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Graffiti: Art or Vandalism

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A name or image spray-painted on a wall can elicit smiles, stares, or scowls. Some believe that graffiti is art, some find it fascinating, and some see it as a nuisance. In truth, graffiti is all of these things: a form of creative expression, an intriguing part of urban (and even suburban) environments, and a product of vandalism. Graffiti ranges from crudely spray-painted words or images to stylized name tagging and complicated stencils fashioned on whatever surface is available. Generally, the more visible the canvas, the better; subway trains, freight cars, and blank walls are the most popular. There are three major types of graffiti: gang, hip-hop, and political. (Another form is popular graffiti, which generally takes the form of insulting or lewd

messages written on restroom walls.)

Gang and political graffiti focus primarily on communication of power and opinion, respectively. Hip-hop graffiti is more “artistic,” emphasizing skill and technique. The creators of graffiti, called “writers,” have a variety of motivations, all of which produce forms of self-expression. However, because of its appearance on public and private property, graffiti is vandalism. For many people, it represents gang culture and criminal activity, eliciting a sense of unease.

A conflict of interest arises between

individual graffiti writers and the community at large, parallel to the clash of rights and restrictions. Writers are guaranteed the right to freedom of expression, but the products of this expression both break local laws and offend the members of the community in which they are created.

By definition graffiti is a drawing or inscription on wall or other public surface (“Graffito”). Originating on cave walls as a form of communication (Edgar), graffiti has evolved into what might be called an art form. According to Janice Rahn’s *Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture*, hip-hop graffiti as we know it today existed in the form of names scrawled on subway trains and public property in the 1960s. It became more prevalent in the 1970s as a part of the hip hop music movement in inner-city areas, particularly in New York City’s South Bronx (2). By the 1980s, graffiti was accepted into the art world, with its renegade spirit and innovative forms. Artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring took street art to the gal-

leries and were able to build successful careers (Gablick 106-109). Hip-hop graffiti can be considered an art form in itself, as it is a form of self-expression and creativity.

The most elementary form in graffiti, a tag, is a sort of stylized signature usually scribbled quickly to signify the writer's presence (Edgar). Taggers generally use markers, preferring to make their own or buy those that can be modified (Rahn 10). A tagger can develop his or her style and become a "writer," moving to larger, multicolored, and more complicated works called "pieces," which are spray painted on walls or trains. "Throw-ups" are also a popular form, involving only lettering and a few colors; the aim is to "throw it up" as fast as possible. Most graffitiists, especially in hip-hop culture, do not advocate the use of any tools except for specialty caps, which create better spray patterns than the nozzle that comes on a spray can. Nevertheless, some artists have expanded their repertoire to include complex stencils and mural-like paintings. No matter what the technique, a writer's goal is to create something that is highly visible.

Graffiti is meant to be seen. Hundreds of people will pass a wall while walking the streets in just one day. Thousands use the subway system, and a tag or piece painted on the side of a freight train car has the potential to reach a whole country. Like art or advertising, there is an emphasis on sharing. Unlike advertising, graffiti does not aim to please, but rather to be very public. The writer who takes the biggest risk to tag a prime location is afforded the most respect from his or her graffiti colleagues. While some writers and gangs put most of their energy into tagging every possible surface to claim territory, others focus more on perfecting technique and developing skill.

For example, hip-hop graffitiists have developed what is known as "wildstyle," a complex system of lettering that is nearly impossible for a non-graffitist to read. It involves three dimensional, overlapping and intertwining letters, often enhanced by arrows and other details. Wildstyle is completely freehand and requires a high level of skill; it is used primarily for impressing fellow writers. Like some artists, graffitiists sometimes keep "black books," small notebooks for sketching ideas and recording autographs: the tags of fellow writers. When creating large pieces, graffiti artists may enlarge sketches, creating a wall-sized, spray-painted work from a pen drawing without the use of grids or measurements.

Such a grand scale sometimes requires the writer to work in layers, putting up rough outlines and returning later to fill in colors. The most attractive and interesting pieces are those that contain a variety of expertly blended colors, complicated forms, and three-dimensional effects. All of these effects are achieved with nothing but the writer's expert handling of a mere aerosol spray can.¹

Each graffiti writer has his or her own unique motivation. Political graffitiists deface billboards or write on walls in order to verbally attack the institutions of society that they disagree with or find offensive; ultimately, the goal is to express one's opinion. Generally, gang members write to claim "turf" or attack other gangs. Hip-hop writers aim to hone their talents and gain respect. Gang and hip-hop writers seem to be motivated by a desire to belong to a group. Gangs band together for protection and power; hip-hop writers make a creative community in which to compete and learn. Some members of this community believe strongly in the notion that they are beautifying an otherwise drab and uninviting environment. Montreal writer DSTRBO says, "People find graffiti offensive, but I find concrete gray buildings offensive, like we're living in a world where the people with the least amount of imagination make the rules" (Rahn 41). Not surprisingly, these are the same type of graffitiists who may be hired to paint murals.

The underlying motivation for all graffiti, however, is self-expression, the exercise of the right to free speech. Due to its visual format, graffiti becomes a tangible manifestation of character. In 1984, a group of visiting European hotel managers took a tour of New York City and rode on a freshly cleaned subway train. *The New York Times* reported that several of the visitors were disappointed to "not have something that's part of the local color" (qtd. in Austin 3). One mentioned that his country had "graffiti on [its] monuments in Rome and we don't whitewash them when Americans come over" (qtd. in Austin 3). University of Delaware student Pamela Townsend agrees with this sentiment, calling graffiti an intriguing and perfectly acceptable feature of her environment (Townsend).

Advertisers frequently cash in on the popularity of the graffiti movement, targeting those consumers who

¹ The background information in this and the previous two paragraphs appears in multiple sources from the bibliography. For in depth coverage, see especially Phillips and Rahn.

find graffiti interesting. Some use the graffiti style for the “cool” factor, implying that a product has some sort of street credibility. Companies have also been known to hire writers to spray paint ads. The British clothing line Box fresh picked up the style of London sticker graffiti-ist Solo One and eventually signed a deal that allowed it to print stickers that included Solo One’s tag (Alvelos 187). Successful campaigns have also been executed for the advertisement of album releases, plays, films, and even Calvin Klein perfume (Alvelos 184). For example, in 1997, a stenciled silhouette appeared on the walls of London buildings. Several weeks later, the same silhouette was found on fly-posters as promotional art for a Robert Miles single. Consumers were familiarized with an image, and then made a connection to a product (Alvelos 182). Both graffiti and the posting of bills (fly-posters) are illegal activities, but law enforcement tends to ignore them while companies reap the financial rewards.

Even writers do not agree on whether graffiti is art or vandalism. The conflict here is not legal, but rather between the individual “artists” and the graffiti community. In addition to those who believe that graffiti is a sort of beautification, there are those writers, most notably Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, who

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have crossed into the legitimate art world, displaying and selling canvas works in galleries. Advertisers have also cashed in on the graffiti style, using it to target an urban demographic and in some cases even hiring writers to paint advertisements. The graffiti aesthetic aims to “instill an aura of ‘cool,’ of ‘street credibility,’ on the advertised product” (Alvelos 184). While some graffitiists see publicity as an opportunity for more people to see their work, purists see the legitimizing of the medium as a sort of blasphemy. They vehemently declare that graffiti is vandalism. The illegality of graffiti is an important

concept, as it represents the original form and, more importantly, affects the outcome of a piece. When working on a wall or subway car, it is essential for writers to execute their ideas quickly and expertly. However, with a canvas made especially for painting and an unlimited amount of time to artfully engineer an image, the artist loses some credibility. These beliefs are also rooted in the notion that gallery art, in particular, consists of “pretty pictures to sell to rich people” (Rahn 176) and “has a lot of negative connotations and it alienates people” (Banksy).

Arguments about semantics aside, creating graffiti is vandalism: the destruction or damaging of property without the consent of the owner. In contrast to advocates, graffiti opponents (a group which includes government officials, “legitimate” artists, and members of the general public) do not believe that self-expression can transcend the law. Furthermore, some feel that graffiti robs people of a sense of safety. Because graffiti is often associated with gangs and other subversive behavior, people find its appearance on subway cars, for instance, to be very disturbing. When a gang claims territory in a certain area, its “violent lifestyle” comes along with the tag (term from Phillips 313). Additionally, the “dissing” (disrespecting, usually by crossing out or writing over) of another gang’s tag can be construed as a threat from which rival gang fights ensue (Phillips 313).

In comparison to more serious crimes such as robbery or homicide, graffiti is a minor offense. However, graffiti can be seen as a gateway to other criminal activities. According to the Broken Windows theory, crime increases in an environment that appears to be neglected by authorities. One broken window on a building encourages people to break more and “create[s] a sense of disorder that attracts criminals, who thrive in conditions of public apathy and neglect” (Montgomery). If graffitiists are allowed to deface whatever property they please, one assumes that they will be allowed to commit acts of violence or theft as well. When public property is kept clean and free of tags and paint, the law enforcement appears to be maintaining a level of control and safety.

Spearheaded by politicians, some cities have launched aggressive anti-graffiti campaigns. In the 1970s, New York City Mayor, John Lindsay, created an Anti-Graffiti Task Force that aimed to stamp out graffiti and included organizations that were affected

by the “plague,” such as the Mass Transit Authority. The Task Force lobbied for better paint removers, more easily removable ink and paint, and resistant coatings for surfaces (Austin 86-7), and by 1973 it was spending \$10 million per year on removal efforts (Austin 91). Lindsay’s successors followed his example, embarking on anti-graffiti crusades themselves. Mayor Rudy Giuliani made the Anti-Graffiti Task Force a permanent establishment in 1995, calling graffiti a “quality of life crime” and citing its tendency to lead to more serious crimes (New York City Investigation Division 1). Incumbent Mayor Michael Bloomberg continues to fight graffiti with the assistance of the Task Force (New York City Investigation Division 3). The city’s current anti-graffiti law, which prohibits individuals younger than 21 from possessing spray-paint and broad-tipped markers, is being challenged by seven artists who believe it encroaches on their right to free speech (Trotta).

A similar law in Wilmington, Delaware, requires parental consent for the sale of spray paint and broad-tipped markers to minors, and a bill is currently being considered to extend the law to all of New Castle County (Basiouny). State law prohibits only the action of creating graffiti, defined as the damaging of “public or private real or personal property without the permission of the owner by knowingly, purposely or recklessly drawing, painting or making any significant mark or inscription thereon” (Graffiti). The punishment for a graffitist includes a fine payable to the state, reparations for the damages caused to the property in question, and community service hours, at least half of which must consist of graffiti clean-up (Graffiti).

Whether a graffitist is motivated by the desire to communicate, assert social position, or simply create a form of art, he or she is practicing self-expression. Yet the proliferation of graffiti causes passersby to feel uneasy and can lead to an increase in illicit behavior. Writers may contribute to the local color of a city, but politicians create a positive image for themselves when they campaign against graffiti; people feel as if their leaders are doing something effective and working for social change. Since graffiti is clearly both an artistic form and an act of vandalism, the problem lies in deciding which interpretation will become “law”; (meaning which is most commonly accepted and acted upon). When graffiti is accepted, there seems to be a double standard

regarding the degree of acceptability of different types of graffiti. The more “pictorial” incarnations of graffiti, such as murals or stencils, seem to be tolerable because they are based on image more than language; words are more threatening than pictures because the message is conveyed clearly, without hiding behind symbolism.

Hip-hop graffiti can be an outlet for youth to “expand their horizons and overcome the constrictions of growing up among the urban poor” (Phillips 314). Writers make contacts, develop skills, and channel their energies to art rather than gang membership.

Gang graffiti is dangerous, popular graffiti is lewd (yet marginally entertaining), political graffiti is either offensive or admirable depending on political leanings, and hip-hop graffiti is artistic. Obviously, it would be unjust and ineffective to stamp out just one form of graffiti while largely ignoring the others, not to mention the difficulty authorities would incur while trying to draw the line between subversive, neutral, and benevolent graffiti.

Contrary to the Broken Windows theory, graffiti does not always lead to criminal activity. In fact, it can lead away from it. Hip-hop graffiti can be an outlet for youth to “expand their horizons and overcome the constrictions of growing up among the urban poor” (Phillips 314). Writers make contacts, develop skills, and channel their energies to art rather than gang membership. Additionally, graffiti may also prove itself as a mechanism of social mobility, a gateway to “wind up in art school, the gallery, and other mainstream work” (Phillips 314). Keith Haring, for example, started out drawing simple chalk pictographs in subway stations and gradually moved to gallery work, which would eventually be able to sustain him financially (Gablik 106). Jean-Michel Basquiat scribbled sentences in subways and sold handmade postcards and clothing before being invited to participate in an exhibit called “New York/

New Wave.” From there, he was asked to join a gallery and, like Haring, became successful in the “legitimate art world” (Gablik 108-9). Without their beginnings in graffiti, Basquiat, Haring, and many others may never have found a positive way to channel their energies. Additionally, graffiti can serve as inspiration to established and aspiring artists.

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Unfortunately, when it comes to graffiti, free speech becomes a crime. If graffitiists truly believe in their “art” enough to break the law to create it, they commit a sort of civil disobedience. Conveying one’s point of view does not come without consequences, even when the law is not in question. Self-expression is always open to criticism, and graffiti writers must be willing to accept the repercussions of their actions. ▲

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