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WR 222

Professor Snyder

7 May 2017

Shouldn’t Graffiti be Considered Art?

Graffiti and art traditionally inhabit two separate worlds. Art is legal, graffiti is illegal. Art is beautiful, graffiti is ugly. Art is meaningful, graffiti is superficial. Though we can place them in separate boxes, maybe they have more in common than we think. When I was in high school there were some students that drew bits of graffiti all over one of the installations the art students created. The art teacher, instead of just discouraging them from creating graffiti, treated them like artists- leaving them a note critiquing their work not because it was against the rules, but because their taste for composition was terrible. This sort of attitude- considering graffiti as art- would really benefit the art community by broadening the view of what art can really be.

Graffiti can definitely look beautiful. Artists like Banksy and Jean-Michel Basquiat have created works of graffiti that are famous and meaningful in their content and execution. These pieces can be worth a lot of money and generally people respect them. Then why are other works of graffiti considered worthless vandalism? It can’t be because they’re ugly. Basquiat’s works are a great example that technical ability and aesthetic aren’t the only things artists can be appreciated for. It could be argued that some modern and established artists actually have less skill and aesthetic ability than some graffiti artists, since graffiti artists are frequently sought out by companies to create art for them as advertising for their products (Radiolab). Art is intensely subjective, and considering it vandalism until it looks “beautiful” and then turning 180 degrees and considering it a valuable piece of social commentary is an unfortunate circumstance of how we treat graffiti.

Not only that, some people are inspired by the graffiti style and just think it’s cool. If it can inspire artists, why shouldn’t it be considered art? To really understand what graffiti can be, maybe it is best to examine what art is first. Wikipedia defines art as a “diverse range of human activities in creating visual, auditory or performing artifacts (artworks), expressing the author's imaginative or technical skill, intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power”. This description can describe graffiti as well as any painting or illustration. They can be visual pieces expressing the artists’ and writers’ skill level- for examples of graffiti that require incredible amounts of planning and effort, look up wildstyle graffiti. No matter where it’s created, wildstyle is known to draw the eye with bright colors and powerful linework. It can even be used to beautify neighborhoods and create tourist attractions in run-down neighborhoods (Olivero). However, there are several forms of graffiti besides wildstyle. What most people worry about when they think of graffiti are the tags: a stylized signature of the graffiti writer's name.

Tags are generally considered ugly, lazy, and for leaving your name in as many places as possible. Tags aren’t like Banksys and Basquiats. They aren’t meaningful, they have no social commentary. What do they have to say except “look at me”? Maybe that’s all they need to say.

When Spanish painter Pablo Picasso developed the style of cubism, he didn’t do it because he wanted to create something deep and meaningful. He certainly didn’t do it because it looked good. Everyone who looked at one of his first Cubist pieces, “Les Demoiselles d'Avignon”, said it looked awful (Sister Wendy). So he didn’t create cubism to be pretty. He just wanted to be famous and stand out. According to Russell Jones, the reason why graffiti writers make so many tags is because they want to “get up”, meaning to create a reputation and fame for themselves through writing graffiti. Jones argues that because the only reason graffiti writers create tags is to get famous, they can’t really be art. But consider why “real artists” make art.

Besides looking good, the idea of getting noticed and appreciated for creating art is an important factor as well. Even commissioned works, which are sometimes done purely for money instead of passion, can be considered art. In these cases, the pieces that were made cannot always be associated with creativity or self-expression. The whole genre of art nouveau was essentially made from posters and advertisements. Alphonse Mucha, who was best known for his art nouveau style, made a large majority of his pieces as ads. Are they not considered art because they were created to sell something instead of inspire others? If art was invalidated as soon as it became a product of “getting up”, most of these pieces would be gone.

If tags are treated differently because they’re “just words”, consider calligraphy. Both are types of writing that look pretty and most people would need to develop skills and practice to do well. That’s considered art as defined by Wikipedia. Graffiti fonts are well known and emulated by artists. So are calligraphy fonts. Neither need to contain any graphics or images. Plenty of calligraphy artists can’t draw outside of lettering. Tons of Instagram posts of calligraphy are made for views rather than because the writer is really passionate about what they’re putting down on paper. Graffiti writers can be described in nearly the same way- just change the location of where the art is made. But calligraphy is still considered a type of art, and tags generally aren’t.

So maybe graffiti is put in a bad spot because of where it’s located. There is also an undeniably strong social and economic divide between artists in galleries and graffiti writers in worn down neighborhoods (Radiolab). The price of a nice canvas can be daunting for those who struggle economically. If we could look past where graffiti is placed and more about the hard work and creativity that goes into it, then maybe graffiti artists would be able to find a more legitimate place in the art world.

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