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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 as a society have placed them in separate boxes, it might be time to change this attitude. When I was in high school there were some students that drew bits of graffiti all over one of the installations the art department had 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 use of composition was clearly lacking. This sort of attitude- considering graffiti as art- would not only benefit the art community with a broader range of techniques and ideas, but also the graffiti community by giving graffiti pieces a more legitimate social standing.

Even though the first thought in most people’s minds when they think of graffiti is typically a messy nonsense blend of lines and color, it can definitely be beautiful. Artists like Banksy and Jean-Michel Basquiat have created works of graffiti that are famous and complex in their content and execution. Banksy in particular is known for creating works that resonate with many people, bringing a voice with strong commentary on war, the wage gap, and abuse of corporate power in the western world (Bledsoe). Basquiat’s works are also strong examples of self-expression and abstract aesthetic, which modern artists frequently emulate in their work as well. However, art in general is intensely subjective, and considering it vandalism until it looks “beautiful” is an unfortunate circumstance illustrating how many socially relevant and innovative works can be brushed aside simply because they are made on an illegal medium.

To really understand what graffiti can be, maybe it is best to first examine what art is. 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. For examples of graffiti that require incredible amounts of planning and effort, “wildstyle” is one of the most easily identifiable. No matter where it’s created, wildstyle is known to draw the eye with bright colors and powerful linework. However, there are several forms of graffiti besides wildstyle. What most people worry about when they think of graffiti are the tags: a simple, stylized signature of the graffiti writer's name. Tags aren’t like Banksys and Basquiats. Unlike pieces by these artists, tags aren’t meaningful and in most cases are given little effort. Tags are the type of graffiti that really come to mind when people think of it as illegal.

By definition, graffiti is “unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface” (Merriam-Webster). The single most defining quality of the whole idea of graffiti is that it is made without permission. If it is illegal, then why should the art community encourage it? One of the main arguments made against creating graffiti is that it not only affects the building it is placed 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). Business and home owners have expressed their dislike for graffiti ever since its inception, and they have every right to. The “broken windows theory” as defined by Adam McKee explains that the sight of graffiti and other types of technically harmless but significantly noticeable crimes bring 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.

Tags, which are the most common type of graffiti, litter the walls of abandoned buildings and clog up older neighborhoods. The sight of them leads to a feeling of general disorganization and uncertainty wherever they are placed (Sanchez). And, since they fall under Merriam-Webster’s definition of “graffiti” as much as any Banksy piece will, both tags and pieces are judged and dealt with in the same manner by the public: erasure. The words written in tags mean nothing to most people. So, even though some graffiti may be beautiful examples of social commentary and skill, the fact that tags exist must be accounted for in order to establish what graffiti really is.

Although art galleries have displayed the more elaborate examples of graffiti and touted its ability to connect with the general public, the fact remains that another side of graffiti exists. We cannot say that some graffiti is allowed, but only “the good kind”- to do this would only create another barrier between art and graffiti, not unite them. All forms of graffiti, including the ugly and simple, should be considered when defining graffiti and how it should be dealt with.

And yes, tags are just words written in a stylized print and don’t really stand for anything. However, consider calligraphy. This is also a type of writing that looks pretty and most people would need to practice to do well, which is enough to fit the definition given by Wikipedia. Calligraphy fonts and graffiti fonts alike are well known and emulated by artists, and the use of either requires little skill for creating other types of illustrations. Words written with calligraphy sometimes have no meaning at all, other than to look good. Calligraphy-based accounts on social media such as Instagram are notorious for creating and putting out content for the sake of views rather than any personal passion (Kircher). 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.

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. However, consider the reasons why “real artists” make art. When Spanish painter Pablo Picasso developed the style of cubism, he didn’t do it because he wanted to create something deep and meaningful. According to a BBC documentary featuring art historian Sister Wendy, he certainly didn’t do it because it looked good. Everyone that looked at one of his first Cubist pieces, “Les Demoiselles d'Avignon”, admitted it looked awful. Yet today, cubism has succeeded in its goal to be a distinct and unique form of art that makes it stand out in history, even to someone who has never studied it.

Besides looking good, the idea of getting noticed and appreciated for creating art is important for many artists, Picasso included. 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. Alphonse Mucha, who was best known for working in the style of Art Nouveau, made a large majority of his pieces as ads. By Russell Jones’ definition, these pieces would no longer be considered art due to their focus on gaining attention and selling products. Yet Mucha’s methods of recreating lithographic prints and his unique flowing style have have repeatedly influenced new artists with each revival of Art Nouveau (Wikipedia). By alienating these works, the art community would lose some valuable history and creative techniques that the Art Nouveau style employed. By alienating graffiti, perhaps the art community is now doing the same thing in modern times.

In the end, despite the shared traits between graffiti and art, it’s not a surprise that graffiti is still largely discouraged by the public. At its core, graffiti is illegal. An important part of what defines it is that it is made without permission, and so those who own the property being graffitied on have no reason to ever want to keep it. However, there are some explanations for why graffiti artists have made their canvas such an unconventional and inconvenient one. There is an undeniably strong social and economic divide between artists in high-end galleries and graffiti writers in worn down neighborhoods (Radiolab). The price of a nice canvas can be daunting for those who struggle economically.

Graffiti artists could benefit from the legitimization of their works as “art” because it opens up many avenues for making money from their work. When graffiti is recognized by companies as an appealing modern art style, graffiti artists are sought out to create advertisements for their products (Radiolab). And while graffiti has a reputation for being commonplace, cheap, or generally unsuitable for modern art galleries, this trend is slowly changing (Zimmerman). According to a New York Times article by Lady Pink, a muralist and urban graffiti artist, some galleries already allow street art to be sold alongside traditional art pieces to great success. Where and how graffiti is treated when it is sold may have a stronger influence on its monetary value than what the piece actually looks like. Pieces created by graffiti artists can be sold for “hundreds of thousands of dollars” simply because they are sold in galleries in a similar fashion as traditional art pieces (Heisler). In some cases they can sell for much more. An untitled Basquiat piece sold for $110.5 million, placing it within a list of the top ten artworks that have ever been sold for over $100 million in history (Pogrebin and Reyburn). The piece, consisting of flat bright colors haphazardly applied to the background with a messy abstract skull just slightly off center in the foreground, has been sold for almost twice as much as famous paintings by Picasso and van Gogh. If this is the case, then why are other works of graffiti considered worthless vandalism?

Graffiti has been used to beautify neighborhoods and create tourist attractions in run-down neighborhoods. The city of Rio de Janeiro benefitted from graffiti by treating it as a type of mural, even going so far as announcing “the legalization of graffiti on city property that is not historical”, an idea that is far from even being considered in most American cities (Olivero). This way, young artists are able to make a career out of the pieces they create. Intricate works of graffiti that find a connection with people in these urban environments become crime deterrents rather than instigators. New ways to create graffiti without harming businesses and homes have also begun to pop up as the style achieves a wider appeal with audiences. “Reverse graffiti”, which is done by cleaning away specific parts of areas to create an image rather than putting paint down, is becoming popular as a non-invasive way to leave graffiti in an area, especially with advertisers (Brenhouse). Even if graffiti is never legalized outside of Brazil, the same illegality of graffiti which restricts its creation also inspires artists to think outside the box and invent new techniques for creating art.

If we could look past where graffiti is placed and more about the hard work and creativity that goes into it, then graffiti artists would be able to find a more legitimate place in the art world. In turn, the art world would benefit from the broadened scope of opportunities and insight that the graffiti community has to offer.

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