim (1995[1912]: 100). With activities similar to rites, we can actualize collective feelings, which then are expressed by individuals as a form of social steam or “collective effervescence.” When these emotions are actualized people “believe they have been swept up into a sacred world entirely different from the one they have before their eyes” (Durkheim, 1995[1912]: 228).

In my study Durkheim’s analysis of totems has been beneficial to understand how collectors of urban art join a socially constructed sub-world and express passionate feelings about artworks they have acquired. Passion for art is built on faith (Thornton, 2009). Going to an art show may very well be seen as a modern rite and artworks as totems of a clan.

2.2. Art, boundaries and value

2.2.1. Art worlds

Sociologists have investigated how social cohesion and stratification are organized around art. While Bourdieu (1984) studies how taste constitutes individuals from a consumption perspective, Becker (1974) is more focused on practices on the production side (De La Fuente, 2010). Bourdieu shows that art and culture reproduce social stratification and thus lock individuals within their social positions.

It is not obvious that we can tell if a thing is an artwork simply by looking at it, whether it is art or not is decided within an “artworld” (Danto, 1964). Becker (1982) exposes that artworks are not created by isolated individuals but are collectively produced within “art worlds” with established procedures. Things are thus accepted or rejected as art within art worlds conceptualized as networks of individuals and institutions with certain conventions and practices. Art world institutions such as artists, material suppliers, distributors, museums, art schools, critics, audiences, and collectors do boundary work that decide what is art (Becker, 1982). This boundary work separates art worlds from other social sub-worlds; simultaneously it creates boundaries between different art worlds such as contemporary art, outsider art, and urban art (Bengtson, 2014; Fine, 2004; Thornton, 2009).
Money is just one out of several values associated with art. Construction of boundaries creates pecuniary as well as cultural value (Fine, 2004). Money is also a social construction with complex meaning that maintains and builds social relations (Zelizer, 1997). Gerber (2014: 219) identifies four types of values that artist associate with their work: pecuniary, credentialing, vocational, and relational. Simmel (2011[1900]) claims that value is an intellectual construct independent of matter. This is analog to the absence of an evident relation between the physical world and the intellectual meaning we make out of it in the form of “spiritual beings” or concepts (Durkheim (1995[1912]).

2.2.2. Unsanctioned art

Illegal images in public spaces are usually labeled “graffiti” or “street art”. When these images are based on the letters of a graffiti artist’s “tag” – done at site with spray paint or markers – they are usually referred to as graffiti (Kimvall, 2014). This practice in particular is associated with its development on the New York subway during the 1970s and 1980s and has since been established as a global subculture. Images with other motifs and other techniques that are prepared in advance and then applied to public or private property without permission are usually labeled “street art” (Bengtsen, 2014; Young, 2014). Common techniques and materials within street art are stencils, posters, yarn, and sculptures. Common motifs are persons, animals, and political or poetic messages. The literature trying to further define and delimit graffiti and street art is extensive (Dickens, 2010; Kramer, 2010; Macdonald, 2001; Shannon, 2003; Snyder, 2009). The label “street art” is often used to mark a distinction from graffiti, but it is also common to use it as an umbrella term that includes graffiti as well as unsanctioned artworks in other techniques and of other motifs (Young, 2014). In this study I have not started with any definition and instead paid attention to how informants use these labels. I use the ideal type unsanctioned art to capture the shared practice of graffiti and street art to apply images and messages to public space without permission.

Kimvall (2014) points out that the discourse on graffiti simultaneously questions and acknowledges it as art. This argument applies to street art as well. The boundary work deciding whether graffiti is valued as art or perceived as vandalism takes place within a narrative of outsider and establishment, or crime and art. These are often seen as dichotomies but graffiti writers are simultaneously involved in a “deviant” subculture and an art world (Lachmann, 1988). Street art is often perceived as easier to understand and appreciate by a wider audience. This is reflected in the literature on street art, which often discusses
“unsanctioned” rather than “illegal” art. Street artworks are also more often discussed as gifts to the public rather than as the destruction of property graffiti is seen as (Bengtsen, 2014; Kimvall, 2014; Young, 2014).

Graffiti particularly – but also street art – is often perceived as essentially illegal. But to define graffiti and street art through illegality is problematic since there is an abundance of images done with permission that are labeled graffiti or street art (Bengtsen, 2014; Dickens, 2010; Kimvall, 2014). Many studies on unsanctioned art focus on the differences between the subculture and the dominant culture (Kramer, 2010; Lachmann, 1988; Macdonald, 2001; Young, 2005; 2014). In social science, subcultures have often been seen as protest against hegemony (Hannerz, 2015). To practice legitimate graffiti would thus open up the subculture for “outsiders” and artists would lose control over “their” subculture (Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001). Hence, the authenticity of the subculture is seen as compromised if the boundary to the establishment and market economy is not protected. However, recent research on subcultures acknowledges that they are not mere reactions and protest against hegemony. Boundary work is also done by subcultural agents who create cohesion by nurturing ideas about a confirmative and oppressive mainstream (Macdonald, 2001; Hannerz, 2015).

2.2.3. Exchange of urban art

The label “street art” is often used as a distinction vis-à-vis graffiti, but in galleries and auction houses both these expressions are sold under the label “urban art” (Bengtsen, 2014; Young, 2014). The word “street” in street art refers to where the work is executed, where graffiti is often perceived as illegal in essence. Since none of these requirements are met for artworks produced in studios and sold in galleries this causes some debate. According to some, street art is unsanctioned and ephemeral in its nature and produced for a context other than a gallery. Parts of the meaning of unsanctioned artworks may be lost in galleries and museums (Bengtsen, 2014; Young, 2014). But reference to the unauthorized background of artists can also create value in artworks executed in studios and sold in galleries. Recognition for graffiti and street art from established critics and major institutions is not very significant (Bengtsen: 2014, Kimvall: 2014, Young: 2014).

There are several ways to acquire graffiti and street art. Art may be removed from the street and brought home or sold. It may be gifted by the artist or bought at a gallery or an auction house, often in the form of a print or canvas (Bengtsen, 2014). In addition to the types of acquisition graffiti and street art may be adapted with permission directly to the walls of a
private home. Since street art and graffiti are perceived as free, public art some artists try to keep prices low or even give away art (Young, 2014). This ethos is also reflected when urban art print producers struggle to keep prices down and prevent speculation in high-demand street artists such as Banksy (Bengtsen; 2014; Dickens, 2010).

2.2.4. The value of the rejected

The institutional boundary work in a society, or the “objective reality” includes normative expectations. As Berger and Luckmann (1967: 116) write, it “puts everything in its right place.” Things considered out of their place are perceived as dirt (Douglas, 2002[1966]). A pair of socks is supposed to lie neatly folded in a drawer, not tossed on the kitchen table. Graffiti and street art are examples of conflict concerning this symbolic arrangement of things into *proper* places. Graffiti and street art have often been considered “paint in the wrong place” and perceived as something that needs to be washed away (Guwallius, 2010: 3-4). The word “graffiti” has a negative connotation while the label “street art” indicates that the latter is “art” and thus more valuable even if they are equally illegal (Kimvall, 2014). Boundary work creates meaning and is a practice of valuation. Unsanctioned art is persistent in creating debate since it is not possible to place and contain it in a distinct *drawer*. Boundaries are used to exclude art as well as individuals. But the rejected can also be exciting. Marginalized expressions can be perceived as exotic and what previously has been rejected may acquire value and be seen as sacred (Douglas, 2002[1966]; Durkheim, 1995[1912]; Fine, 2004).

The ephemeral character of unsanctioned art creates environments that are constantly changing, thus presenting unexpected encounters with art that challenge the expectations of the inhabitants of cities (Bengtsen, 2014). Encounters with street art can result in “enchantment” (Young, 2014). This is if you become aware of and appreciate uses of physical structures for artistic rather than practical purposes such as travelling to work and school. The enchantment of the unexpected that Young describes concerns, in particular, aesthetics and the fact that our perception is a result of our social environment and history (Alexander, 2008b; Marx, 1954[1867]). Street art questions the expectations of what to experience on your way to the office. Some appreciate this challenge to perception; others are disturbed by what is perceived as a break with the expected and normative order of things (Douglas, 2002[1966]). Those who are susceptible to this enchantment enters a sacred world with meaning (Durkheim, 1995[1912]). This belief is an example of the intellectual aspect of
separating and connecting; constructing intellectual borders will also have concrete impacts (Simmel, 1994[1909]).

3. Method and research design

3.1. Ethnography and social constructivism

I employ ethnographic tools because it is appropriate method to answer questions about the behavior and formation of groups. Ethnography is a qualitative approach used to interpret culture-sharing groups through observations and interviews as well as other types of data (Creswell, 2013). I have used this approach to capture the lived experiences of individuals from what Schütz (1953: 6) calls their “biographically determined situation.” Material things like artworks do not have essential meaning but are interpreted within a social world. This is not an interpretation that individuals subjectively give by themselves. Individual subjects are positioned and navigate within an institutional order, and they also influence it (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). According to an interpretative framework of social constructivism multiple subjective meanings of the social world are negotiated socially and historically (Creswell, 2013: 22-25). This perspective was helpful when analyzing how social interaction organized around exchange creates meaning and how this meaning is fundamental for social cohesion.

3.1.1. Going along and producing data

In a previous study on how graffiti artists in Sweden use their competence within marketing I found that the narrative of graffiti as something exciting and illegal was used to valorize products such as sodas and cars and even entire cities (Jacobson, 2017). Several of the graffiti artists I followed sold painted canvases; sometimes these were referred to as graffiti, at other times street art. Like the literature says, the labels were often blurred when the aesthetics of these subcultures were presented to the market (Bengtsen, 2014, Kimvall, 2014; Young, 2014). I became curious about the individuals who bought these paintings: what made them purchase urban art?

When I started the study at hand, I approached a woman I had gotten to know when visiting art shows in my hometown, Stockholm. I knew she had bought paintings by graffiti artists and asked if she would consider showing me her art collection. She agreed. With a two-page
interview guide filled with questions and themes I arrived at her place after she had finished work. I let her art and the stories associated with it guide the conversation, which was very interesting and pointed in several directions. After two hours and twenty minutes we had not exhausted the topic but out of respect for her need for rest I pressed the stop button on the recording device. Three days later I got on a plane to New York. During a six-day stay there I visited several private homes. I used the same approach as I had in Stockholm and soon realized that there where many recurrent themes.

During the course of the study I visited 20 art shows at 16 different galleries, art fairs, auction houses, or museums. These visits lasted approximately between one and two hours. Observations and informal interviews with gallerists and visitors offered perspectives that influenced analysis and go-alongs in the homes of collectors. This was helpful when the research question was developed into an interview guide. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to use pre-formulated questions while also being able to immerse in themes that emerged during conversation (Galletta, 2013), for example, "passion" and "museums." I asked open-ended questions like: “what can you tell me about this artwork?” This yielded unexpected themes and allowed for narratives to be communicated (Bryman, 2011). This enabled me to listen carefully to the subjective meaning of informants, which is a fundamental attribute of a social constructivist framework (Creswell, 2013). I listened to and observed collectors because I am engaged in what makes their lives meaningful and I value their statements (Gerber, 2014; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The interview guide provided focus during conversations, while using a survey questionnaire would have risked circumscribing reflections from informants (Creswell, 2013). Consequently, the guide was developed as my understanding of the field grew. For example I realized that distinctions between different forms of art were not as articulated among urban art collectors as I had anticipated. Instead I heard them talk a lot about social cohesion. So I started to ask more specific questions about that. A follow-up question in one interview was: “But is it like one community? Is it a community?” This is an example of the abductive methodology discussed below.

My main data was produced during “go-alongs” in the home of collectors (Kusenbach, 2003). This enabled me to experience and discuss art collecting in a realistic context. The home visits consisted of a house tour discussing individual pieces of the collection and a part where we sat down talking in general terms about collecting. I did eight go-alongs, seven in private homes and one during a gallery opening. Go alongs lasted between an hour and a half and two
hours and 40 minutes. Additional to this I did one in-depth interview at a restaurant. In total my recorded data consists of 19 hours and 51 minutes.

Go-along interviews enabled me to produce several types of data additional to the words of informants, which is in line with ethnographic methodology (Creswell, 2013; Galletta, 2013; Kusenbach, 2003). I paid attention to body language and how collectors displayed and discussed artworks and other aspects of their home. Interviews were recorded while I noted my reflections and things that the recorder could not capture. Interviews were transcribed word for word, which was the level of detail appropriate for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 88, 96). I also noted pauses, tone, nonverbal utterances, and distinct emphasis that reflected when informants were hesitant, convinced, or emotional when they talked about their art.

Additional to go-alongs I adopted visual analysis, mixing semiology and ethnographic audiencing research (Rose, 2001: 69, 198). I got permission from informants to photograph the artworks we discussed. Semiology traces how images work in relation to broader systems of meaning. Semiology departs from the perspective that social practice and culture is made up of signs that stand for something more than themselves. This fit well with the literature on materiality (Alexander: 2008a, 2008b; Durkheim, 1995[1912]). Ethnographic audiencing research utilizes in-depth interviewing to grasp the meaning of images, the activities of social actors, and their shared assumptions. This fit well with go-alongs in the homes of collectors.

3.1.2. Getting invited – case and sample

Through gallerists, artists, and photographers I established contact with seven individuals and two couples in Stockholm and New York who agreed to participate in my study, in total eleven individuals. My sample criterion was that the informants should have acquired several artworks and identify themselves as fitting this description: “people who collect or have bought graffiti or street art related art”. Using the word “related” enabled me to avoid any pre-formulated distinction and instead pay attention to the boundaries used by collectors.

Stockholm is the center of graffiti and street art shows in Sweden while New York is one of the major art centers in the world. The market for graffiti and street art is still perceived as a novelty and is supposedly in a phase of expansion both in Sweden and the United States, but on different scales (Bengtsen, 2014; Kimvall, 2014; Young, 2014). New York is perceived as the birthplace of graffiti and is one of the cities known for a lot of street art (Kimvall, 2014; Young, 2014). In New York, these art forms have been traded as tangible artwork since the
1970s (Kimvall, 2014). Graffiti with influence from New York began to be common in Stockholm from 1984 onward, but to my knowledge, the market for urban art is not very established yet (Jacobson, 2017). One observation I have made is that artists from both New York and Stockholm exhibit in art shows in both cities. By triangulating informants from cities of different sizes and on different continents, I aim to identify common themes within urban art. I have also paid attention to regional differences.

I utilized purposeful sampling and combined different ways to approach informants to get a broad and varied sample of collectors that could help me answer the research question (Creswell, 2013: 155-157). Five go-alongs and one interview were done in New York and three go-alongs in Stockholm. The age of the informants ranged from 25 to 65 years old. Five were women and six were men. The most these collectors had paid for an artwork ranged from 500 USD to 20,000 USD. Some had collected graffiti or street art over many years, others recently started. Some had a background within graffiti; for others the works represented something new.

I was concerned by the fact that four of the New York interviews were a result of the same contact; might this bring a bias to my study? But I soon found out that I might have ended up with the same informants even if I had used other approaches. Two things indicated this. First, all the informants had bought art from several other sources than my initial contact. Second, I learned that several other people that I had reached out to also knew these collectors. I could have found the same collectors through other channels. I was also concerned when I realized that some of these collectors knew each other; had I found a small clique of friends instead of several individuals that were part of a bigger community? But it wasn’t only the collectors associated with one of my gatekeepers that knew each other; collectors that I had approached with the help of different people were acquainted also. This suggests that there exists a community between collectors that is possible to enter from different directions. I was happy to have two dedicated and well-connected door openers.

3.2. Abductive approach & unexpected results

I employed abductive analysis going back and forth between theory and data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). According to the abductive perspective, a deductive method would force the empirical material to fit pre-formulated theory while induction makes believe that researchers can start free of assumptions or theories.
3.2.1. Ideal type sub-worlds and roles

When I entered the field I had a lot of questions about how urban art was defined in relation to graffiti and street art. We discussed a lot of categories and boundaries that could be explained by using Simmel’s (1994[1909]) metaphor of a door. To capture this I used the analytical construct of ideal types (Weber, 1949[1897]). These are not found in reality but are abstractions that emphasize a one-sided viewpoint that the researcher is interested in. Figure 1 below illustrates ideal types representing roles of individuals and boundaries constructing urban art. This is an example of boundary work where separation and connection go hand in hand as described by Simmel (1994[1909]). Further, following Simmel these boundaries are both concrete and intellectual. Agents and artworks are positioned within these sub-worlds in a concrete and immediate sense.

In figure 1 the ideal types graffiti, street art, and art worlds overlap and constitute the “sub-worlds” of unsanctioned art and urban art (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). These ideal types are constructed on the basis of previous research in dialogue with my empirical data. I describe the artworks reviewed in the study with the ideal type unsanctioned art for site-specific images done without permission in public environments. I use the ideal type urban art for artworks that are done on paper or canvas with permission and that are movable and symbolize unsanctioned art, see figure 2 and 3 on page 22. Figure 1 also includes ideal types representing the roles individuals active in these sub-worlds occupy. In my analysis collector

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4 For research that discusses these labels see Bengtsen (2014); Fine (2004); Kimvall (2014); Thornton (2009); Young (2014).
is an ideal type describing an individual who has acquired several urban artworks as purchases or gifts. A stranger is an individual who has low knowledge and no personal bonds to the sub-worlds of graffiti and street art. Native is a person who has been executing unsanctioned art. Artists are natives who produce urban art and gallerists and museums represent roles that sell or exhibit urban art. In the first stage of fieldwork and analysis I used these ideal types to understand how collectors of urban art understand and participate in constructing borders between categories that, in reality, are not clear-cut.

3.2.2. Analytical concepts and thematic analysis

In the second stage of analysis and fieldwork I added additional perspectives and tools to cover themes I had not anticipated. This illustrates how the abductive approach is positioned between deductive and inductive methods and promotes unexpected results without discarding theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). After a few home visits I had realized that the collectors, in many cases, rejected the discursive categorization of art I brought up for discussion. One of them said: “But the whole street art graffiti hmmmmmmehh […] it is hard to define, porous, like a sponge.” Categorizations were nondiscursive rather than logically coherent. This can be further exemplified with when I asked a collector how he defined his collection and he showed me images of the artworks on his phone instead of categorizing them. This, together with many statements about “passion” for art in contrast to pecuniary value, guided me towards materiality and the surface and depth of Alexander’s (2008b) icon as well as collective effervescence of Durkheim’s (1995[1912]) totem. In the second stage of my analysis I synthesized these theoretical metaphors for social meaning and cohesion with the separating and connecting of Simmel’s (1994[1909]) door.

Similar to the abductive approach, Blumer (1954: 7) argues that culture and social phenomena are “sensitizing in nature” and not possible to study by pre-defined concepts. Analytical concepts are constructions that sensitize the researcher. These tools offer clues and suggestions on how to understand an empirical world consisting of unique parts. Sensitizing concepts are progressively tested and refined in relation to the empirical data. According to Blumer (1954: 8-9), this procedure will result in an objective interpretation. These perspectives were employed when I repeatedly listened to and read through my data constructing themes with the help of codes assigned to the material in relation to the research question and previous research. Themes are patterns within data, which I identified and analyzed according to the methodology of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
In thematic analysis, codes are a tool closely connected to the “raw” data while themes are an integrated part of the researcher’s analysis and conclusions (Saldaña, 2009). In the first cycle of coding I used *In Vivo Coding* to construct codes from the words in the qualitative data since this approach pays attention to the actual voices of participant (Saldaña, 2009: 74). An example of this was the frequent use of the word “passion”. Additionally I utilized *descriptive coding*, which focuses on the topic of the data rather than its explicit wording, for example for implicit distinctions my informants made. Further, *versus coding* was useful since it pays attention to distinctions in the form of binaries; for example *street versus museum* was a common binary in my data (Saldaña, 2009). I constructed *latent themes* that go beyond what informants actually say (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 84). As I moved between data and theory, eventually I could connect words like “passion” and binaries like ”street versus museum” with theoretical perspectives on materiality, boundary work, and social cohesion formulated by Simmel, Durkheim, and Alexander. To capture continuity and contradiction through individual statements, I also employed narrative analysis. A narrative is a way for individuals to make sense of and interpret their experiences (Bryman, 2011: 530). Narrative analysis investigates which roles people are ascribed and focuses on how people create meaning out of events rather than describing what happened.

### 3.3. Ethics, credibility, and limitations

#### 3.3.1. Moving between public and private – ethical considerations

Ethical considerations flow through all phases of research. In each step of the research I have considered how I produce, handle, and present data so that informants are not harmed. It would not be possible to acquire *informed consent* from all individuals present at public art shows. I informed the visitors I engaged in conversation with about my study and its ethical implications. This includes *informed consent, right to terminate* at any point, and *anonymity for informants*. Informants who I asked to participate in interviews were offered a single page information letter briefly stating the purpose and context of the study. I explained that they could stop the interview and their participation in the study at any time. The information letter contained the *Codes of Conduct* by The Swedish Research Council (Gustafsson et al., 2006), as well as the *Code of Ethics* by The International Sociological Association (2001). Names of informants and artists have been changed in this paper.
3.3.2. Credibility

During the process of abstracting particulars into codes and themes the data was developed into a result, or a narrative (Creswell, 2013: 52-54). A topic for reflection during all steps of the study was how I, as a researcher, participated in constructing the meaning of urban art collecting through the questions I raised and the analysis I made (Creswell, 2013: 25, 78). I kept a research diary to keep track of how my actions influenced the data and how my interpretations evolved during the course of the study at hand.

In a previous study I visited the studios of several graffiti artists (Jacobson, 2017). This helped me to understand the production of urban art as a collective process (Becker, 1974). But I had to challenge the preconceptions I brought to the study. I formulated two strategies to confront my preconceptions as well as used findings of previous researchers. First, I decided not to use any definitions of the art discussed when conducting interviews. I asked informants what they could tell me about the objects they had in front of them. Then I used follow-up questions guiding the conversation toward the research question. Second, I included the research diary in the analyzed data to make myself aware of how I influenced data production as well as interpretation.

In qualitative research, credibility is considered more important than validity and reliability since the latter two have traditionally been formed in relation to quantitative standards (Creswell, 2013: 245-246; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To establish credibility I triangulated methodologies and data utilizing visual, narrative, and thematic analysis at several sites. Through transparency on how I reached my conclusions I aim to bring further credibility to my study.

3.3.3. Limitations

This study is limited by the time frame of the master thesis program, by the fact that I live and study in Stockholm, and by my resources. The fieldwork I did provided me with an amount of data that I was able to process and pay equal attention to and with sufficient data to draw conclusions from. This study is executed in two different cities and cannot be generalized into a global perspective. Other cities known for a lot of unsanctioned art and urban art are London, Paris, and Berlin (Bengtsen, 2014, Dickens, 2010, Kimvall, 2014, Young, 2015). Visiting collectors in these cities could have further informed this study about similarities and differences between different settings.
Focusing on collectors will obscure the role of other participants in this art world. The gallery setting suggests that the intentions of artists and gallerists is important, this study has not investigated this beyond how collectors relate to it. Since the sample is based on private collectors most of the discussed artworks are of limited sizes that can fit in a private home. A study investigating acquisitions by institutions or companies could also investigate the relation to larger place-specific work such as non-movable mural paintings.

4. Analysis

Only to humanity, in contrast to nature, has the right to connect and separate been granted, [...] the human being is [...] the bordering creature who has no border. The enclosure of his or her domestic being by the door means, to be sure, that they have separated out a piece from the uninterrupted unity of natural being. But just as the formless limitation takes on a shape, its limitedness finds its significance and dignity only in that which the mobility of the door illustrates: in the possibility at any moment of stepping out of this limitation into freedom.

Georg Simmel (1994[1909]: 5-10)

The first part of my analysis investigates how urban artworks symbolically represent graffiti and street art in private homes and hence connects separate parts of the world. In the second part of the analysis I scrutinize how new collectors enter the sub-worlds of unsanctioned art and urban art. An important theme here is the boundary towards the established art world exemplified by museums. I analyze how collectors establish a feeling of belonging together. I examine how themes such as enchantment, gifts, and friendship create social cohesion among collectors. In the third section of the analysis I look further into how urban art in private homes makes individuals part of the ideas and social bonds these artworks materialize.

Finally, in the last analysis section I suggest how to interpret some paradoxes I encountered.

4.1 Connecting to the city

4.1.1. Interior - entering the private

My main data was produced in the homes of collectors. Surrounded by their art we discussed the meaning, joy, and motivation of being a collector. A private home is separated from the common and typically controlled by an individual, a couple, or a family. With your home you
may express your freedom through individuality and identity, which is to separate and connect yourself from others.

Simmel (1994[1909]: 5) used the door as a metaphor for the individual freedom to separate and connect in an “immediate as well as symbolic sense” and in a “physical as well as intellectual sense.” The ability to use the door to your home as an opening between the private and the public is something art collectors do with their collections in concrete practice. But the individual is conditioned by the common, and vice versa (Durkheim, 1995[1912]: 209-212). The following field note describes the first time during my study that I entered the home of a collector.

I climb the stairs to the third floor and ring the bell by the large wooden door. Susanne, a woman between fifty and sixty years old, opens and greets me cheerfully. She lives with her partner Sven in a large apartment. We pass through a parlor dominated by a long, sturdy table in a dark wood and a gigantic oak cabinet. The three-meter-tall walls are covered in gold and burgundy floral wallpaper dating from the early 20th century. At one end of the room is a small suite of furniture consisting of a sofa and easy chair placed around a table set with candles. The room is dark, but still snug with the corners illuminated by lamps. You could easily imagine Susanne and Sven to be wealthy, but a large chunk of their earnings is swallowed by the rent they pay for the six-room apartment. Both are self-employed within the service sector and have been fortunate enough to be able to exchange their former home for this magnificent apartment in central Stockholm.

“Let’s start from the beginning, so we go through here, it’s a little messy, our son has just moved out,” says Susanne and leads the way through a pair of glass doors to a room that leads into the dining room. The living room walls are painted in a light color and there are several painted canvases. Most are about a square meter in size and covered in every color of the rainbow. Several are of trains and color explosions of bright running paint. Comic strip faces are looking down on us or are leaning against the walls, waiting to be hung. Some of them are dominated by flowing, wavy or edgy graffiti-style signatures and multi-colored letters.

The field note above includes several references to the “doors” with which we organize our world through separating and connecting (Simmel, 1994[1909]). First I, as a researcher, enter the field of study through the door to Susanne’s home. Then she leads me further into a separate room to her collection of urban art. Like several other collectors I have visited, she has organized her art according to categories that are in different rooms. Photography is in the dining room and urban art in the living room. In a corridor both categories can be found; they constitute different forms of art. They are different but similar; they are separate connections. This is an example of Simmel’s observation that to separate we must connect, and vice versa. This has an analogy in that individuals constitute the common. Susanne has individually
chosen how to arrange her art collection, but the boundaries are socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). How this is done is a topic for my analysis.

4.1.2. Exterior – bringing home the city

The previous field note discloses that the urban art on the walls in Susanne’s home contained a lot of references to the common. This is exemplified by the trains of our infrastructure and by characters from well-known comic books. This is what Alexander (2008a, 2008b) points to when he says that the “surface” of materiality brings us in contact with their symbolic and social meaning, their “depth.” Below are two examples of artworks that fit the ideal type urban art used in this paper.

![Figure 2 by Dart and figure 3 by Herr Nilsson. These paintings fit the ideal type “urban art”. They incorporate common motifs and techniques like spray paint, comics characters, and graffiti letters. These artworks were offered for sale in a gallery during my fieldwork. They were not within any collection I reviewed during my study, but they very well could have been. See list of figures for details.](image)

By visiting collectors with a shared interest in graffiti and street art I investigate how exchange of images with disputed value builds social cohesion. The art I have seen in the homes of urban art collectors reflects the practice in graffiti and street art to adapt common images and apply them to walls and trains in the city without permission (Kimvall, 2014; Young, 2014). In my analysis this practice is described with the ideal type unsanctioned art. The reference to this practice can be implicit or explicit in urban artworks (Bengtsen, 2014). It is reflected in the letters and signatures and the pouring and exploding paint that both covers and constitutes the trains on Susanne’s walls. Visual analysis building on semiology and
audiencing discloses that these artworks are “icons” that signify the practice of unsanctioned art (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b; Rose, 2001: 69, 198).

During my visit in Susanne’s home she told me that the first urban artwork she acquired was a gift (see figure 4 below). The following field note reveals that the symbolic meaning of the artwork at first made Susanne insecure about the boundaries of urban art:

Susanne shows a framed map of the subway system of New York, the abstract image of the city and its infrastructure is covered by a graffiti tag made with a dark blue half-inch marker. The signature spells out “Skip” and around it the artist has drawn a cloud. When I ask Susanne what she first thought of the artwork she says: "Well, I guess I thought he was one of the first to start this graffiti thing and that it, writing your name, like, I realized it was really important, but I didn’t quite get the tag thing and all the rest at the time, really, but I found it all really impressive, the fact it was a map of New York," she says and makes a sound illustrating how the city is covered in paint. “And then this cloud around it and that it was a gift, so it’s been on my wall ever since.”

Figure 4: Skip’s map. This is a photomontage inspired by an actual artwork in Susanne’s home. In this study the names of collectors and artists whose artworks they own have been changed in order not to disclose their identity.

Susanne expresses her affection for the artwork by saying that it has been on her “wall ever since.” She indicates two reasons for this: the fact that it was a gift and the symbolic depth of the artwork, which testifies about unsanctioned art, here, represented by the history of graffiti. When she says “this graffiti thing” and that she “didn’t quite get” parts of it she is referring to the boundary work within the “sub-worlds” of unsanctioned art and urban art that are new to her (see figure 1 in method section describing the boundaries and Berger & Luckmann, 1967, on sub-worlds).

Skip’s name in vibrant graffiti style covering the city symbolically materializes the will for graffiti writers to make their name visible, in flamboyant style, and themselves famous, or as they say “go all city” and become “kings” (Kimvall 2014: 50, 193). The symbolic meaning as well as the concrete practice of diffusing color over the urban landscape is emphasized by the cloud, which Susanne pointed out. The common is symbolically represented in several layers,
in the image of the city we share, in the subway with which we commute. The word “commute” and its Latin roots express common movements; the subway combines parts of the city that are separate, physically and intellectually. Cities have surface and depth just like artworks. Money, ethnicity, and gender structures cities both in concrete and symbolic ways. This is another example of Simmel’s “separating and connecting” observation. To be part of something has this double meaning – the parts are separated and constitute a whole. The tag represents not only Skip as an individual but also the graffiti community with its shared history associated not only to cities as a general concept but also to the particular city of New York. This Susanne points out when she refers to those who were first to “start this graffiti thing.” Susanne further witnesses that she appreciates both the symbolic and concrete meaning of writing your name on the city: “that you become someone through writing your name, yes!” she says enthusiastically.

The conflicts about ownership and how to use urban space are a central part in the discourse on graffiti and street art (Kimvall, 2014; Snyder, 2009; Young, 2014). Appreciation among urban art collectors for unsanctioned art is something I have heard throughout my study. Monica, another Swedish collector who like Susanne owns artworks both by American and Swedish artists says:

M: And I think that some, partly I think it’s exciting and fun to be doing this, there’s like this thing, you’re doing something illegal, and some have got caught, you know. It goes back and forth.
I: Do you think it kind of comes through in these paintings?
M: Yeah, absolutely. I like that, I’ve, well, I’ve always liked [...] I like this I like the creative side of it, and then, what can I say, I think it’s interesting that there’s so much of this kind of painting in the subway, that it’s a hub, a city can be like a symbol for the ego, it’s like an aorta, pumping blood.

Monica’s statement is in line with my analysis of Skip’s subway map artwork. The subway represents something that connects us, a “junction” that is vital for urban life. Urban art symbolically represents encroachments and challenges to the established ways we connect to each other. Urban art collectors appreciate this. To use the structure of cities in new ways, as canvases for art is seen as positive and “creative.” That unsanctioned art is illegal adds to the value and meaning of urban artworks (Jacobson, 2017). All through my study I have witnessed that urban art in private homes functions as icons for unsanctioned art in the urban landscape (Alexander, 2008b).
4.2. Feeling art and connecting to artists

This section of my analysis will address how collectors first become aware of unsanctioned art, then start to exchange artworks and establish social relations, and how this results in a feeling of belonging together, underpinning social cohesion.

4.2.1. The enchantment of unsanctioned art

Graffiti and street artists use the physical structures of cities for artistic purposes rather than practical. Subways and walls are turned from transportation vehicles and office buildings into artworks. This is an important aspect of the symbolic depth of Skip’s artwork on a subway map, which I previously discussed. A map is a publicly founded common good distributed without charge to facilitate a practical use of the infrastructure. When it is turned from a useful and common thing into a unique artwork its meaning is altered. This can be understood with Durkheim’s (1995[1912]) distinction between a “sacred” and meaningful relation to the world and the ordinary practical and “profane” perspective. This concerns separating and connecting also, since things that have particular meaning can be understood as “sacred (…) beings set apart” (Durkheim, 1995[1912]: 303; Simmel, 1994[1909]).

Sudden encounters with unexpected unsanctioned art that change the meaning of the urban environment can result in a mind-altering experience, or an “enchantment” (Bengtsen, 2014; Young, 2014). We can hear this in the following quote when Maria, a collector in New York, describes paying attention to street art for the first time like it was a revelation:

*I just saw this face on a door, eh, a linocut on a piece of Chinese print newspaper, and ah, it was just this aha moment because I hadn’t really paid attention to anything of that kind before, I mean I knew it was there and in fact if we’re good at anything it was not having paid attention […] and ah I just had this sort of sensitization when I looked at, “oh there is something on that door, hold on, I am onto something.” And, you know I was at a place, I had broken up with a boyfriend, I had stopped taking photos for a while, I was just in this sort of creative wretch. This found me or I found it at the right time, when I was receptive to something different and then I started to carry my camera with me again, I had just bought a little digital camera and then it became a game of: “OK I gonna vary, I gonna go down a different street and see what I see.”*

Here, an actual door illustrates Simmel’s (1994[1909]) metaphor of a door between boundaries that give the physical world different meanings. The boundary work captured by Simmel’s door has to do with how we connect to, and are influenced by, matter; after all, it was a material thing that enchanted Maria. The face on the door addressed Maria, it found her, or she “found it.” She pays “attention,” which results in an aesthetic “sensitization” and an
“aha moment.” The face on the door functions as an “icon,” signifying the added depth of meaning of unsanctioned art (Alexander, 2008b).

The quote above includes many layers of how boundaries are perceived. First, materiality is “nondiscursive,” which is reflected in Maria’s “sensitization” by the impression from the face; her sensation happens without the linguistic categories often associated with boundary work. But the impression is instantly connected to the discursive aspects of boundary work as Maria starts to intellectually reflect about boundaries. The face that makes Maria think: “I am onto something” indicated that she has made a new distinction. She connects unsanctioned art with the words “that kind,” and simultaneously separates it from other things defining it as “something different.” It is like she is standing on the threshold to a separate room, a new “sacred” world in contrast to the “practical” or “profane” world (Durkheim, 1995[1912]; Young, 2014). Like Simmel (1994[1909]) writes, the door is the “boundary point” where we “always stand or can stand.”

One aspect of materiality is how things influence our actions. The face on the door made a strong impact, it was like a revelation that halted Maria in her daily routines. It changed her perception as well as how she intellectually separates and connects the things in the world. After she reflected: “hold on”, she went down “a different street” further exploring the new world that she had become aware of. The enchantment of street art was a life-changing experience. This kind of “agency” of material things where artworks have a strong impact on our actions is described by collectors on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, in Stockholm and in New York (Alexander, 2008b; De La Fuente, 2010).

Additionally, things that challenge the dominant boundaries of a society are often perceived as dirt that should be removed to restore order (Douglas, 2002[1966]). Graffiti and street art have often been handled this way (Guwallius, 2010; Kimvall, 2014). To be enchanted by street art is to see this use of our shared environment as an enriched meaning, or as Douglas (2002[1966]) writes: “to call attention to other levels of existence.” Urban art collectors appreciate the anomaly in regard to the dominant boundary work of cities as rational and profane structures. The anomaly that “sets things apart” can make the rejected sacred (Douglas, 2002[1966]; Durkheim (1995[1912]).

Maria’s narrative must be understood from the position she speaks from. Unsanctioned art is something Maria had not “paid attention” to before. Her role can be understood with the ideal type of a stranger entering the ideal room of unsanctioned art – a sub-world new to her, which she can enter since she can now “see” it (see ideal types in figure 1 in method section).
In my study seven out of thirteen informants fit the ideal type stranger, since unsanctioned and urban art for them represented what Douglas (2002[1966]) calls new “levels of existence.” Maria’s statement is an example of how many of these “strangers” demonstrate being “enchanted” by unforeseen unsanctioned art before starting to collect urban art (Bengtsen, 2014; Young, 2014).

4.2.2. Street-museum dichotomy

An aspect of the enchantment discussed above is that the city is turned into a different kind of museum with an ephemeral and surprising nature. Unsanctioned art is often perceived as alien to established museums (Bengtsen, 2014, Young 2014). In my data, collectors repeatedly discuss unsanctioned art in contrast to museums. What they particularly point out is that art in the street is easy to access. Steven testifies to this:

> What street art does is that it makes it more easily accessible than even the Internet. Now you literally know when, you used to have to walk [...] away from the crowd that is walking the street, you had to go inside this building to see this canvas on a wall, now all you have to do is to do what you have been doing all your life all throughout your regular day, go to work, walk to school, drive down the street, and there it is. So all street art did for me is that it introduced me to these various artists more easily that are different types of artists because, they were just there in front of me [he snaps his fingers] you could just not miss it.

Steven describes the enchantment that Maria experienced in a little more relaxed tone: “there it is” as it is a regular thing you see on your way to your daily routines. This is because he does not see himself as a stranger. He grew up with unsanctioned art around him in his New York City neighborhood. But the general theme is the same as in statements by Maria and other collectors: the art was “in front of” him. Quite similar to Maria’s experience, street art “introduced” Steven to new artists. He makes an important point that the art is not inside a building but available to the public. It is thus “accessible” to us all. This is an example of both the concrete and ideal aspects of separating and connecting (Simmel, 1994[1909]). The art in a museum is physically separated inside buildings, which also indicates which images are intellectually perceived as being dirt or worth preserving (Douglas, 2002[1966]). The physical separation of different types of art establishes an intellectual definition of street art as something other than art in a museum. But even if they are physically separated, a connection remains. That both are art forms is reflected in that Steven connects them when he discusses different locations to see art.
4.2.3. Materializing social bonds through urban art

Easy access to unsanctioned art is expressed by most of my informants. But an even more emphasized theme among collectors is that not only artworks but also artists are more available in the street than in museums. Collectors can establish personal relationships with urban artists that they cannot with most artists represented in museums. Throughout my study I have heard collectors arguing that they are not motivated by pecuniary speculation, instead it is connecting to artists and establishing relationships that drives them. This is consistent with theories claiming that money and exchange of goods often has more to do with establishing and preserving social relations than making profit (Granovetter, 1985, Mauss, 2002[1925], Zelizer, 1997). The following quote by Joseph illustrates the above theme:

*I think for me it is having that sort of connection with the artist. You can read all you want about Picasso or one of those guys or girls. But being able to actually have the conversation, and hang out, and be a person with them. That’s, you can’t, you can’t put money on that.*

In contrast to the many distant or even dead artists in museums Joseph values that he can meet urban artists. This gives his art collection a value that transcends money (Zelizer, 1997). Personal relationships with artists add meaning and value to the artworks in a collection. This brings attention to the idea that urban artworks are not only icons of unsanctioned art as analyzed above, they also materialize personal relationships and can then be understood as “totems” for a specific community with shared interests (Durkheim, 1995[1912]). Maria shares how her interest in art has changed from museum art into unsanctioned art:

*I always had postcards from visiting museums, I had Chagall prints, I grew up with art, you know my teenage room was band posters and uh, I was really into Egyptian hieroglyphs and impressionist art, Chagall, blah, blah, blah, Kandinsky, Paul Klee and that kind of stuff. It wasn’t until uh I started documenting the scene and getting to know artists personally that I had this idea that, oh, I can acquire art. And have it be meaningful because I have a relationship with the artist.*

That artists whose work are displayed in museums are not accessible in the same way as urban artists is reflected in the quote when Maria discusses “mass-produced” reproductions that do not include a personal relationship with artists. Art by artists she knows adds additional layers to the symbolic depth of the artworks in Maria’s collection. The “mass” and the “personal” are examples of separating and connecting individuals and groups.

In the statement above, Maria refers not only to the individual artists but also to the “scene,” which is the social community that is materialized in the artworks she purchases. This is an
example of connecting and separating that constitutes a “sub-world” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Simmel, 1994[1909]). There is a latent theme of difference in Maria’s statement between museums and urban art; museums cannot provide the same meaning as urban art since there are no personal relationships involved. Museums are rather perceived as part of the institutional objective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

The artworks Maria buys thus function not only as “icons” but also as “totems” representing a “clan” and materializing a community built on belief that is thus “sacred” and not “profane.” This is an example of how Durkheim (1995[1912]) argues that modern societies are built on the same religious principles as “primitive” societies.

In contrast, in Maria’s narrative here, she now talks from another position than when she was enchanted by unsanctioned art in the form of a face on a door. Before, she fit the ideal type of a stranger. Now when she has started to establish relationships with artists and has acquired their art she is becoming a collector.

As pointed out above the “depth” beneath the material “surface” of art contains several layers (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b). First, unsanctioned art can be symbolized explicitly in both the subject matter and technique of an artwork (see figure 2 and 3). The symbolic representation of unsanctioned art can also be implicit. If an artist is known for painting in the street an artwork can be considered urban art even if this is not obvious by looking at the visual surface of the artworks. This excerpt from my interview with Joseph is an example of a collection that includes both artworks with personal bonds to artists and those where the link to the street is represented by the subject matter of the art or by the history of the artist:

Yeah, that one is more about the design, the guy is cool but I didn’t have the stories, I don’t have the connection. I haven’t had dinner. I haven’t sat with this person right after his mom passed away. To like be with him and see him through that, like watch over his house and be his girlfriend’s friend. Be part of his life. (...) Like, getting to know these people, getting to hang out with them, getting to have those stories, like having that sort of relationship with someone is a lot different than just going out and seeing something you like and saying: “I like that, that is cool.” Some of these pieces I might not even like how they look, but I like it because it is the person that made them, I think that’s what speaks to me, it is having that story.

To have a “story” with an artist here is to have a profound friendship. Artworks that have this in their depth have a greater value for collectors of urban art. This is an example of relational value, which is one of four values of art that Gerber (2014) identifies. But throughout my study I have witnessed that collectors like Joseph also have artworks that symbolize unsanctioned art through their “design.” Joseph later states that, since they are urban artists,
they are potentially accessible. He exemplifies this by saying that in the future he might run into artists whose art he has bought without knowing the person. Hence, the personal relationship with artists that creates bonds to artworks can in some cases be potential rather than actual.

The most personal relationships are established by gifting artworks. We can understand this with Mauss (2002[1925]) who states that exchange of gifts are a “total phenomena” that pervades all of society and establishes social cohesion. When I go along with Steven discussing his collection, he uses the given names of many of the artists in his collection, which indicates the personal relationship he has with them:

S: Yeah, that is his phone number [on the artwork]. I have a few pieces from him.
I: So you bought it?
S: No, no no no, he just gave it to me. Kevin, he is an interesting character. Ah! You know Code, that’s a Code piece. The first time I met Code he actually stayed with me, so we became friends after this.
I: You have to spend some time to meet all these people? That’s an Eagle?
S: Yeah, I got that from Carlo. This is one of the nicest things I got from anyone. Honestly when he gave it to me, I cried. No one ever gave me a piece of art before.

The phone number on a drawing materializes the close relationship with the artist. That Eagle gifted Steven an artwork further intensifies the strength of the bond between the artist and the collector. This is expressed in that it made Steven cry. Throughout my study I have heard these kinds of testimonies of strong emotional feelings actualized by art. These are examples of what Durkheim (1995[1912]: 228) calls collective effervescence; which will be analyzed below.

4.2.4. Being part of something bigger

As analyzed above, friendships between artists and collectors bring forth strong emotions that make art collecting meaningful. These are more than personal relationships, the feeling and meaning of collecting art needs to be understood as part of a community, what Maria called a “scene.” In the following quote Joseph tells me about the first time he met one of the artists whose work he collects and got a gift:

So he gave it to me, I was really excited […] Ah, so that’s one reason also why I really love art, just having that [relationship]. You can see me, when I talk about this stuff I get animated, I get excited.
This is something that really drives me, this is love, it is passion.
Joseph uses expressions connected to activity and a rush of energy; it is almost as if he describes a religious rite. According to Durkheim (1995[1912]), material things can materialize feelings of community. Since feelings are volatile and immaterial they need to be imagined into things to be preserved. The feelings of community that are embedded into “totems” can be actualized in rites, and individuals then express them as a form of steam or collective effervescence. Modern societies still include rites but they are partially masked. Exchange of art can be understood as a form of rite based on belief that these artworks are important, that is sacred. For example, going to an art fair is like a rite. The German word for fair, “messe”, attests to the worship and belief associated with trade: it is like “going to mass” (Thornton, 2009: 81). The quote below illustrates how artworks that relate to the city and its artists engage Maria. Here she develops the theme of a community or clan which she has become part of:

Oh, I mean I guess what makes it special is that our passion for the movement, our art form, the urban experience unites us, this interest in city experience, this interest for the cityscape, how we can help, define it, be part of it, experience it. I mean it is all those sorts of give and take; the dynamics of living and being part of a city, I mean this scene wouldn’t work in a rural environment. Not as much. [...] Since falling into this scene I am never bored, it’s like I leave the house on a Saturday with my camera and I can happily walk around for six hours you know and take in a lot of amazing art in person and it makes me feel good and if it’s something that I see by someone with whom I have a personal collection, connection to it feels even better because now its you know a part of a friend. Um, so ah, I mean it is I think that if you really wanna boil it down it is really being part of something bigger than yourself, and being passionate about it.

It is quite telling that she confuses the words collecting and connecting: to collect is to connect with both things and individuals. Maria’s emotions are tied to boundary work, to distinctions and feelings for the community. She wants to both “define” and “experience” the city. As previously noted, a “part” is separated from other entities but it is also connected by “being part of something bigger.” In this case the urban part is first separated from the rural and then there is another separation marked by “the movement,” “our art form,” or the “scene,” indicating a community or distinction within the city. This is the room or sub-world into which Maria now has entered (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Simmel, 1994[1909]). Maria’s narrative expresses a change after the revelation with the face on the door: ”[s]ince falling into this scene.” After passing the threshold, she has become a part of “something bigger.” In previous narratives, she first walked alone through the city on her way to work, and then she, as an individual “I,” started to establish relations with artists. Now she speaks in
plural about “our passion.” The enchantment by the face on the door led to her “falling into this scene,” a community where she is “never bored.” In contrast to before, the city now has meaning. Like Alice in Wonderland Maria has fallen into an enchanted world (Carroll, 1996). As we previously learned, this scene is formed around urban art that symbolizes unsanctioned art. As Maria says, “the urban experience unites us.”

Maria’s statement was delivered as an answer to my question about if the interaction was different within the street art community compared to other social settings, such as those concerning her occupation. She found my suggestion that there could be similarities between interaction at an art opening and a conference at her work absurd and amusing. This is one example of a strict division between work and art that corresponds to Durkheim’s profane-sacred dichotomy. In Maria’s testimony we can see what Durkheim defines as the sacred aspect of life, believing in and “being part of something bigger than yourself.”

Throughout my study I have heard urban art collectors talk about the “passion” that “drives” them and makes them “animated.” These words echo Durkheim’s (1995[1912]: 220) claim that all societies have a “world of sacred things” in which we enter into relations that excite us “to the point of frenzy.” By triangulating method and data, and analyzing interviews and artworks with ideal types, visual, narrative, and thematic analysis, I have disclosed a general theme where exchange of art establishes strong feelings resulting in social cohesion rather than economic gains.

The above analysis discloses a progression in the narratives of collectors. They first see and get enchanted, then they establish bonds through exchange of art and knowledge, which creates boundaries. Finally they are passionate about belonging within the community that their intellectual and concrete boundary work has created. The analysis above reflects how Simmel’s door, Alexander’s icon, and Durkheim’s totem are present throughout my study. This shows that separating and connecting, materiality, and collective effervescence are interrelated. To belong, you must first separate – that is, to become aware of and create boundaries. Simultaneously, you need to connect to go from observing to belonging.

### 4.3. Connecting and collecting – owning art

In the previous sections I used Simmel’s (1994[1909]) metaphor to describe how collectors of urban art became aware of a door and entered the boundaries to a sacred room or sub-world of shared meaning and importance. Urban art collectors preserve the strong feelings of
community by acquiring material artworks that function as *icons* for unsanctioned art and *totems* for the community (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b; Durkheim, 1995[1912]).

In this section I will return to the concrete rooms where urban art collectors keep their artworks. We will move from the public into the private and get a deeper understanding of how emotions are collective and, simultaneously, materialized in individuals.

4.3.1. Making art a part of you

Throughout this study I have seen that material artworks in private homes engage strong feelings about our shared environment and the sub-worlds we establish within it. A fundamental theme I have identified among collectors is the importance of materiality and its connection to emotions. According to Alexander (2008b), the way things “feel” has important sociological implications. Things arouse feelings that make us act. I previously described becoming aware of unsanctioned art as a form of revelation. Steven uses this word about the feelings evoked when unwrapping a newly purchased artwork:

> You know when I bought this; a sort of revelation came into my head that I never thought about in this art world…

Steven, who lives in New York, had not visited the gallery, which was in Europe, and based his decision to buy the artwork on a digital image. But holding the artwork in his hands and hanging it on his wall is something else. Matter carries meaning. Steven’s “revelation” is an aesthetic experience of the physical artwork, which comes into his “head.” This illustrates that individual feelings are a result of social cohesion and creates an “effervescence” that becomes more pronounced as Steven’s narrative continues (Durkheim, 1995[1912]: 228). The revelation is material and “nondiscursive” but like I previously pointed out it immediately starts his reflections (Alexander, 2008b: 782).

> *I bought it from the picture. And what I realized, owning this, because I believe this is truly a masterpiece, this is something I believe will hang in the Whitney Museum at some point, maybe at the end of my life but definitely at some point in history, I mean he is one of the greatest artists of this whole graffiti era movement, I mean he is from the late 70s early 80s, timeline-wise history-wise he is great. But what I realized when I got it, it is such a powerful painting.*

Owning the artwork influences Steven’s reflections and feelings. He perceives the artwork differently since he is close to it. This together with the “power” of this particular artwork provokes first the revelation and then the reflection that this thing will outlive him. This is reflected in that he thinks it is destined to hang in a prestigious museum. Steven connects
Code to the shared symbolic *room* of the “graffiti era movement.” The aesthetic “power” of the physical artwork is so strong that it can carry the symbolic meaning of a “whole” movement. The power is not only based on the skills of the artist, but also on the symbolic meaning of unsanctioned art and the authority of this artist within this movement. I have repeatedly heard collectors assert that symbolic importance and artistic quality are intertwined. The strength of these two aspects bestows artworks to harbor and actualize strong emotions.

Owning art and gazing into the future when it is preserved in a museum is to make both the individual collector and their feelings, as well as the community, historically significant. As pointed out before, the strong feelings collectors express toward art can be understood as emotional steam that is produced by the collective and bubbles out of the individual as *collective effervescence*. Durkheim’s analysis of this as a religious moment fits Steven’s use of the word “revelation.” And the recurring theme in this study about entering new worlds after an epiphany is reflected when Durkheim writes, “they believe they have been swept up into a world entirely different from the one they have before their eyes” (1995[1912]: 228). This is a sacred world. It has value and meaning beyond the practical. This is in accordance with the enchantment Young (2014) identifies, which is also omnipresent in testimonies from collectors I have met.

Code’s artwork is an artistic masterpiece that carries the symbolic meaning of the “graffiti movement” even if the aesthetics do not include graffiti. As such, it functions not only as an *icon* symbolizing graffiti but also as a *totem* materializing the strong emotions that come with social bonds. A poor artwork may be a symbol or *icon* for unsanctioned art but it needs the strength of a *totem* to represent the importance of a “movement.” Owning is about establishing connections between the self and other things. We then become part of the ideas these icons represent (Alexander, 2008b). This is reflected in Joseph’s answer to my question below:

*I: So what does it mean for you that they are yours? Like you own them?*

*I: They are my possession, they’re my, they are an extension of me! Almost...[he laughs].*

Joseph’s laugh when he answer my question hints that this passionate relation to material things is kind of embarrassing, supposedly since it is so intimate. Artworks are not only objects defined by, and managed according to, the will of the collecting subject. Rather the artwork and the collector enter into an intersubjective relation. Alexander (2008a: 7) describes how “the distinction between subject and object dissolves” when we experience things – like
Joseph says, his art is an “extension” of him. The dissolved distinction or separation is connected with the ability for things to possess agency, which I pointed to when analyzing Maria’s revelation of seeing a street art face on a door. When we “fall into” things, the distance we have in reflection disappears and things become “extensions” of us (Alexander, 2008a). The falling distinction is nondiscursive, while intellectual separations are discursive. As I have previously argued, nondiscursive and discursive boundary work goes hand in hand in a dialectic where they inform each other. Simmel (2011[1900]) writes that the moment when we really enjoy and not judge a thing is like a momentary paradise, like it was a blissful gap in time when we forget to reflect. The joy of art that urban art collectors express may be one of these moments.

Urban art collectors express their close relation to artworks both by keeping them close in a concrete way and by the intimate emotions they have towards art. Separating and connecting art into different rooms of a private home also signals which artworks are most valued. Several collectors hang the art they have the strongest emotional attachments to in their bedroom. It is like the bedroom represents the heart of the collection, Steven disclose this:

*I see it everyday, I never loose, I am very humble that I can see this everyday that’s the best thing I can say. It is an original it is there.*

Collecting urban art is an example of how passionate exchange can be. Steven further points out that this artwork is by his side when he makes love. He is not the only collector who compare the relation to art with romantic relations. Isak has hung his favorite artwork over his bed. He has put a golden frame around it that he hopes will signal its importance. He tells me it is the first things he sees when he wakes up. Further he agrees that the placement over the bed is intimate, maybe even sexual, and says he wants to “keep it close to me.”

Many collectors refer to art and artworks as love relations, saying for example, “I take the collection personally, no joke, I love it from my heart.” The words “passion” and “love” are frequently used about the activity of collecting, as in, “it is a passion hobby” or “[you] should fall in love with [the artwork].” When I ask Isak what he values about his collection, he disputes its pecuniary value: “I love the stuff, money is one thing.” Isak also says that to start to speculate about the pecuniary value of his collection would totally ruin the emotional value the artworks have for him. This is consistent with literature on value and money that concludes that different values of art may be in conflict with each other and that money is not colorless but has meaning dependent on social relations (Gerber, 2014; Zelizer, 1997).
An intimate emotional attachment with the strength of passion is not unique to urban art. When Thornton (2009) asks to shadow a high-profile collector couple at the prestigious Art Basel fair, she gets turned down with the motivation that it would be like letting her into their bedroom. These collectors confess to having a very intimate relation to their art. At the same time, Thornton’s analysis reveals that they are part of a collective; there are thousands of people “going to mass” and worshipping art. These collectors use the bedroom as a metaphor for their intimate connection to art. Throughout my study I have seen that feelings that are profoundly individual are also shared (Durkheim, 1995[1912]).

4.3.2. Bringing art into your home

According to Simmel (2011[1900]), value and being are independent of each other. It is an intellectual act to define what values things have for us, which cannot be grounded in the matter itself but in our ideas about them (Durkheim, 1995[1912]). This reflection also creates a distance and a desire for the thing that is judged. Arranging art within the borders of a private home is about intellectually separating what we value and physically connecting to what we enjoy. As previously stated “sacred beings are beings set apart” (Durkheim, 1995[1912]: 303). This was illustrated in the beginning of my analysis when I entered Susanne’s home in Stockholm. Collectors assert how important art is for how they navigate between the public and private. I asked Joseph: “when you come home and you see the art on the walls, what do you feel?”

*It makes my happy, this is like my happy safe place, like after a day of talking to clients, doing sales, having big sales, small sales, going through the ridiculous of the day, coming home to this place that has been designed by us. Like purchased by both of us, this makes me happy, like having this to come home to. I feel like I came home to a place that didn’t have all this, that only had my material belongings, a TV and a computer, I wouldn’t be me. This is me; this is where I come from.*

The last sentence shows that for Joseph his art materializes who he is and where he belongs. He is a young adult from New York and perceives of the urban landscape and unsanctioned art as a part of him. The physical artworks on his walls materialize this intellectual boundary work. He also makes two distinctions between what Durkheim calls the sacred and profane aspects of life. First, the practical aspects of life such as “sales” at work are “ridiculous.” Second, his artworks are not included in his profane “material belongings”; they are implicitly labeled “sacred”. The sacred art bears witness to who he is. Throughout my study I have heard collectors state that art makes life meaningful, in contrast to occupational work. We heard this earlier in Maria’s statement.
“Home” functions as a safe house where collectors seek shelter and comfort from the uncertainties and demands of the profane institutional order or objective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). But it is also about bringing closer the sacred parts of the world to which collectors belong. Collectors choose what to bring home and make a part of themselves. In doing this, they also make the ideas that material things represent part of themselves (Alexander, 2008a; 2008b). As previously analyzed these ideas are the practice of unsanctioned art and the community of urban art materializes it. When Steven answers the same question I asked Joseph, about feelings of coming home, the answer is strikingly similar:

S: I am at home. I feel exactly that, that I am home [...] the best thing to define this is that I am surrounded by what makes me most comfortable, anywhere at any point in time. When I walk into this house, from the wood, the metal, the concrete, to the art. I walk in here and it doesn’t matter if I had a dollar or a billion dollars if I was on a beach in the Bahamas, or on top of the Eiffel Tower, nowhere could be better, more comfortable. [When speaking Steven adjusts his tempo and emphasizes the important part by talking slower.] Just, without anything monetary [said slow], put a slob in my face [said rapidly]. This is home. [In a slow tempo he articulates, “This is home” indicating that after these three words there is nothing further to add. He enhances this with a gesture where he distinctively slaps the backs of his hands against his thighs and then raises the hands again, palms up, with a gesture that indicates that there is nothing more to add. It can’t be questioned that it is here he belongs. His identity and that of his art-filled home are pronouncedly with his body language and the uncalled-for words.]

I: Art is an important part of that?

S: I would … it is probably one of the most important parts.

Steven uses his body language when words aren’t enough to express what he feels when coming home. His feeling of belonging is corporeal and thus communicated nondiscursively with his body. But the feelings are also verbally explained, following the nondiscursive, through misrecognition of the profane, here represented by, “anything monetary.” Steven earlier pointed out to me that he had designed the house and in the quote above also the matter, “the metal, the wood, the concrete,” of the house adds to its sacred aspects; it is like a temple for him. Art is enumerated as one of the building blocks of this sanctuary; it is particularly art that makes it a home rather than any building where he spends the night. He testifies to this when he tells me about when a friend helped him hang his art:

[W]e started hanging up all the art, and the home felt like a real home to me, the art makes it, I need to be surrounded by art, it is air to me.
Steven expresses that he needs to come home and recharge. While the profane necessities of life drain energy, collectors express that art functions as a necessary energy deposit. Steven’s metaphor with air appears also in several quotes from other collectors, like: “I suffocate [without art]” and “I need art.” As Helen attests, art from the urban art community gives her “inspiration” that enables her daily routines:

For me to buy a piece I really have to be drawn to it. Like I cannot not have it. And it like inspires me. [...] I like pieces that inspire me, and that definitely inspires me and is something I need to have.
A piece like that, to constantly keep me inspired even on days when I am not. That’s why I like to buy art pieces that draw me in. Because I look at them to help bring out inspiration

Helen and other collectors talk about a need for energy that is fundamental for their daily activities. And they find this in urban artworks. Again, the energy they receive from material artworks can be understood as collective effervescence. According to Durkheim (1995: 213, 226-227), acting in “harmony” with the “moral power” of the community gives members power and motivation to act. A “rush of energy” comes to us from “outside ourselves,” and the social community “uplifts” the individual. Throughout my study I have heard these types of statements on how material things influence our actions and our motivation to act and live. This is also what Alexander (2008b) discussed as agency of things. This is entirely tied together with the boundary work analyzed by Simmel and others. The energy urban art collectors receive comes from being part of a specific community, or sub-world, formed around exchange of urban art. Emile Durkheim (1995[1912]: 225) claimed 105 years ago that modern men and women are not that different from those perceived as “primitive”:

Never, perhaps, has divinity been closer to man than at this moment in history, when it is present in the things that inhabit his immediate surroundings and, in part, is immanent in man himself.

I believe that my analysis shows that Durkheim’s conviction holds also in our present virtual moment.

4.4. Exit - paradoxes and pragmatism of owning

Before exiting the field and closing the door to the homes of urban art collectors, I present here some additional statements I found puzzling. I can only suggest here how to interpret them. As in the previous analysis this addresses how we see the world. This is exemplified by this quote on the “powerful” artwork by Code that Steven had acquired:

But there are so many others from that show I wish to God that I can see, but they are probably in somebody else’s room you know. It is like a gift to have this, I never realized this until I got this and,
you know there was two other pieces I wanted and couldn’t get. [...] I am dying to see them in person, you know, I get to look at this. But I will never get to see them because they are in private collections. There are so many wonderful things in private collections; you know I wanna make sure that everything is in public at one point.

I suggest there is a paradox in relation to how Steven and other collectors earlier stated that the good thing with unsanctioned art is its availability to the public. Here it is revealed that private owning does not live up to this ideal.

Another collector admits that owning art is a narcissistic act, which is quite contrary to collective effervescence. But that statement in particular concerned artworks that did not include personal relationships with artists. Acquiring art in a profane mode with impersonal rather than social money breaks bonds instead of establishing them (Granovetter, 1985; Mauss, 2002[1925]; Zelizer, 1997). The same collector says it is a responsibility to own art. Locking the art inside, retracting it from the common, is not perceived as being responsible.

Another collector who owns more art than he can fit on his walls expresses this responsibility, as “art wants to be seen.” One solution several collectors use is to lend art to friends. Another is to imagine a future donation to a museum, like Steven. His epiphany when unboxing Code’s artwork unveiled an additional level in the paradox of owning urban art that is about separating and connecting – when Steven had bought and brought the artwork into his home he realized it belonged in a museum. Many collectors attest that they intend to donate their collection to museums. I asked Steven what it would mean:

What does it mean? [He thinks.] I feel like it means I left the earth better before I got here.

Donating is perceived as returning the art to the public where it is belongs. The social bonds torn apart by private ownership would thus be healed. There are several layers to this paradox. The ephemeral nature is often perceived as essential to street art and graffiti (Bengtsen, 2014, Young, 2014). When the expressions of unsanctioned art are symbolically represented in artworks as commodities the symbolism of the illegal is offered under legal circumstances and the ephemeral is made permanent. The symbolism of the free and challenging is controlled, and the sacred of unsanctioned art risks being profaned when adapting to the institutional order. One of Bengtsen’s (2014) informants highlights this stating: “The sense of wonder is lost.” The depth of urban art contains the ephemeral and non-monetary aspect of unsanctioned art while urban artworks in contrast are preserved and sold. The meaning of unsanctioned art is symbolically represented in urban art, but the actual practices of graffiti and street art are not possible to concretely apply in urban artworks. The collector Monica testifies to this
paradox but also recounts how collectors handle the topic of compromised authenticity pragmatically:

M: You could say that graffiti is dead when it hangs on the wall, but I like graffiti. [...]  
I: What is it you like about it?  
M: Well, it’s got to be something about [...] it crosses boundaries, it’s not, well, boring, it’s fun. I believe in the wandering mind, I believe in creativity. It doesn’t really happen in these high-status environments. In a way they’re bought these artists, they’re forced to, to come along. And that’s for me to say and I’ve said before that money must be a driving force too in all this so I don’t know [she laughs].  
I: Yes, how do you think about that tension?  
M: Well, I don’t think it matters much, I think I can think that.

Monica was actually the only collector in my study admitting that the pecuniary value and profit motivated her. However, like other collectors she is quite explicit that this is in contrast to the symbolic meaning of the art, as well as bringing art inside kills it. But she is pragmatic, “I don’t think it matters much.” Like Gerber (2014) I have continuously heard that conflicting values of art in the same statements do not need to be resolved. Pragmatism toward authenticity and definitions is something I have heard throughout statements from collectors. When I asked Maria if she would call the art in her home street art, she said:

Ngieew, he he... [she makes a sound indicating doubt and then chuckles, pauses and thinks before she continues] not really. If it is by someone who may at one point or the other define themselves as such.

The limits of discursive boundary work are reflected by Maria’s initial lack of distinct vocabulary. Then she collects herself and offers a discursive explanation that I find quite pragmatic. She implicitly transfers the context of what an artist has done in the streets to the artworks in her home.

The fact that urban art collectors are pragmatic does not reduce the symbolic importance of urban art as totems for a community that appreciates unsanctioned art; rather, it makes it possible. To imagine urban art in a future museum is about claiming that the rejected art in the street should be acknowledged as worth preserving. This is an additional level of the paradox; like my previous analysis showed collectors value unsanctioned art because it is not within the walls of established art world institutions. Museums represent the institutions in the objective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Collectors recognize that this is hard to change, but maybe not impossible, most collectors agree that eventually their taste will be acknowledged:
People have very low graffiti IQ, they don’t see the difference between a street painter and a master. [...] Graffiti is the ultimate expression of modernism. [...] 500 years down the line people will understand.

In this quote we hear that this collector perceives of himself as way ahead of his time. For a museum to eventually accept his collection would mean they recognize the value of the collector and his community.

The literature on subcultures says that when they are incorporated into the market they risk appropriation and having their autonomy compromised and their potential for change disarmed (Kramer, 2010; Lachmann, 1988; Macdonald, 2001). If you depart from the position that graffiti and street art are essentially illegal phenomena urban art will be either a paradox or exploitation. To judge whether it is right that graffiti artists and street artists sell their art is a normative question. From an empirical perspective I have found that the borders between unsanctioned art and urban art are full of openings between the boundaries. Urban art does depend on unsanctioned art, and many artists doing unsanctioned art depend on the market for urban art. Previous studies on graffiti and street art revolve a lot around the challenges of defining these practices as well as delimiting them from other art forms (Bengtsen, 2014, Kimvall, 2014; Young, 2014). The pragmatism I have identified indicates that the paradoxes within urban art need not be resolved. Like one collector said, when we discussed definitions and I asked him whether or not a specific piece in his collection was authentic subway graffiti: “it is, and it isn’t.”

5. Discussion

My research question as well as the title of this study reflect several layers of social cohesion, economic exchange, and culture. My analysis showed that exchange of urban art is about belonging to a community built on shared passionate belief. When collectors acquire art they connect to things and people through strong emotional bonds. In private homes urban artworks materialize collectors as a part of a specific community formed around unsanctioned art. This gives collectors comfort from – and energy to cope with – the profane demands of life. My analysis shows that humans at every moment are engaged in a boundary work of separating and connecting, which makes the world meaningful (Alexander, 2008a; Aspers,
Further, my analysis shows that boundary work results in social cohesion and is fundamental to constructing several types of values (Fine, 2004; Simmel, 2011[1900]). While the previous literature tends to see these as intellectual and discursive acts, my results indicate that boundary work, to a great extent, is nondiscursive and material. We feel and fall into things such as artworks; this works together with linguistic categorizations in a discursive-nondiscursive dialectic that structures our perception of the world. In my study this was exemplified by the enchantment my informants felt in relation to intervention of street artists in our shared environment (Young, 2014). My results confirm the sociological importance of materiality as well as claims for more attention needed on this topic (Alexander, 2008b; De La Fuente, 2010). Further research utilizing observation may bring more understanding to the importance of nondiscursive practices. The strong feeling toward art that my informants testify to is consistent with the dissolution of the subject-object distinction discussed by Alexander (2008a). The moment when the feeling of materiality strikes can be interpreted as resulting in the strong emotions of collective effervescence, which result in a feeling of being “swept up into a world entirely different from the one they have before their eyes” (Durkheim, 1995[1912]: 228). It is a moment that re-constructs the world. This is the moment of enjoyment we feel when we bring desired things close to us and feel profound presence, something Simmel (2011[1900]) compares with the concept of Paradise. This corresponds to the enchantment of street art pointed out by Young (2014).

Material things like artworks can exercise a form of agency, which means that they can initiate causal consequences (De La Fuente, 2010). The agency of things is not very acknowledged in social science where a dominant frame of understanding is the division between subject and object. More research on materiality can bring deeper understanding to the complexity of our relation to things and on how to methodologically grasp this. The moment when individuals burst out into collective effervescence, the subject-objective dissolution is mirrored by a subject-subject dissolution. The strong feelings brought about from “being part of something bigger than yourself,” as Maria reported in my analysis, is about abstaining an individual perspective on the world and joining a “passionate” community.

The individual perspective is that of a profane and rational economic man (Simmel, 2011[1900]). Collectors of urban art find the demand of this role suffocating. Art on the other hand brings them air to breathe. In my analysis the evolving narratives of Maria and other
collectors demonstrated a profane and occupational world that is quite lonely and hostile, similar to the iron cage of rationality of Weber (1978[1905]). In contrast, the sacred world of art is a place full of friends and shared meaning. My study has been guided by literature claiming that economic exchange is not primarily about pecuniary gains and that art has several values additional to monetary ones (Gerber, 2014; Granovetter, 1985; Mauss, 2002[1925]; Thornton, 2009; Zelizer, 1997). My study establishes that contemporary society and exchange has not become as disenchanted as Weber alerted. Instead my results suggest that economy in general is still quite enchanted.

To conclude that exchange of urban art is a passionate economy based on social bonds is not to say that money is irrelevant. Money plays an important role in this economy. But it is the social community that engages urban art collectors and not speculation. Misrecognition of monetary value and the importance of gifts confirmed that exchange of material things constitutes and withholds social bonds (Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas & Isherwood, 1996 [1979]; Granovetter, 1985; Mauss, 2002[1925]).

Ethnographic methodology with an abductive approach guided my study in the direction of materiality and emotions, which was unexpected and is not particularly emphasized in the literature on urban art (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Economy is simultaneously emotional and rational; this is another example of a discursive-nondiscursive dialectic. Additional studies are needed on how rationality and materiality are interdependent in different markets. My results are not at odds with a Bourdieusian framework. Conflicts over status and reproduction of social stratification were present, both within unsanctioned art and in relation to other art worlds. The symbolic representation of unsanctioned art in urban art is an engagement – but also a struggle – over space and representation that both are concrete and symbolic. But my data unveiled a different dynamic. The motivations for urban art collectors were not primarily to position themselves hierarchically. Several of the collectors I visited described how they suddenly acquired a taste for urban art, which re-constructed their reality and perception. Distinctions and boundaries were not used to exclude but rather to create cohesion. This is not compatible with a Bourdieusian perspective on taste inscribed into the body as a stratified habitus. Again, this is an example of how abductive methodology – going back and forth between data and theory – yielded unexpected results that did not confirm previous theories and required a new approach.

Bourdieu (1984) analyzes culture and art as embedded in an economic struggle and, thus, as a dependent variable of economy. Informed by Alexander (2008a; 2008b) my results point in
the direction of culture being quite autonomous and having independent potential for innovation. More attention is needed to the interdependency of economy and culture.

By visiting private homes and listening to urban art collectors, aspects of materiality and intimacy were disclosed that I had not anticipated after reviewing the literature. In future research it would be fruitful to study these topics from the perspectives of additional agents such as gallerists, museum staff, and artists. The importance that material things have in contemporary times of immaterial social media is a topic to be further studied. This may include the importance of design and materiality of the devices through which we communicate. It can include the material importance of the things we like to communicate about, such as when we post images online of our meals and drinks, or of the art we acquire.

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Figure 3. artwork by Herr Nilsson, photographed by Malcolm Jacobson and published with permission from the artist, acquired on Instagram, Dec. 23, 2017. P. 22.
Figure 4. Skip’s map, photomontage by M. Jacobson. Drawing by T. Barenthin Lindblad. P. 23.

7. Literature


