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Graffiti is Hardly Art

We have all seen news articles praising it. Art exhibits and museums open shows with themes based on it. Young people imitate it. However, no matter how pretty or meaningful it may be, graffiti is always vandalism and should not be encouraged.

By definition, graffiti is “unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. The defining quality of graffiti itself is that it is made without permission. If it is illegal, then why is the art community allowing it to continue and encouraging the creation of more graffiti? It’s clearly unwanted on public buildings, since it is distracting and usually clashes against the background of a building. A business owner would not want to keep graffiti on their walls, as it looks incredibly unprofessional. Graffiti, and especially “tags”, stand out from the looks of their surroundings in a way that devalues the building being graffitied on as well as the surrounding area.

Graffiti not only affects the building it is displayed on, but also the community around it. The presence of graffiti has been shown to increase the likelihood for other acts of “disorder and incivility” within the area, simply by being seen (Mac Donald 2014). The “broken windows theory” as defined by Adam McKee explains that the sight of graffiti and other small but significantly noticeable crimes brings out a feeling of “disorder”, which in turn can inspire misconduct in others. No matter what the graffiti looks like, the fact that it is illegal and can be the instigator of other crimes should not be ignored.

Of course, talented graffiti artists like Banksy and Jean-Michel Basquiat exist. Their works often portray thought-provoking images and are reproduced and sold as prints and other mass-produced media, similar to famous established art pieces such as Van Gogh’s “Starry Night”. Though art galleries have displayed these more grand and elaborate examples of graffiti and touted its ability to reach the general public by focusing on social themes, the fact remains that another, uglier side of graffiti exists. Tags, which are essentially just made up of the graffiti writer’s name in some stylized print, litter the walls of abandoned buildings and clog up older neighborhoods, leading to a feeling of general disorganization and uncertainty in these areas. Tags are not images and contain nearly no effort compared to artworks done by real artists. And, since they fall under the category of “graffiti” as much as any Banksy piece will, both tags and pieces must be judged and dealt with in the same manner: erasure. The fact is that no art gallery is going to display someone’s name tag, even if it is the signature of someone representing some social movement. They hold no inherent artistic value because any signs of effort, care, or meaning are visibly lacking in tags. These words mean nothing to most people. So, even though some examples of graffiti may have some thought put into them, the fact that tags exist must be accounted for in order to establish what graffiti really is.

We cannot say that some graffiti is allowed, but only “the good kind”. All forms of graffiti, including the ugly and simple, should be considered when defining graffiti and how it should be dealt with. In general, graffiti is a blight on communities and should not be considered a form of art no matter how “inspiring” it may appear.

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