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**CONTROLLING ARTISTIC IDENTITY—ARTIST V. MUSEUM: A CASE STUDY OF KAWS AT THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM**

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COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

CONTROLLING ARTISTIC IDENTITY—ARTIST V. MUSEUM:

A CASE STUDY OF KAWS AT THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE  
IN MUSEUM STUDIES

MUSEUM STUDIES PROGRAM

BY

COURTNEY BARBER

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Courtney Barber submitted on May 7, 2021.

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## Courtney Barber

### Abstract

Through contemporary social media applications, non-traditional artists now hold the ability to curate their own artistic identities and associated brands. Accordingly, the constant use of social media platforms and consistent reinforcement of familiar artistic styles and characters, have become linked to the artist's relationship with their public following. In the case of the street artist KAWS, the artist has strategically built the familiar foundations of his public persona upon the repeated use of the character *Companion*, frequent social media interactions, and consistent brand collaborations. In bringing an artist utilizing such contemporary methods into the traditional museum space, it can be questioned whether the institution will simply serve as yet another public platform for the creator to further establish their identity and brand. This phenomenon is further explored through a case study of the career-spanning exhibition, KAWS: WHAT PARTY, located at the Brooklyn Museum through September 2021. Through his strategic brand marketing, KAWS has come to exemplify the question of whether museums continue to function as the public's primary exposure to art, or if they now stand as venues for artists to market themselves. Through visiting the exhibition, I evaluate how the aforementioned strategies are used to reinforce the identity that KAWS has already established for himself, and his brand. As a result of these evaluations, I determine the ways in which KAWS uses the KAWS: WHAT PARTY exhibition as yet another platform to perpetuate his artistic identity, and recognition of his brand.

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## I. Introduction

In thinking of the strategies used by artists of the past, each creator can be considered through the lens of their skills, their following, or even through the technologies available throughout their lifetime. As time has progressed, and art has become more accessible to public audiences, the formation of an artist's identity, both in terms of individuality and their work, has become increasingly valuable. When examining street artists such as Keith Haring or Jean-Michel Basquiat<sup>1</sup>, they were both very adept at self-promotion and building a strong following, which prompts one to wonder how their careers may have been reinforced by the menagerie of technological innovations offered through the Internet. Through a more current lens, it can be said that the contemporary street artist, KAWS, utilizes a wide breadth of identity-forming strategies, ranging from those of his predecessors, to options available as a result of modern innovation.

In evaluating the career of KAWS, whose proper name is Brian Donnelly, it is crucial to note the wide trajectory of his work, and the ways in which he advertised this work to an audience he continues to expand. KAWS' career and his accompanying audience are highlighted in this research, as questions remain about the ways in which non-traditional artists may manipulate the museum space. While many street artists, beginning in the 1960s, utilized the technology available to them at any particular point, KAWS has taken the plethora of contemporary social media options and implemented them as the foundation of his personal brand. These social media platforms, in conjunction with high-profile brand collaborations, have

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Rocca, "Keith Haring & Jean-Michel Basquiat: How Both Prolific Artists Changed the Art World," Esquire SG, February 25, 2020, <https://www.esquiresg.com/features/keith-haring-jean-michel-basquiat-how-both-prolific-artists-changed-the-art-world/>.

ensured that KAWS and his works reach a large and widely varied audience. While this brand has been carefully crafted by the artist himself, there remains the possibility that this curation may not clearly transfer into the museum space. While planning a museum exhibition may not imply a complete relinquishment of control for the artist, the historical disparities between street art and the cultural institution may reveal themselves. For example, in multiple gallery shows throughout the early 2000's, KAWS' presentation was noted for following traditional museum hierarchies and "well-established rules"<sup>2</sup> of the institution. Rather than free-standing versions of his most well-known pieces, KAWS' monumental works were placed on pedestals, rather than existing in the natural environment, as his paintings were hung in a conventionally organized fashion around them.<sup>3</sup> Although KAWS had placed an immense amount of strategic effort into establishing his artistic brand, and disseminating this identity to his followers, the gallery's influence proved overpowering.

As early fans flocked to local galleries to see the work of such an influential street artist, many were critical of the lack of apparent identity and associated brand familiarity. In preparing to visit the work of KAWS, many members of his audience expected to see a reflection of the clever and strategic personality the artist had curated through his street art and online presence. In the case of these early galleries, the artist's personality was overshadowed by the influence of traditional conventions within cultural institutions. For museum visitors accustomed to KAWS'

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<sup>2</sup> William S. Smith. "The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine." *Art in America*, 09, 2019, 56, <https://ezproxy.rit.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.rit.edu/docview/2294473632?accountid=108>.

<sup>2</sup> Smith. "The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine."

<sup>3</sup> Smith. "The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine."

Instagram<sup>4</sup> or website,<sup>5</sup> the institutional setting may feel more refined or restrained, as external familiarity with the artist is molded to fit within four walls.

For this research project, I visited and assessed the KAWS: WHAT PARTY<sup>6</sup> exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, on March 7, 2021. Leading up to my visit, I constantly monitored KAWS' social media platforms, announcements of new brand collaborations, and the ways in which his most familiar artistic character was used to maintain recognition. Upon viewing the exhibition, I considered the artistic identity that KAWS has constructed through his online presence, in addition to the application of the aforementioned strategies, including the repeated use of *Companion*, use of social media, and brand collaborations, that he uses to establish such individuality. Additionally, I evaluated the ways in which the Brooklyn Museum has promoted the show, and thus, how this has impacted the way in which the institution represents KAWS, in both artistic and creation-based identity.

Following my visit to the Brooklyn Museum, I then evaluated how the exhibition was organized, and how the exhibition represented the artist's most familiar character, *Companion*, in addition to the representation of brand collaborations. When thinking of social media, it became evident that not only are KAWS' personal connections to his platforms crucial to his identity and brand, but so too, are the online interactions between himself and his audience.

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<sup>4</sup> "KAWS." Login - Instagram. Accessed October 29, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGU6z22DHX9/>.

<sup>5</sup> KAWSONE. <https://kawsone.com/>. Accessed February 10, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Brooklyn Museum of Art. "KAWS: WHAT PARTY." Brooklyn Museum: KAWS: WHAT PARTY. Accessed February 10, 2021. [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/kaws\\_what\\_party](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/kaws_what_party).

## II. Literature Review

I seek to understand how the street artist KAWS has created an artistic identity utilizing the strategies of, a repeated use of his familiar artistic character, *Companion*; consistent use of social media platforms; and involvement in multiple high profile brand collaborations. More specifically, it is crucial to understand how these strategies may be manipulated within the museum space, allowing an exhibition of the artist's work to serve as yet another platform in expanding identity and recognition. While initially perceived as a street artist, it must be noted that KAWS has worked to appeal to audiences of multiple social and economic strata- further underscoring the need for an evaluation of how he has cleverly marketed his brand outside of the formal institution, prior to exhibiting within it.

As the practice of art continuously changes, a contemporary highlight rests upon street artists, as they garner a previously inconceivable public following on the international stage. While the art market is fueled by connoisseurship and elite wealth, art created for public consumption may be more successful in reaching larger audiences, and establishing a brand following, than in the merit of collectors and formal museum institutions alone. With artistic offerings of varying price levels, street artists have made their work more accessible to the public, while also increasing demand for their work.

More specifically, the work of Brian Donnelly, also known as “global culture phenomenon”<sup>7</sup> KAWS, has permeated multiple sectors of pop and “youth cultures”<sup>8</sup>- representing a recent trend made possible through an ever-growing culture of international

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Albert, “KAWS and Effect,” *The Australian Financial Review*, September 19, 2019, <https://ezproxy.rit.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.rit.edu/docview/2288680446?accountid=108>.

<sup>8</sup> Guadalupe Sanchez. "KAWS Exhibit Draws Large Crowds to the Modern." *University Wire*, Jan 11, 2017. <https://ezproxy.rit.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.rit.edu/docview/1857449336?accountid=108>.

consumerism. Beginning as a New Jersey based street artist, KAWS transcended the traditional criticisms of an assumed lack of cultural content associated with being an “outsider” artist and found himself collaborating with iconic individuals and brands such as Guess and Calvin Klein. These partnerships eventually culminated in the social media fueled following KAWS has found his career to be bolstered upon. As experienced by artists perceived to be “outsiders,” museums as a formal institution have a historical tendency to only exhibit works deemed acceptable by professionals within the field- and thus by the buyers within the art market whom they influence. As a result of this legacy, there exists a sense of apprehension relating to the representation of an artist’s carefully curated identity. For KAWS, specifically, it is of the utmost importance that visitors to a museum recognize both his work, and his influence, within an exhibition, as they have become intimately familiar with a particular identity through sources outside of the institution. As museums continuously work to attract new and returning audiences, while also maintaining a steady cash flow, our technologically advanced contemporary society has begun to place an increased emphasis on accurately representing an artist through their established identity—as opposed to an identity curated by the institution.

Beginning “as a teenager in the early 1990s,”<sup>9</sup> Brian Donnelly created the handle “KAWS”<sup>10</sup> based strictly on the aesthetic value of how the letters look when placed together upon large billboards or buildings (Figure 1). After a short period of tagging frequently targeted city locations, the artist then turned to the less conventional choice of advertisements and marketing campaigns, as a means of reaching a larger audience. In order to access a wider breadth of advertised targets, Donnelly began travelling to New York City, to play “the semiotic

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<sup>9</sup>Smith. "The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine."

<sup>10</sup>Smith. "The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine."

games initiated by teams of well-resourced marketing professionals,”<sup>11</sup> as noted by the artist’s enthusiastic critics. While parleying with corporate powerhouses may have appeared to be a cultural rebellion, the artist stated he was simply toying with a distinct type of canvas, while maintaining “a certain amount of respect”<sup>12</sup> held for all of his unsuspecting partners in creation.

For example, as Donnelly was slowly attaining the infamy of KAWS, he framed his work within the notion of “forceful collaborations,”<sup>13</sup> as his work was continuously applied in the manner of a pre-emptive, albeit criminal, strike on brands remaining unaware. One of these first notable projects was in 1995, on a Captain Morgan billboard<sup>14</sup> near the Holland Tunnel, advertising the Captain breaking through the fourth wall of another advertisement in typical trompe l’oeil fashion (Figure 2). Seemingly encouraging artists to contribute to the billboard, the Captain himself was seen to have painted over the faces of traditional models— making a mockery of the image in a manner that would become reminiscent of Donnelly’s emerging personal style.<sup>15</sup> Accompanying this image, were the words “The Captain Was Here,” in which the word “Captain” was then replaced by “KAWS.”<sup>16</sup> Although critics and cynics believed that the artist had fallen for a corporate ploy, he had managed to assert his artistic dominance over the original intention and bring attention to his own work.

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<sup>11</sup> Smith. “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>12</sup> Caitlin Dover. “Street Smarts.” *Print* 54, no. 1 (Jan 2000): 14.

<https://ezproxy.rit.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/231035536?accountid=108>.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>14</sup> William S. Smith, “What the Rise of KAWS Says About the Art World’s Ailments,” *ARTnews.com* (ARTnews.com, November 27, 2019), <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/kaws-democratized-art-peddles-relatable-motifs-exhaustion-death-63649/>.

<sup>15</sup> Dale Eisinger. “The Art Evolution of KAWS.” *Complex. Complex*, June 1, 2018. <https://www.complex.com/style/2013/08/kaws-art-evolution/the-formative-years>.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”



Once established in New York City, Donnelly began attending the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan,<sup>17</sup> where he met fellow artist, Barry McGee, who gifted him with a key to open any of the locked advertisement displays across the city.<sup>18</sup> With this tool in hand, Donnelly was then able to access the menagerie of advertisements across New York City, where he would then be able to capitalize on the international growth of corporate commercial spaces. With his focus still set on American pop-culture and fashion houses, KAWS quickly emerged as Donnelly's fully formed identity, cementing his persona as he rose to become a powerfully unique player in the art world. As a result of this newly acquired key, KAWS was then able to remove advertisements from their locked boxes, paint over them in his studio- using his newly formed "cartoon-like character"<sup>19</sup>, and return them by morning. In terms of criminality, these actions remained against the law, but they were also so novel, that the public began to search for signs of the artist's work across the city. This following became so strong, that when referring to these incidents in recent interviews, KAWS has noted that many of his edited advertisements were stolen by followers almost immediately after placing them back in their locked boxes. Additionally, the artist is "unabashed about reusing existing works,"<sup>20</sup> as public interest in his previous pieces only serves to increase his market value and enrich the history of his career. While these ironic, and increasing, thefts initially subverted the artist's message, they also proved the value held by his

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<sup>17</sup>Smith. "The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine."

<sup>18</sup>Smith. "The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine."

<sup>19</sup>"10 Things to Know about KAWS," Christie's (Christie's, October 30, 2019), <https://www.christies.com/features/KAWS-artist-guide-9756-1.aspx>.

<sup>20</sup>Mischa Frankl-Duval. "Artist Brian Donnelly, Aka KAWS, Embraces the Abstract; New London show by Artist also Known as KAWS is a Bold Departure from Cartoonish Figures that made Him Famous." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Oct 02, 2019. <https://ezproxy.rit.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.rit.edu/docview/2299778676?accountid=108>.

work that would carry him toward a “redefinition of pop-culture imagery,”<sup>21</sup> propelling him toward increasing celebrity.

As KAWS’ career grew in both creative ability and brand recognition by followers, he “was quick to grasp the importance of working within global networks to further”<sup>22</sup> his artistic influence. Following his transition from simply tagging his name, to implementing the use of his characters with “X’s” through their eyes, KAWS was then able to travel to Japan in 1999, after developing “professional relationships with key figures in the Tokyo Streetwear scene, including Nigo, founder of A Bathing Ape.”<sup>23</sup> Through facilitating relationships with fellow pop culture influencers, KAWS was effectively expanding his international market, while also building the foundations of public access to his work, as it exists in multiple price levels. Following multiple return trips to Japan, KAWS created his own store to feature his burgeoning streetwear and “high-end toys and collectibles,”<sup>24</sup> aptly named “OriginalFake,”<sup>25</sup> fashioned after popular streetwear brands. It was in the lead up to this original storefront that the artist began to bring the aforementioned cartoon character painting to a three-dimensional reality. As a result, *Companion*<sup>26</sup> was eventually given life through a partnership with the Japanese company, Bounty Hunter (Figure 3). This figure, strikingly similar to Disney’s Steamboat Willie, mimicked common cartoon features of exaggeration, with the exception of X’s placed through the eyes, leaving *Companion*’s view up to viewer interpretation. It is important to note, that in his early career, KAWS worked as a freelance animator for Disney Animation Studios, which

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<sup>21</sup> "Kaws to Take Part in 86th Annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade." *Entertainment Close - Up*, May 23, 2012. <https://ezproxy.rit.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.rit.edu/docview/1015186237?accountid=108>.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>23</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>24</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>25</sup> KAWS, “OriginalFake,” *OriginalFake*, accessed October 29, 2020, <http://www.original-fake.com/>.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

most likely went on to influence the stylized manner in which *Companion* has been conceptualized.<sup>27</sup> With multiple iterations, *Companion* can be seen putting their gloved hands over these mysterious eyes or reaching out toward the audience through grand sweeping gestures. Although Brian Donnelly began his career as a street artist, his departure into multiples and collectibles propelled him into new markets, while also exposing his work to new audiences.

When gaining international fame, many comparisons were drawn by critics between the artist, his contemporaries, and many iconic creators. Throughout the early 2000s, as his street art transformed into pop culture collectibles, KAWS was often compared to Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring as they also started their careers “out on the street.”<sup>28</sup> Additionally, parallels were made between Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and KAWS based on the artist’s “instinctive understanding of the possibilities of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,”<sup>29</sup> as technological intervention in the art process, in terms of both manufacture and dissemination, grew in popularity. As the fame associated with these artists has transcended various art movements and art market shifts, it stands to reason that merging the traits associated with such success would create ever-increasing notoriety. It is also important to note that parallels were drawn, by both critics and supporters alike, between KAWS and Japanese artist Takashi Murakami (Figure 4). Throughout his career, Murakami has been known for unifying disparate ideas of Japanese and Western art, fine art, and *otaku*<sup>30</sup>(youth obsessions with technology), as well as bridging commercial spaces and museums.<sup>31</sup> The similarities found between these two

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<sup>27</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>28</sup> Christie’s. *10 Things to Know About KAWS*.

<sup>29</sup> Christie’s. *10 Things to Know About KAWS*.

<sup>30</sup> “What Does 'Otaku' Really Mean?,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed October 29, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/what-does-otaku-mean-in-japanese>.

<sup>31</sup> Takashi Murakami - Bio: The Broad,” *Bio | The Broad*, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.thebroad.org/art/takashi-murakami>.

international artists served to further portray KAWS as an indomitable figure, seeking to find a balance between what the masses could afford, and what the elite found interesting enough to place in their collections. From this conglomeration of financial and social support, a street artist may eventually find career and brand mentions within the formal museum institution.

As the name and brand “KAWS” was becoming increasingly well known, the artist’s work began to expand, both in terms of output and types of manufacture. While never abandoning his signature *Companion* figure, KAWS has molded this creation in many different media, as the intention behind each is different. As an increasingly established artist, KAWS continued to spend the early and mid-2000s advertising and expanding his work through “Japanese toy companies Nigo and Medicom Toy; fashion brands DC Shoes, Vans, and Supreme; [creating] guitar picks with John Mayer, an album cover with Kanye West, artwork for Comme des Garçons/Pharrell Williams' perfume, a *New Yorker* magazine cover, even rugs for Gallery 1950.”<sup>32</sup> Even before the intentional applications of social media, KAWS was able to align himself with some of the largest companies and brand names in the fashion industry, solidifying his reputation as a creator, while also exposing his talents to a menagerie of audiences with different interests. By ingratiating himself with the public, KAWS has been successful in expanding his following to include individuals across varying economic and social standings—honoring the importance of both “low” and “high”<sup>33</sup> art, especially in the case of his standing figures. Following an initial run, in 2006 of the original five-hundred casts, “the toys sold out almost immediately,”<sup>34</sup> cementing *Companion* as the foundation of the artist’s work and messaging. In jumping forward thirteen years, it may astonish casual viewers of the artist’s work

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<sup>32</sup> Jane Albert. “KAWS and Effect.”

<sup>33</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>34</sup> Christie’s. *10 Things to Know About KAWS*.

to see a “121-foot-long inflatable version of KAWS’ *Companion* installed in Hong Kong’s Victoria Harbor during Art Basel.”<sup>35</sup> This piece, titled *KAWS: Holiday*, has come to signify the growth and surge of interest in the artist’s work, as the installation had already travelled through many different countries, and was considered the centerpiece of the prestigious art festival (Figure 5). As this event is privately owned, and for-profit, it attracts many affluent and influential guests,<sup>36</sup> aligning the work of KAWS with the fine art typically purchased by fine art collectors. Additionally, Art Basel is generally known for the many photo opportunities and parties it provides for its most prestigious guests, which are quickly posted to social media accounts. Through the “profound impact”<sup>37</sup> of social media, a passive public following may become an active following, complete with daily updates and the suspense of waiting for whatever the artist may post next.

As Brian Donnelly evolved into KAWS, the artist’s assumed persona has also continued to evolve, this time under the established name. While always maintaining that he creates art “that no one can be too stupid to get,”<sup>38</sup> KAWS remains aware of the idea that his rise to fame necessitates the need for strategic adaptations to changing environments. Through understanding this, the artist has been able to capitalize on multiple social media platforms- even posting pictures and reminiscing upon his early days as a street artist<sup>39</sup> (Figure 6). In combining his professional collaborations with the loyal public following he has cultivated, KAWS has been

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<sup>35</sup> Christie’s. *10 Things to Know About KAWS*.

<sup>36</sup> Adam Lindemann, “Is It the Art or Is It the Hype?,” *Observer* (Observer, April 3, 2012), <https://observer.com/2012/04/is-it-the-art-or-is-it-the-hype/>.

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Sokolowsky, “Art in the Instagram Age: How Social Media Is Shaping Art and How You Experience It,” *The Seattle Times* (The Seattle Times Company, November 16, 2017), <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/visual-arts/art-in-the-instagram-age-how-social-media-is-shaping-art-and-how-you-experience-it/>.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>39</sup> “KAWS,” *Login • Instagram*, accessed October 29, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGU6z22DHX9/>.

successful in “tilting the scales toward the conventions of museum display,”<sup>40</sup> as he balances his own style with traditional institutional conventions. As his followers have come to trust his various artistic strategies, there is little hesitation in visiting KAWS’ exhibitions within the traditional gallery setting as he “follows well-established rules.”<sup>41</sup> Although his paintings may be hung in traditional white-cube fashion, and his sculptures placed on polished platforms, the intention and idea behind KAWS’ work is not lost as a result of their immediate environment. While this steady public following has bolstered and supported KAWS’ career, his work also serves to sustain visitation to the museums exhibiting his work. Through the cultivation of a loyal following, supported by the reinforcement of various identity-based strategies, KAWS has introduced the notion of contemporary artists utilizing the museum space as one’s personal creative venue—calling the traditional uses of the cultural institution into question.

As Brian Donnelly has transcended traditional artistry to create a brand that encompasses a variety of products and collaborators, the notion of a non-traditional artist has shifted. Through his beginning as a graffiti artist, KAWS was immediately attracted to the subversion of traditional advertisements— not to make a political statement, but to reach a larger audience based on his collaborator of choice. This affinity for understanding the mechanisms of building a following led KAWS to create in different mediums, across different parts of the world, offering him acceptance into a variety of economic and social circles. This widespread support eventually led to the inclusion of his work, most notably variations of *Companion*, in major museums across the globe. With such a wide breadth of followers, collaborators, and works, the future of KAWS’

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

<sup>41</sup> Smith, “The Weak and the Dead: An Illustrated Quarterly Magazine.”

career may be difficult to predict, although it is sure to follow the strategic path he has so carefully laid out, in establishing his brand's artistic identity.

### **III. Methodology**

In having an interest in, and familiarity with art, it may be very easy to notice subtle nods to various artists and their works. While this skill may require a trained eye, to notice the work of KAWS, one must simply scroll through Instagram, or flip through a magazine and see the décor within a celebrity's home. In essence, once one becomes familiar with the physical characteristics of KAWS' work, they will see it in many places.

From a personal standpoint, my interest in KAWS and his work initially stemmed from the fact that I was seeing *Companion* in various components of my life, including on social media, as well as in emails from clothing brands who were collaborating with the artist. While I originally thought that this was simply just an artist rising to fame within the confines of popular culture, I was very quickly shown that KAWS was recognizable on an international level. In the Summer of 2020, I was watching a livestream video, hosted by J-Hope, one of seven members of the South Korean music group BTS (Figure 7). Throughout the pandemic, these livestreams became very frequent, and I had become accustomed to examining the space and décor behind J-Hope, in his personal studio, as I feel one can learn about others based on their curated personal environments. It was during one of these moments of observation, that I noticed a piece of KAWS' work on a shelf behind J-Hope as he spoke. My interest was immediately provoked, as I had never considered the international implications of the spread of KAWS' work, as well as that of his artistic identity. To have amassed a national following on social media is impressive on its own, but global representation by a celebrity implies a certain status in popular culture. As a

result of this observation, an interest into the strategic process KAWS has implemented to achieve such a strong brand identity, and associated brand recognition, emerged.

#### **IV. The Curated Identity of KAWS**

When first evaluating the various street artists actively creating in our contemporary society, multiple creators came to mind. For example, the way in which Banksy<sup>42</sup> is known in his anonymous form and graffiti art throughout the world is of particular intrigue, but the increasing popularity and scope of KAWS' career overshadowed any other choice, but himself. Through a utilization of a singular identifying artistic subject (*Companion*), social media platforms, and high-profile brand collaborations, KAWS has curated both himself and his work in a manner strategically different than his contemporaries.

##### **A. *Companion***

For anyone who may be unfamiliar with KAWS as an individual, there exists a very real possibility that they would recognize the work that has become synonymous with his brand. This work, known as *Companion*, was brought to life in 1999, as KAWS navigated his own personal style. Knowing that he did not want to create anything that would be difficult to understand, the artist created his figure with X's through the eyes, and puffy white gloves on the hands, as a means of offering something to the public which could transcend any possible cultural or language barriers (Figure 8). It can also be questioned whether or not such vagueness simply offers permission to audiences to follow KAWS' career and participate in the hype— regardless of any perceived deeper meanings. Throughout his career, KAWS has spoken many times about

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<sup>42</sup> Banksy. Accessed February 11, 2021. <https://www.banksy.co.uk/>.



his goal to create art for anyone, and argues that through *Companion*'s expression-less eyes, the viewer is able to project any emotion onto the character. It is through this ambiguity that the artist has successfully created a character through which his expansive group of supporters can experience different emotions together.

In addition to *Companion*'s ambiguous features, the character's strength also lies in its instant recognizability. Once a potential follower of KAWS is introduced to the character, the features will be familiar during any future interactions. As a result of this easily accessible familiarity, the artist is able to reinforce his artistic identity and encourage audiences to quickly identify with his works—no matter the platform or location.

## **B. Social Media Platforms**

Beginning with the very onset of personal usage of the internet, KAWS understood the importance of maintaining a constant online presence. With so much of the art world isolated behind institutional walls, this new way of presenting art to the masses contributed to the already steady rise of the street art scene. Due to the fact that street art has been historically “sanctioned, forbidden, and branded as vandalism,”<sup>43</sup> many people may feel an inherent attraction to the physical representation of rebellion. Prior to the introduction of the internet, this rebellion could only be seen by viewers living in the same geographic location as the artist- a phenomenon quickly remedied by early forms of social media.

Beginning with Myspace, KAWS began the arduous work of building a following, as he posted his work and crafted the interpersonal relationships that are so important between artist and audience. This platform remained the most active, until KAWS chose to create the

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<sup>43</sup> “The Rise of Graffiti Art.” ARTDEX Blog

OriginalFake<sup>44</sup> website in 2006, following his multiple trips to Japan (Figure 9). It was due to these trips that KAWS was exposed to the impact of miniature collectibles, which then led him to create three-dimensional figures in addition to his two-dimensional works. These figures would come to represent his artistic identity and style through the OriginalFake website, as well as representing him as an artist to this day.

Following the closure of the OriginalFake website in 2013, KAWS has since relied most heavily on his Instagram<sup>45</sup> account, as well as his most recent personal website, KAWS ONE<sup>46</sup> (Figure 10). Upon first visiting this website, it presents an iteration of KAWS' synonymous creation, *Companion*, lying flat on his stomach, with only the option to enter one's email. Once an email is entered, the user is automatically placed on the mailing list, and is then simply left to wait in anticipation of when KAWS will drop his next three-dimensional works. Once these drops occur, they typically sell out immediately and goods are then placed on resale websites for at least double the price. This high level of demand has cemented KAWS' place as both a successful artist, and also as a high-profile figure in contemporary pop culture.

### C. Brand Collaborations

As KAWS' star power has grown, so too has the recognition by those involved in the arts, as well as those immersed in the world of pop culture. Extending as far back as his first trips to Japan, KAWS has worked with international figures, such as Nigo, founder of streetwear brand a Bathing Ape.<sup>47</sup> This partnership would be instrumental from the very beginning of what would

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<sup>44</sup> KAWS. OriginalFake. Accessed October 29, 2020.

<http://www.original-fake.com/>.

<sup>45</sup> "KAWS." Login - Instagram

<sup>46</sup> KAWS ONE. <https://kawsone.com/>

<sup>47</sup> bape.com. Accessed February 11, 2021. <https://bape.com/>.

become KAWS' three-dimensional career and continues today. I believe that these early international connections are a very important facet of KAWS' career, as they were developed far earlier than some American bonds he has forged in recent years.

Although he had relied on the notion of “forceful collaborations” with American brands at the start of his career, the large audience cultivated through KAWS' strategic brand marketing has attracted many large brands to form formal agreements with the artist. This has been reflected in advertisement campaigns with brands such as Guess, Calvin Klein, Air Jordan, COMMES des GARÇONS, and Kanye West.<sup>48</sup> While these brands may appear to be disparate elements that make up the conglomeration of popular culture, they instead serve to unify the different interests of KAWS' followers, effectively contributing to the growth of his support. Most interestingly, KAWS has collaborated with the French fashion house Dior on various pieces of apparel, and it is most likely a result of this partnership that Dior is the sponsor of the KAWS: WHAT PARTY exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

Additionally, KAWS has recently expanded his efforts to include partnering with various brands and programs, utilizing his newly found star power as the lead member of the collaboration. For example, in November of 2020, it was announced that KAWS had created “a limited run of 1,000 boxed sets containing 25 holiday cards”<sup>49</sup> for the Food Bank of New York City. Described as a “world-renowned artist,” KAWS was clearly shown to be using his artistic talents to benefit a good cause, while also relying on his large base of supporters to purchase the boxed sets.

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<sup>48</sup> “KAWS XX - 10 of His Best Collaborations.” TheArtGorgeous, April 6, 2017. <https://theartgorgeous.com/kaws-xx-10-best-collaborations/>.

<sup>49</sup> “Food Bank Collaborates with KAWS on Limited Edition Holiday Cards.” Food Bank For New York City, December 7, 2020. <https://www.foodbanknyc.org/fb-kaws-collaboration-holiday-cards/>.

## V. **KAWS: WHAT PARTY as Strategy**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to interrupt day to day museum operations, it has been difficult to imagine that I would be able to experience a KAWS exhibition at any point in the near future. For this reason, I was shocked to see that the Brooklyn Museum moved forward with their KAWS: WHAT PARTY<sup>50</sup> exhibition, beginning in February of 2021. Through the suggestions and support given by my advisors, Dr. Rebecca DeRoo, Dr. Jonathan Schroeder, and Dr. Tina Lent, I was able to easily plan my trip and move forward in my research.

In preparing for my trip to the Brooklyn Museum, the most notable phenomenon I encountered, was the fact that many of the time slots for ticket purchasing were already sold out. Another result of the COVID-19 pandemic has been that museums must now sell tickets in advance, in order to control and monitor how many people are within the institution at any given time. While I had assumed that this would be a part of the process for obtaining tickets, I did not anticipate how much information I would be able to draw from these options alone. When looking at opening weekend three weeks in advance of the exhibit opening on February 25, 2021, the tickets were completely sold out for every time slot that had been offered. To put this in perspective, the exhibition opens at 11am every morning and closes at 4:30pm. The time slots are offered at fifteen-minute intervals, with thirty people allowed in the exhibition at a time. While it is remarkable that this opening weekend is already booked to capacity, there are many other days at the time of this writing, including my 11:15am time slot on March 7<sup>th</sup>, that are sold out as well.

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<sup>50</sup> Brooklyn Museum of Art. "KAWS: WHAT PARTY."

While it is not necessarily surprising that an exhibition of KAWS' work would attract a surplus of attention, it is slightly surprising that this attraction appears to supersede any impact that pandemic precautions may have on the visitor experience, or any hesitation to attend. As the aforementioned reasons for KAWS' growing popularity and fame would be sufficient on their own to exemplify the artist's impact, this detail of the ticket sales serves to cement the argument further.

In examining the popularity of the exhibition, the increased use of social media on behalf of both KAWS, the Brooklyn Museum, and exhibit curator Eugenie Tsai must be noted (Figures 11, 12). While museum advertising is to be expected in advance of a high-profile exhibition, the reliance on social media by all participating entities highlights the importance of KAWS' online presence—and its connection with his followers. As a follower of KAWS' social media, myself, I can attest to the fact that I relied heavily on social media posts by the artist and the museum to provide updates and checked the actual website very few times.

In conjunction with the use of social media, the influences of brand collaborations were highlighted in many ways, including the clear identification of Dior as the exhibition's official sponsor. Additionally, the text description of the KAWS: WHAT PARTY exhibition alludes to the retrospective displaying various facets of the artist's past, including works resulting from partnering with multiple well-known brands. In understanding how the Brooklyn Museum exhibits KAWS' collaborative work, alongside depictions of *Companion*, the artistic identity and brand recognition so ceaselessly sought by the artist will be recognized.

## **VI. The Brooklyn Museum**

### **A) A History of Graffiti Art in New York City**

While urban neighborhoods tend to be instantly associated with street art and the discursive nature of its creators, New York City maintains a unique connection to the art form. For many years, beginning in the 1960s, as residents of various boroughs traversed their respective streets, they were exposed to “the crude street-style imagery of graffiti.”<sup>51</sup> In applying such a negative connotation to the work of street artists, it stands to reason that a mainstream distaste for those considered to be different would form. This distaste then holds the powerful ability to influence people’s behaviors in terms of legislation and the threat of punishment if one behaves in a manner opposite of mainstream expectations. For example, “under a city ordinance passed in 1972, it was illegal even to carry a can of spray paint on the subway unless the can was enclosed in a sealed container.”<sup>52</sup> As recently as the 1970s, laws were put in place as a means of limiting the abilities of street artists, as New York City was on the cusp on many revitalization projects. As a result of “The decline of the industrial sector, high rates of crime, pollution and racial tensions,”<sup>53</sup> the city’s leadership, in addition to the extraordinarily wealthy, sought to improve conditions through any means necessary. These means included the perpetuation of the stereotype that street art lacked cerebral intention, and its very existence broke the laws of a civilized society.

As the 1970s progressed, and street artists became increasingly familiar with the punishment of removing their own artwork from the public space, the 1980s would bring a level

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<sup>51</sup> Calvin Tomkins, “The Rise of Graffiti Art,” *The New Yorker*, March 26, 1984, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1984/03/26/up-from-irt>.

<sup>52</sup> Calvin Tomkins, “The Rise of Graffiti Art,”

<sup>53</sup> “Change or Die’? Gentrification in Brooklyn,” *Humanity in Action*, accessed March 3, 2021, [https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge\\_detail/change-or-die-gentrification-in-brooklyn/](https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/change-or-die-gentrification-in-brooklyn/).

of acceptance previously unheard of. Beginning in the early 1980s, lesser-known art critics began showing their clients the work of street artists as they shifted their craft from the built environment to the traditionally accepted confines of a canvas. Following this silent proliferation of street artist's works into the hands of collectors, Sidney Janis, among others, cemented its status as having "ascended from the subculture into art— or into the art market."<sup>54</sup>

As a successful art critic, Sydney Janis turned his gaze toward the work of street artists, eventually leading to his "Post Graffiti" exhibition " at the Sidney Janis Gallery, on West Fifty-seventh Street."<sup>55</sup> This 1983 exhibition served to highlight many subversive artists of the preceding decade, while still labelling their work with the term graffiti— which continued to carry a negative connotation. Once Sidney Janis had provided his stamp of approval, many collectors of fine art became purveyors of works that had once been ignored. Although an artist's popularity within the art market has consistently marked their level of success, the introduction of street artists and their creators began to shift cultural norms. While it is difficult to assess whether or not street art was initially viewed as a temporary novelty within wealthy collecting circles, this shift throughout the 1980s endured, and its impacts on contemporary society persist.

With the proliferation of street art following its stamp of approval by progressive collectors, artists were then given the opportunity to expand upon their base of creation. For example, Keith Haring noticed that "when a subway advertising billboard was not in use a sheet of black paper was put in that space,"<sup>56</sup> which he then filled in with white chalk. In creating this pattern for his art, which in turn attracted an audience, Haring went on to become a star of the

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<sup>54</sup> Calvin Tomkins, "The Rise of Graffiti Art."

<sup>55</sup> Calvin Tomkins, "The Rise of Graffiti Art."

<sup>56</sup> Calvin Tomkins, "The Rise of Graffiti Art."

international art circuit.<sup>57</sup> It is within this manipulation of a city's infrastructure that street artists thrive, and KAWS was no exception as he began targeting advertisements in a manner reminiscent of his predecessors.

## **B) Influences of Gentrification**

In the same way that high-quality street art became synonymous with New York City and its associated boroughs, so too has the contemporary phenomenon of gentrification. As the trend of civic revitalization was introduced in 1980 to combat rising crime and community tensions, the social landscape of Brooklyn was forever altered. Following “a massive exodus of predominantly white, middle-income individuals”<sup>58</sup> the neighborhoods left behind fell into a startling economic decline, resulting in steady deterioration for the primarily minority communities left in their wake. Exemplifying the desperation felt by those left in Brooklyn, residents came to realize that it was “more profitable to burn down their buildings and get the money from the insurance than to rent them out.”<sup>59</sup> As a result of this economic anguish, the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn “experienced a wave of fires that burnt vast parts of the district to the ground and completed its economic collapse.”<sup>60</sup> It was due to this downfall of multiple Brooklyn neighborhoods that the need for revitalization increased— and developers began to take notice.

At the dawn of the 1990s, the effects of New York City's revitalization efforts were glaringly obvious as Rudy Giuliani's “Zero Tolerance” policy took hold, and the city was poised

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<sup>57</sup> Calvin Tomkins, “The Rise of Graffiti Art.”

<sup>58</sup> “Change or Die’? Gentrification in Brooklyn,” Humanity in Action.

<sup>59</sup> “Change or Die’? Gentrification in Brooklyn,” Humanity in Action.

<sup>60</sup> “Change or Die’? Gentrification in Brooklyn,” Humanity in Action.



to become a financial and cultural stronghold.<sup>61</sup> With this perceived improvement within Brooklyn's neighborhoods, members of the middle class began to return, in addition to young individuals seeking a new and prosperous environment. Coupled with this reintroduction of the wealthy and trendy was the establishment of cafes, restaurants, and shops intended to serve their interests and needs. In opening these new businesses, surrounding property values quickly increased, and many longtime inhabitants faced new forms of financial strain. In many cases, these residents were those who had survived the societal and financial crises of the 1980s and now faced a new threat to their environment.

As an increasing number of developers continued to move into Brooklyn, they brought with them “trendy thrift stores, vegetarian restaurants, lofts, galleries, and clubs.”<sup>62</sup> This essentially created a vicious cycle, wherein new businesses attracted new wealthy residents, which then attracted new businesses intended to suit their growing list of needs. While fledgling businesses and transforming residential neighborhoods were one result of the gentrification of Brooklyn, attention must also be paid to the effect of developers and their impact on industrial spaces. As many lifelong residents of Brooklyn worked within the industrial sector of the borough, the departure of those unable to afford to stay in their homes resulted in mass closures along the riverbanks.<sup>63</sup> Once the cycle of gentrification is introduced, it becomes almost

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<sup>61</sup> “Change or Die’? Gentrification in Brooklyn,” Humanity in Action.

<sup>62</sup> George Levrier-Jones, “Gentrification in Recent History: What Happened in Brooklyn?” - History Is Now Magazine, Podcasts, Blog and Books: Modern International and American History,” History is Now Magazine, Podcasts, Blog and Books | Modern International and American history (History is Now Magazine, Podcasts, Blog and Books | Modern International and American history, February 20, 2019), <http://www.historyisnowmagazine.com/blog/2019/2/17/gentrification-in-recent-history-what-happened-in-brooklyn#.YD7K9U6SnIU=>.

<sup>63</sup> George Levrier-Jones, “Gentrification in Recent History: What Happened in Brooklyn?”

inconceivable to imagine that both the societal and physical landscape of the environment will ever return to a resident's perception of what was once normal.

In a final example of how impactful gentrification has been within this particular borough, one must emphasize the similarities between Central Park in Manhattan, and Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Built to rival its cosmopolitan counterpart, Prospect Park was transformed from a center of criminal activity, into a landscaped haven for residents to feel safe and explore. As in many other examples of community revitalization, these positive changes prompted the introduction of new office buildings and restaurants—effectively excluding members of certain societal and financial strata. For those familiar with Central Park, they may have fond memories of the Central Park Zoo, or of visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In seeking to mirror this experience in Brooklyn, one may choose to visit the Prospect Park Zoo, or the Brooklyn Museum of Art, nestled comfortably within the park's borders.

### **C) Street Art Exhibitions of the Past**

As the Brooklyn Museum is situated in an area of Brooklyn that can be tied directly to the impact of revitalization and gentrification, the institution must reconcile two differing aspects of its societal function. Heralded as a world-class museum of contemporary art, this label is indicative of a space intended for those with a worldly interest in high art. This perception stands in direct contrast to Brooklyn's history as a home for minority groups and those who may be of a lower economic echelon. To exist in a space that serves such a diverse population, it is crucial to explore the various ways in which the Brooklyn Museum has referenced the borough's rich associations with street art.

When researching street art exhibitions presented by the Brooklyn Museum, the most prominent example was displayed from June 30, 2006 through September 3, 2006 under the name “Graffiti.”<sup>64</sup> Referencing the ancient origins of graffiti art, the museum then goes on to highlight the illegal origins of the art form, as well as its function as a “subversive public communication.”<sup>65</sup> The museum then goes even further, stating that these creations “have become legitimate— moving away from the street and into private collections and galleries.”<sup>66</sup> This insinuation that the work produced by street artists only becomes legitimate once placed within museum walls, perpetuates the notion that if placed anywhere else, the work may not be considered art. Additionally, through repeatedly referencing the subversive and illegal nature of street art through their official exhibition description, the museum reinforces negative connotations visitors may already associate with the art form.

Interestingly, this exhibition also highlighted the fact that the artists on display only gained critical attention once they “began to paint on canvas or large sheets of paper.”<sup>67</sup> As a result, the pieces shown in this exhibition are solely two-dimensional creations, as it can be assumed that street artists were still finding their footing within the institutional structure— and had not yet ventured into other mediums, such as sculpture. While it can be presumed that the negative undertones associated with the exhibition description can be attributed to its controversial nature in the early 2000s, it is imperative to note the museum’s apparent stance on the works at the time. Also, important to note, is the fact that this exhibition was only made possible through a donation made by Carroll and Conrad Janis, the sons of Sidney Janis.

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<sup>64</sup> “Graffiti,” Brooklyn Museum: Graffiti, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/graffiti/>.

<sup>65</sup> “Graffiti,” Brooklyn Museum: Graffiti.

<sup>66</sup> “Graffiti,” Brooklyn Museum: Graffiti.

<sup>67</sup> “Graffiti,” Brooklyn Museum: Graffiti.

With the goal of securing a global market for street artists and their work, Sidney Janis had directed his passions into creating the 1982 exhibition titled “An Expressionist Image”<sup>68</sup> within his own gallery space. This extremely successful exhibition featured the work of artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat as their fame continued to flourish. Following “An Expressionist Image,” Janis then went on to curate an exhibition entitled “Post Graffiti,” which travelled to many international galleries.<sup>69</sup> Upon his death in 1999, Sidney Janis’ sons donated a portion of this street art collection to the Brooklyn Museum, in the hopes that it would continue its diffusion into contemporary institutions and the interests of their audiences.

As the years have progressed, and 2006 falls further into the past, the Brooklyn Museum appears to only have one other notable street art exhibit in their repertoire. In 2019, the museum hosted “JR: Chronicles,”<sup>70</sup> featuring the work of the exhibition namesake, JR. As a muralist, photographer, and filmmaker,<sup>71</sup> this artist’s work is known for consisting of large-scale projects that focus on issues such as “immigration, women’s rights, and gun control.”<sup>72</sup> Through maintaining a mysterious air, in addition to his socially and politically charged art, JR’s work could easily fall into the same category as his anonymous colleague, Banksy.

Occupying 20,000 square feet of the Brooklyn Museum’s Great Hall,<sup>73</sup> “JR: Chronicles” stands in stark contrast to its “Graffiti” predecessor. Rather than an exhibition of multiple artists’ work, this most recent example is a solo showing, resulting in the “largest North American

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<sup>68</sup> “Graffiti,” Brooklyn Museum: Graffiti.

<sup>69</sup> “Graffiti,” Brooklyn Museum: Graffiti.

<sup>70</sup> “Brooklyn Museum Debuts Massive Exhibition from Mysterious Artist JR,” Brooklyn Eagle, October 4, 2019, <https://brooklyneagle.com/articles/2019/10/04/brooklyn-museum-debuts-massive-exhibition-from-mysterious-artist-jr/>.

<sup>71</sup> “Brooklyn Museum Debuts Massive Exhibition from Mysterious Artist JR,” Brooklyn Eagle.

<sup>72</sup> “Brooklyn Museum Debuts Massive Exhibition from Mysterious Artist JR,” Brooklyn Eagle.

<sup>73</sup> “Brooklyn Museum Debuts Massive Exhibition from Mysterious Artist JR,” Brooklyn Eagle.

exhibition for the artist to date.”<sup>74</sup> The exhibition demonstrates that the Brooklyn Museum now recognizes the greater legitimacy of the work of JR as they proudly promote a momentous exhibition, rather than the cautious and seemingly judgmental approach to graffiti art seen in 2006. Additionally, this institutional embrace of street art may also serve to represent a widespread acceptance of graffiti art in museums and art markets, internationally.

In terms of the work that was displayed, JR’s *Chronicles of New York City* mural showcased photographs of over one-thousand city residents whom the artist had also interviewed and audio-recorded<sup>75</sup> (Figure 13). This work functioned as the ideal centerpiece for JR’s work as it served to showcase his ability to capture the image of a variety of individuals and showcase their likeness through his street art. In sharing images of “everyday people,”<sup>76</sup> JR serves to represent members of society that may otherwise be overlooked. Additionally, when describing the exhibition, the museum only referred to the potential illegality of the street artist’s methods once, and only within the context of the work being focused on collaboration and community engagement.

In partnering with JR, the Brooklyn Museum chose to support the work of a street artist committed to acknowledging those who may feel unseen in a city full of diverse personalities. While there is a large chronological gap between the two most prominent street art exhibitions within the institution, it would appear that a shift took place within the thirteen years. This shift could be attributed to the growing popularity of street art more broadly, from a general

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<sup>74</sup> “Brooklyn Museum Debuts Massive Exhibition from Mysterious Artist JR,” Brooklyn Eagle.

<sup>75</sup> “JR: Chronicles,” Brooklyn Museum: JR: Chronicles, accessed March 4, 2021, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/jr\\_chronicles](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/jr_chronicles).

<sup>76</sup> “JR: Chronicles,” Brooklyn Museum

perspective, or it could be the result of the Brooklyn Museum's desire to connect more deeply with its surrounding community.

## VII. Case Study: KAWS: WHAT PARTY

Upon entering the Brooklyn Museum, with the knowledge of the borough's past relationship with its inhabitants, it was a pleasant encounter to find that the lobby of the museum functions as a community center, including ticketholders and non-ticketholders alike. With time to spare before my reserved time to visit the exhibition, I spent a few minutes exploring the brick arches and meandering hallways of the museum, as other visitors shared in my experience. While this moment of observation was based upon immersing myself in the activities of the Brooklyn Museum and its local visitors, it was quickly interrupted by a towering wooden iteration of two *Companion* figures leaning against each other for support, to the right of the Admissions Desk (Figure 14).

With my 11:15am reservation, quickly approaching, I attempted to find my way to the nearest elevator but was quickly thwarted by my own lack of familiarity with the museum, and I ended up in the first-floor gallery containing J.R.'s *Chronicles of New York City* (See Figure 13). Although I am not a native of New York City, there was a palpable sense of community and interconnectedness felt within the space, and I carried this with me as a security guide directed me to the nearest elevator.

As the museum did not open until 11am, my 11:15am reservation meant that the ropes guiding visitors to the KAWS: WHAT PARTY exhibition did not yet need to contain many people. In approaching the desk to have my ticket scanned, I could see a soft pink glow emanating from the next room—which I would soon be entering. With my ticket scanned, and the pink hue becoming brighter as I advanced, I was first exposed to a line of screens flashing various images

from throughout KAWS' career, with a distinct focus on his earlier works of street art, supplemented by original sketches (Figure 15). As the screens neared the main entrance to the exhibition itself, images of *Companion* began to intermix, serving as a representation of the evolution of the artist's foundation. With images of bubble letters amidst urban landscapes and *Companion* figures of various sizes and colorings, the pink room awaited.

Stepping into the pink room, one is greeted by a towering figure of KAWS' newest creation *WHAT PARTY*, standing on a platform in front of the words KAWS: WHAT PARTY printed in large block letters on the farthest wall (Figure 16). Although the new character being introduced does not resemble *Companion* in terms of any specific shape, the pathway to the pink room alone reinforced the recognizable characteristics of the original idea, in such a way that their application to anything else would instantly evoke a sense of familiarity. This is a very important point to note, as even with the introduction of a new character, the involvement of *Companion* plays a vital role in representing the artist's identity and brand, to the point where it is necessary in embedding a new cast member within the public consciousness. Although *Companion* is not the namesake of the KAWS: WHAT PARTY exhibition, its very existence is needed as a representation of who and what audiences are coming to see.

Following an obligatory photograph with *WHAT PARTY* at the exhibition entrance, I was then directed into the next room on the left, where a retrospective of KAWS' work was displayed in multiple formats. Lining the walls were images of the artist's most recognizable two-dimensional works, including a sperm with *Companion*-like features winding its way around the work of Keith Haring (Figure 17). Such an image may seem shocking, or possibly even campy, to the casual observer, but this piece stands as the artist's recognition of those who came before him—and those whose popularity easily prepared them to be forcefully collaborated with. In

addition to the play on the work of Keith Haring, was a large-scale painting of *The Kimpsons* as KAWS so dutifully applied *Companion's* features to the likeness of the already cartooned family (Figure 18). Once a possible risk of copyright infringement, this painting now stands as a testament to KAWS' willingness to play with icons of popular culture, and somehow involve himself in both their past and their future. With a multitude of paintings hung on the wall, two-dimensional work could also be found in glass cases set against, and within, various display cases. In using the example of a palm-sized *Companion* miniature, standing behind glass, the accompanying sketch was displayed behind it, showcasing KAWS' artistic process from the point of two-dimensional inception (Figure 19).

In addition to the artist's most well-known flat works, there was also an entire section dedicated to the earliest portion of KAWS' career, as the earliest versions of his aesthetic-based identity marker were clearly shown. These examples included photographs of his graffiti work in the external environment, as well as particular pages of sketchbooks, allowing for a very personal connection to be formed with the artist in his existence as KAWS (Figure 20). To look at the sketchbook works, one feels as though they are being allowed an intimate look into the life of an individual, as this physical connection cannot be duplicated in the online world.

While the aforementioned examples of KAWS's two-dimensional work may appear to be limited, this was simply not the case, as the retrospective ensured that the walls remained regularly covered, with both early works, such as a multi-panel installation of Snoopy with *Companion's* features—and text (Figure 21). It is imperative to note that while this piece directly references the likeness of Snoopy, the deconstructed features of *Companion* applied to the character serve as a direct link to the recognizability of KAWS' work. Although the pieces did not have lengthy label copy to accompany them, there were six panels of large-scale text intended to



inform the audience of KAWS' career evolution as they progressed deeper into the exhibition (Figure 22). As six panels were scattered throughout five rooms, it can be assumed that the visitor is meant to either bring with them some form of familiarity with the artist's public identity—or that the works will speak for themselves in a manner consistent with KAWS' intention for his work to be easily understood by the masses.

As the white walls covered in various iconic creations by the artist would be a case study in their own right, they also served to supplement the human-sized three-dimensional statues as they lined the walls and obscured the walking paths of the exhibition (Figure 23, 24, 25). Each unassuming white platform jutting out from a wall, be it temporary or permanent, was privileged with the task of supporting various iterations of *Companion*, as well as those of other well-known American characters, altered by *Companion's* distinguishing features. These sculptures matched, and continued, the legacy of KAWS' work as the bodies were seen to be either sleek and shiny, matte and rounded, or any other combination of these aesthetics. While criticism exists that KAWS' work is not necessarily technically advanced, the work he does produce is free of flaws as evidenced by the large, smooth clear surfaces visitors can so freely approach.

When speaking to the importance of these three-dimensional figures, it is crucial to note the role they were seeming to play in the visitor experience. At any given point throughout the exhibition, one could look around to see a multitude of people posing for the perfect photograph to be posted to their social media accounts. Once the picture was posted, it would then most likely be tagged with KAWS' own online handle in the hopes that he would notice it—and even share it to his followers. As this was the second weekend of the exhibition, the artist had set this social media precedent from the very first day, as he consistently shared visitor posts of well-wishes and acclaim for his work. An important distinction to note, however, is the fact that KAWS has been

shown to mainly share the photographs of those with a high follower count, or even celebrities, while the Brooklyn Museum shares posts of community members and the average visitor.

Still within this first room, yet another display is set behind the confines of a seemingly temporary wall as it bisects the center of the space. This glass-covered display is home to examples of brand collaborations with everyone from Travis Scott to the MTV Video Music Awards, to Comme de Garçons' wallets depicting the features of *Companion* (Figures 26, 27). This was a point of particular interest, as the collaborations were simply lined up next to each other, as some were supplemented by sketches of the artist's earliest ideas. There was no forced sense of grandeur, as Star Wars collectibles were set directly on the surface, next to Van's sneakers sitting gently upon their original cardboard box (Figure 28). To display pieces of varying type and price point within the same case, serves to further the sense that KAWS is involved wherever he can be, and no lines can truly be drawn between where he begins, and where he ends.

Upon passing a mass of stuffed animals in the likeness of Elmo, with the features of *Companion*, in addition to a couch made of the same materials, one must traverse a path of additional large-scale figures to reach the next room (Figure 29). This room contained little more than a bench in the center, with an Elmo based painting on one wall, and a three-dimensional sperm wrapped around a yellow figure—an updated version of the aforementioned Keith Haring collaboration (Figures 30, 31). Serving as a place to take a rest, and most importantly to take a picture, it is then time to move into the third room.

This colorful room is almost as strikingly bare as the room before, although one must take a moment to fully embrace the abstract paintings on the wall, in addition to the extremely vibrant multi-panel ode to *Companion* on the opposite wall (Figures 32, 33). Sitting in the very middle of the floor of this third room is a massive *Companion* figure, sitting atop a round white platform,

with its legs crossed, and head in its hands (Figure 34). While there exists a striking contrast between the bright works upon the walls and the white and gray figure in the center of the space, there is a strong sense of cohesion. The colorful abstract works connect to the panel opposite them, while the panel links directly to *Companion* in the middle of the room—as everything seems to lead back to the singular character. Upon taking a multitude of photographs with the hung works, in addition to multiple cleverly posed images with the figure on the floor, one could almost miss the entrance to the small adjacent room that follows.

The next room is the first since the bright pink entrance to be painted a different color than white, and yet this one is different. It is a very small space with a singular painting hung on the dark blue wall, depicting *Companion* as the character appears to attempt to keep its head above water, as its gloved hands are shown floating on the surface (Figure 35). To enter this room, one feels a shift in energy, perhaps even a change in emotion, and the visitor is left in limbo while walking back through previous rooms to visit the remaining space on the other side of the entrance.

Emerging from the pink room once again, although this time to the right, the visitor is sent through a gallery of additional abstract paintings, filled with splashes of bright color and pattern, and yet seemingly still indicative of KAWS' aesthetic and work with shapes (Figure 36). This gallery leads directly to a large room filled with wooden variations of *Companion* in multiple poses and forms, surrounding the center of the space (Figures 37, 38, 39). These wooden pieces are reminiscent of the massive figure in the museum's lobby and offer a very different power to the exhibit. While the bright colors, and matte or shining finishes have always maintained an unnatural manufactured essence, these wooden versions evoke a new sense of unfamiliarity, as *Companion* is seen in a different finish—a natural finish. Making these wooden variations more

special, is the fact that their first introduction was during Art Basel in 2018, intimating a level of material quality previously unseen before that point, and now brought into the museum space. This dissonance is further enhanced by the traditional *Companion* figures in various positions atop a round white platform in the center of the room (Figures 40, 41, 42). While these characters were approximately the size of a small child, they appear especially small as other pieces in the room are larger. Adding to the variance in size and medium, are the screens depicting video of KAWS' work as *KAWS: Holiday*<sup>77</sup> is shown being prepared to float from its point of departure in Hong Kong, in 2019 (Figure 42). The moving images, accompanied by *Companion* in different sizes, shapes, and materials, creates a complex relationship in terms of the viewer's relationship with the character at the conclusion of the exhibition. At its very core, this rooms allows the audience to create a connection with *Companion*, through any means possible, whether it be based on shape, material, finish, or even the emotion evoked by a certain position.

Having reached the end of the exhibition space, there is one destination left, where, unfortunately, photographs are not allowed. From the final room, the visitor is led to the gift shop, which is preceded by barriers and velvet rope, in preparation for a busier time. Being allowed in immediately, one could see that a great deal of items for sale had already sold out, based upon half-empty poster bins and the wide spacing between goods on tables. Of the most sought-after souvenirs, the two-hundred dollar *WHAT PARTY* miniature were sold out, as were all t-shirts in every size, as well as certain posters and canvas bag designs. Observing the goods still remaining, there was a multitude of pins and magnets, depicting both *Companion* and *WHAT PARTY*, in addition to bags featuring only the former. There were also postcard sets, as well as large posters

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<sup>77</sup> "6 Things You Need to Know about 'Kaws:Holiday' in Hong Kong," South China Morning Post, March 20, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/news-trends/article/3002437/6-things-you-need-know-about-kawsholiday-moving-art>.

of the massive wooden installation from the lobby, and also of a singular figure of the exhibition's namesake standing in the center of the frame.

What has become most interesting since leaving the exhibition, is the fact that all of the goods within the gift shop are marked with both KAWS' name, as well as that of the Brooklyn Museum. While this may be typical for other artists and their work with supporting institutions, the involvement of KAWS calls into question whether or not this is simply yet another brand collaboration. Such a partnership lends artistic credence to the creator's legacy, while the museum becomes saturated with followers and intrigued audiences alike. Upon leaving the exhibition, and concluding my observations, I decided to quickly ask when the Brooklyn Museum x KAWS t-shirts would be back in stock and was told to check Instagram often for replenishment updates.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

Having had the privilege to visit the KAWS: WHAT PARTY exhibition, it has become extremely clear that the Brooklyn Museum served KAWS in functioning as yet another platform in establishing his artistic identity and associated brand recognition.

As KAWS began his street art in the 1990s amidst the built environment, he laid the foundations for his current identity as soon as he placed the letters K-A-W-S next to each other on a piece of paper. For many street artists, the establishment of a tag, or name, is enough to cement their subversive career, and yet, Brian Donnelly chose to continue pushing forward, utilizing as many available resources as possible. While the early 1990s did not find many people using the internet for personal use, KAWS manipulated the resource to the full extent of its capabilities through each stage of its evolution. By the late 1990s, personal use of the Internet had increased, with KAWS' art simply waiting to be discovered. In recognizing what would one day become a global phenomenon, and part of everyday modern life, the artist created what would become a

central part of his contemporary identity and means of acquiring his work. To view an artist's work online is enjoyable, but to interact with that same artist in real time is a contemporary privilege.

The importance of social media must be highlighted once again when evaluating the impact of a repeated use of *Companion* throughout KAWS' body of work. Such repetition may appear uninspired to some—and yet it is being used in this context to breed instant familiarity with KAWS across all variations of his work, whether it be solo or collaborative. Additionally, the deconstruction of *Companion* into the character's most recognizable features is a fascinating branding strategy as these features can be placed onto any known cultural figure—and still be traced back to KAWS.

Brand collaborations between KAWS and a compliant, or possibly not, partner function successfully, from an identification standpoint, in conjunction with the emergence of social media and *Companion's* undeniable recognizability. No matter the brand, any application of KAWS' aesthetic will immediately provoke recognition among those familiar, while also reaching new audiences who have not seen his work before.

In bringing the work of KAWS to the Brooklyn Museum, the influence of social media, a repeated use of *Companion*, and the impact of brand collaborations served to reinforce the artist's identity through recognition of his brand. For any visitor to the exhibition, the allure of taking photographs for social media is almost too overpowering to bear, and one quickly falls victim to the concept of an Instagram trap. These photographs are then posted online, with all of the necessary tags, and create a discourse between the account owner and other members of the artist's following. The only thing greater than acquiring more followers would be if KAWS, himself, reacted to the images—or shared them to his personal account.

In fostering an environment where KAWS could display the most recognizable aspects of his career, the Brooklyn Museum more closely resembles a venue for the exploits of the artist, rather than a cultural institution in control of traditional artistic behaviors. Through advertising so heavily for the exhibition on social media, the museum became a participant in KAWS' identification strategy, and became yet another collaborator within the artist's brand. While it must be acknowledged that museums exert a considerable amount of time, money, and effort on public exhibitions, the many facets of KAWS' support draw intrigue as to how much the Brooklyn Museum was truly responsible for. Throughout his Instagram page, KAWS is seen aiding in the installation and design of his exhibition, while Dior is frequently mentioned as the exhibit sponsor—highlighting both implied high quality and celebrity associations. Overall, the KAWS: WHAT PARTY exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum can be seen as a platform for the concentrated amalgamation of the artist's most consistent strategies, in establishing both his public identity and brand recognition. If any of the highlighted identification and branding tactics, including the influence of social media, repeated use of *Companion*, and emphasis on brand collaborations, were missing from the exhibition, one may think the Brooklyn Museum had missed the mark—yet the successful implementation of these strategies means that KAWS once again takes center stage.

IX. Appendix



**Figure 1:** *Untitled*, KAWS, 1994



**Figure 2:** *Captain Morgan*, KAWS, 1995





**Figure 3:** *Companion*, KAWS, 1999



**Figure 4:** *The World of the Sphere*, Takashi Murakami, 2003



**Figure 5:** *KAWS: Holiday*, KAWS, 2019



**Figure 6:** KAWS Re-Installing a Stolen Advertisement from Paris in NYC, 1999



**Figure 7:** BTS member J-Hope holding a KAWS figure



**Figure 8:** Varying versions of KAWS' *Companion*



**Figure 9:** Current homepage of KAWS' original website, OriginalFake



**Figure 10:** Current homepage of KAWS' website, KAWS ONE





**Figure 11:** Exhibit Curator Eugenie Tsai's Instagram post with KAWS, showcasing the two in the exhibit space during the Preview Event



**Figure 12:** Brooklyn Museum Instagram post highlighting KAWS' background as a street artist, with a quote by the artist



**Figure 13:** JR's *Chronicles of New York City* at the Brooklyn Museum



**Figure 14:** Wooden *Companion* figure in the Brooklyn Museum lobby





**Figure 15:** Original sketches by KAWS from the 1990's



**Figure 16:** Pink entrance room to the KAWS: WHAT PARTY exhibit



**Figure 17:** KAWS' "forceful collaboration" with Keith Haring work



**Figure 18:** One version of KAWS' *Kimpsons*

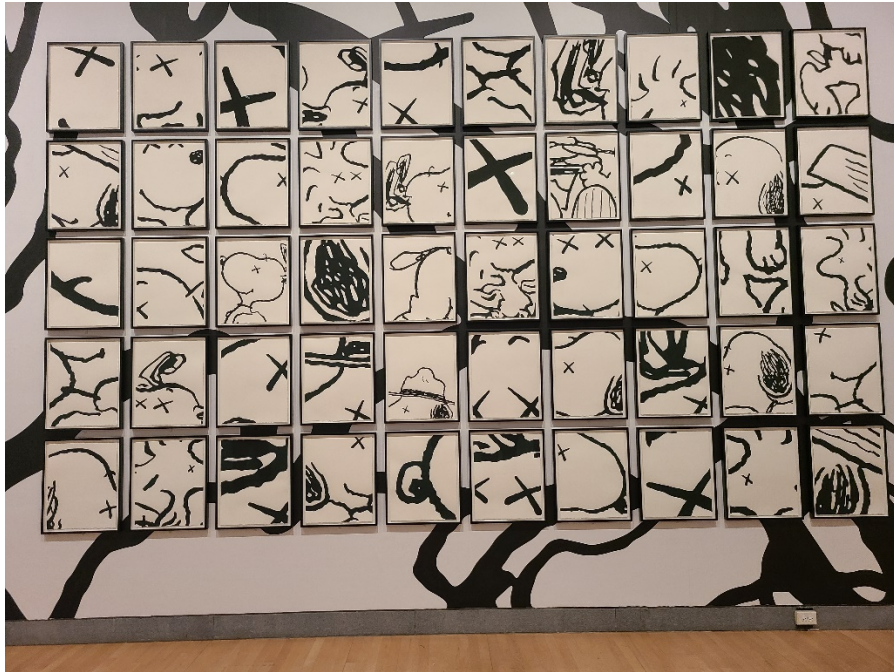




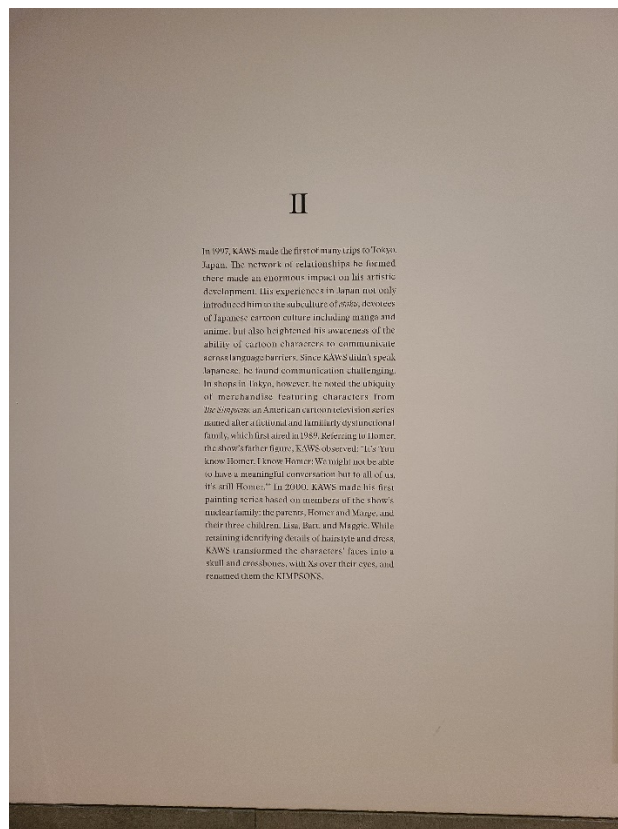
**Figure 19:** KAWS' sketches behind completed three-dimensional works



**Figure 20:** Collection of early KAWS sketches and accompanying sketchbooks



**Figure 21:** Tiles on wall depicting Snoopy mixed with *Companion* features



**Figure 22:** Example of one of six text panels along exhibit walls



**Figure 23:** Large- scale *Companion- Flayed*



**Figure 24:** Large-scale *Companion- Gone*





**Figure 25:** Large-scale *WHAT PARTY* figures



**Figure 26:** Example of KAWS collaborations- Comme des Garçons, Travis Scott



**Figure 27:** Example of KAWS collaborations- MTV Video Music Award, KAWS x SD eyewear



**Figure 28:** Examples of KAWS collaborations- Van's sneakers, Star War figures



**Figure 29:** KAWS stuffed animal couch



**Figure 30:** Elmo bursting out of *Companion*





**Figure 31:** Three- dimensional figure reminiscent of Keith Haring collaboration



**Figure 32:** KAWS abstract painting



**Figure 33:** Tile wall installation depicting *Companion* features



**Figure 34:** *Companion* in center of gallery space





**Figure 35:** KAWS painting, *Tide*



**Figure 36:** Exhibit gallery of abstract paintings



**Figure 37:** *Wooden Companion*, seated



**Figure 38:** *Wooden Companion*, slouching



**Figure 39:** *Wooden Companion*, arms raised



**Figure 40:** *Companion* holding smaller iteration on platform



**Figure 41:** *Companion*, sitting up on platform



**Figure 42:** Smaller *Companion* figures on round platform, surrounded by wooden iterations



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