

Question 1:

From the MESSAGE, MEDIUM, CONTEXT research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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The impact graffiti has had on society: From commodification to activism.

Graffiti as a broad concept is a universal art form going back millennia, Baird, and Taylor (2011) describe how graffiti has been found on ancient Roman structures to the Egyptian desert and more. Found all over the world and over many time periods, people have been carving or writing their names, among other things, onto surfaces often for no other reason than because they can. Today “tagging is the name used for a stylised monogram” (Tate 2017) placed on a form or structure. Modern day graffiti and street art can be said to have originated in the 60’s and 70’s, where it “started as a way for bored kids to pass the time, since then it has grown into a movement larger than anyone could possibly have imagined”. (Sprayplanet 2018) Graffiti is now prolific in urban environments, visible on buildings, bus stations, bridges, signs etc. usually placed without permission from any property owner or Government and where it’s visible to the public. Essentially if it’s got a flat surface, its likely

to have graffiti on it in some form or another. This essay will explore the beginnings of modern-day graffiti, how graffiti was first utilised by artists, both as a commodity and as a platform for activism and how it has evolved and used today. I will focus on three artists who share many similarities in their work but also have a great many differences in their execution, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Banksy.

Pioneers of modern graffiti culture include artists such as Philadelphia based Cornbread, who began by writing his nickname (given for his love of cornbread) in pen on the walls of his juvenile corrections facility, which up until that point had been covered in gang names and symbols: and Taki 183, who became obsessed with tagging his name on as many places as he possibly could “I liked the feeling of getting my name up, and I liked the idea of getting away with it,” Taki (2015).

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Monetisation of modern graffiti was fairly swift on the heels of its conception. One of the first well-known graffiti artists to make a name for themselves in the world of commercial art is also the highest selling American artist ever, Jean-Michel Basquiat, with his most expensive piece *Untitled* (1982) selling for \$110.4 million. Other works of his also sell in the tens of millions. “Basquiat was a key figure in the transition of Graffiti art from a street phenomenon to the world of galleries and mainstream modern art” (Oxford Reference, 2015).

Basquiat started out with street graffiti in the late 70’ and early 80’s by turning his own experiences and observations into pithy, philosophical poems and phrases written onto buildings around his local urban environment under the tag SAMO, which he coined

alongside his friend Al Diaz. The tags were often not brightly coloured or aesthetically pleasing, very unlike how other artists would be tagging at the time. Their graffiti was a cryptic critique of societal happenings. (Basquiat.com, 2010)



Fig 1

Jean-Michel Basquiat

From there Basquiat developed into painting on t shirts, making postcards, drawings, and collages, depicting an amalgamation of abstract expressionism and graffiti art. The subject focus was similar to his previous works, based on his observations of society such as popular figureheads and events of the time. The Kennedy assassination and baseball players for example. He'd sell these items outside The Museum of Modern Art, around Soho and in parks to make money to survive. Soon however, Basquiat's signature painting style quickly evolved further into that of frantic scribbling, anatomical imagery, specifically skulls and faces, and bizarre symbols and diagrams. This style was heavily influenced by his familial background. From his mother's Puerto Rican descent, his Haitian father, and "a convergence

of African American, African, and Aztec cultural histories with Classical themes and contemporary heroes like athletes and musicians” (Artsy.net, 2017).



Fig 2

Jean-Michel Basquiat *Untitled* 1982

His lasting impact on the art world was with bringing his neo-expressionism style into mainstream art circles. His work was quickly considered worthy by critics, curators, and major galleries. This acceptance of his work and styles paved the way for graffiti to be seen as a true art form not just senseless vandalism by gangs and delinquent kids.

Basquiat's influence has also made an impact on modern-day Hip-hop stars such as Jay-Z

who referenced him in his 2013 album "Magna Carta Holy Grail," on the song 'Picasso Baby' stating "I'm the new Jean-Michel," and another song on the album 'Oceans' featuring Frank Ocean saying, "I hope my black skin don't dirt this white tuxedo/ Before the Basquiat show,".

Graffiti and music, specifically Hip Hop or Rap, have an especially close relationship. They have almost identical origins, starting in the urban settings of highly populated American cities in the 70's, with Hip Hop specifically being created in the Bronx. They were effectively started by the same demographics of African American and Latin Americans. Graffiti with its often-anti-establishment rhetoric very much appealed to those communities, as they were (and still are) some of the worst affected by the actions of police brutality, civil rights violations, and poor community funding. Graffiti is an outlet for people, either as a way to express themselves or as a way to share their voice, speak out and incite change. Hip Hop evolved to do the same, giving people a platform to speak out.

Basquiat especially had a lot to say on the matter of police brutality after a close friend and fellow artist, Michael Stewart, was beaten into a coma at the hands of police while being arrested for graffitiing and subsequently died of those injuries.



fig 3

Jean-Michel Basquiat *Defacement* 1983

Basquiat's response to the police brutality resulted in one of his most compelling pieces ever created. *Defacement* 1983 is personal in a way that few other of his works are. This painting wasn't created for public viewing on a canvas but instead was done in private on the dry wall of Keith Haring's artist studio a couple months after the events took place. The subject, an abstracted figure in black silhouette, static in design, contrasts with the pink skinned, white police officers, batons raised and in motion. The abstraction makes it possible to assume Basquiat was saying it could have been anyone. The figure is reduced to little more than a colour, essentially all that is seen or cared about by the police. Especially poignant as Basquiat had been heard to say, "It could have been me." repeatedly following Stewart's death as they were very similar in both appearance and going out and graffitiing. This piece is

a clear statement of this not being an isolated incident but “representation of a systemic problem” both a tribute to Michael Stewart and a critique of the systemic racism which led to his death. (The Canvas, 2020),

Keith Haring

Keith Haring was another prominent graffiti artist during the same time period as Basquiat. Haring had an art school background and decided the banalities of fine art weren't what he wanted for his life or work, so he began heading to the streets to graffiti his ideas onto the walls of New York City. One of his favourite targets being the black subway advertisement papers, placed on walls to hold spaces for future ads. Influenced greatly by Andy Warhol's unique way of working, combining art and life so entirely and Christo's participatory *Running fence*, Haring was drawn to creating completely public pieces.



Fig 4

Haring would often create these white chalk drawings at a fast pace, making as many as 40 in a single day, using the spaces as a “laboratory” for developing his ideas (Haring.com, 2020). His images didn't have much meaning to them, they were whatever he thought of at the time. Whilst it is easy to see recurring themes and motifs, there isn't much in the way of deeper

meaning to them. At least not in the same way as his later work.

Haring's method to the subway drawings was to draw in the daytime in front of people, especially the public, which was very unlike most graffiti artists who tried to stay hidden using nicknames to tag and graffitiing at night away from prying eyes so as not to have police called on them. But with Haring there were always people watching. Because of this he was regularly confronted by the public, either asking what he was doing or being told he shouldn't be defacing the walls. Despite the sometimes-negative responses he received, he enjoyed the participation of others "The subway drawings were, as much as they were drawings, performances... For me it was a whole sort of philosophical and sociological experiment.", it taught him a lot about people.

"By 1984 the subway [drawings] started to backfire, because everyone was stealing the pieces. I'd go down and draw in the subway, and two hours later every piece would be gone. They were turning up for sale." Haring

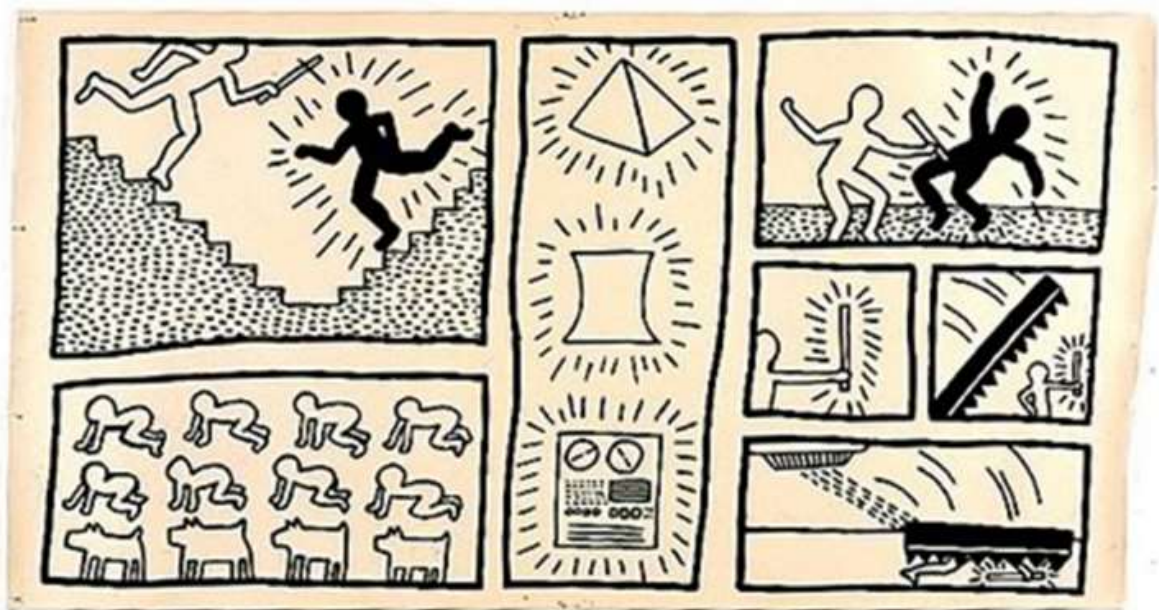


Fig 5

Keith Haring *black in on poster board* 1980

Haring was quickly being recognised in the art world, with shows at P.S. 122 and club 57 (Haring.com, 2020), gaining him popularity, opportunities, and money. His work then evolved from obscure, abstract doodles to be entangled with his activism picturing meaningful political statements. “Compelled to speak for his generation, his art responds to urgent issues including political dictatorship, racism, homophobia, drug addiction, AIDS awareness, capitalism, and the environment.” (Tate 2018)



Fig 6

Keith Haring *ignorance = fear* 1989

His iconic style continues to permeate many aspects of life today. The Change4Life campaign is an excellent example of his style continuing to be used to help promote change. With its use of bright, primary-coloured characters the illustrations capture the audience's attention and draws them into the campaign's important message of creating a healthier lifestyle. Seeing as the campaign is aimed at families and changing the unhealthy eating habits from a young age, it's especially effective as the eye-catching colours and simple shapes appeal to both adults and children. The image below is very evocative of Haring's style, the bold shapes, strong lines, and the fluidity of movement are all present in his original work.

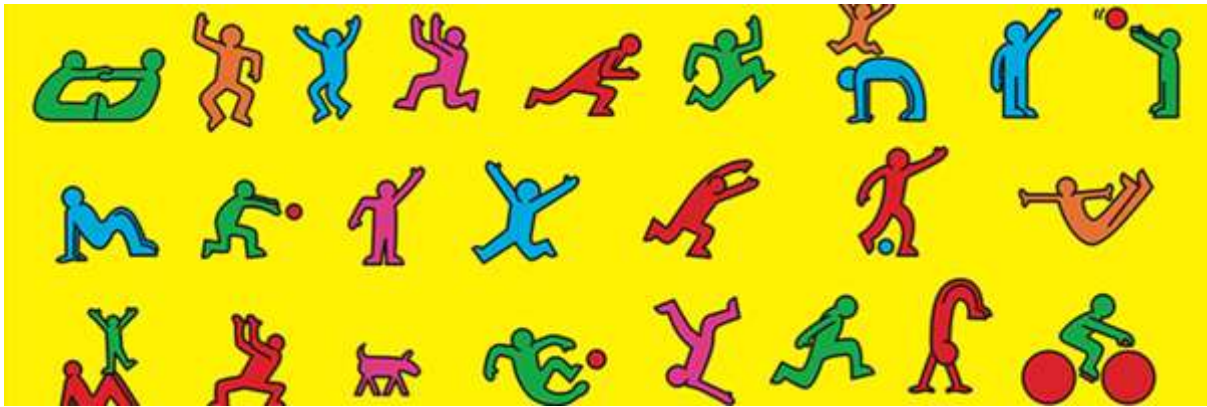


fig 7

Change4Life 2009

Banksy

The carefully maintained anonymity of graffiti artist Banksy, has helped fuel the mystery and intrigue that surrounds him. This in turn has made him and his art works all the more fascinating to the public, raising his profile higher than any other Graffiti artist before him.

Banksy is well known for his stencil painted designs popping up randomly all over the world, with a hefty mix of satirical, political, and social commentary to go along with them. His art is seldom just for the sake of making art. Each piece of his carefully constructed to have the maximum impact from fairly simple imagery. An example of this being his ‘Seasons Greetings’ painted on a garage in Port Talbot, Wales. On one side of the wall, it depicts a small child, mouth open catching ‘snowflakes’ on their tongue, whilst on the other side it shows ash coming from a dumpster fire. Only stepping back and viewing both sides do you finally get to see the whole image of a child ingesting the sooty particulate from the burning rubbish.

The graffiti appeared in 2018 not long after the World Health Organisation (WHO) published a report on UK towns and cities that have exceeded air pollution limits set by WHO (BBC News, 2018). The Mural is commenting on how air pollution from the local steel works, and particulate matter, is negatively effecting people’s health, especially that of children who are

more vulnerable, without anyone even realising it.



Fig 8

Banksy Seasons Greetings 2018

Banksy is arguably one of the most universally known graffiti artists. He's been active since the 90s and has helped contribute to the dramatic shift in how graffiti and street art is perceived. His work incites conversation, the mere presence of a 'Banksy' brings people of all backgrounds together to view and discuss it and can bring awareness to many issues we face as a society today, such as homelessness with his mural "God Bless Birmingham" and a portrait of Steve Jobs in a refugee camp in France (2015).

However, whilst his popularity is regularly used for the greater good, it also creates its own pitfalls. The often-poignant messages of his artwork can be overshadowed by the frenzy that occurs when one of them is discovered. Disputes will quickly arise between finders of street art and owners of the property on which the art is found (Salib, 2015) and how much money it could be sold for, completely disregarding the message of the painting.

His individual paintings and drawings suffer similarly. The people who buy them seem more concerned with the bragging rights of owning a 'Banksy' than the reasons those pieces were created in the first place.



Fig 9

Banksy *devolved Parliament* 2009

'Devolved parliament' is an oil on canvas painting depicting the house of commons filled with chimpanzees, that went on sale a month before we were due to leave the EU. It sold for £9.9 million. For some in Sotheby's packed salesroom, the result was an anti-climax. They had been hoping to witness a stunt as spectacular as the Banksy "shredding incident" Rayburn (2019).

"There's a whole new audience out there, and it's never been easier to sell [one's art]. You don't have to go to college, drag 'round a portfolio, mail off transparencies to snooty galleries or sleep with someone powerful, all you need now is a few ideas and a broadband connection. This is the first time the essentially bourgeois world of art has belonged to the people. We need to make it count." Banksy (2010)

Graffiti is created to be viewed, while easy to cover it is impossible to conceal completely as even when painted over, a new canvas is simply created. Since the beginning graffiti has been a steppingstone for the commercial success of artists and a platform for them to speak out on the injustices that we face. Now there is an ever-growing market of graffiti style products, from shoes and clothing, artwork, re prints, and sports equipment. The aesthetic of graffiti is praised even if the original is still frowned upon.

The practice has been vilified and glorified, once deemed destructive, unsightly, and done by troubled youths as a way of vandalising property; graffiti is now viewed in a much more generous light being showcased in highly revered galleries and sold for millions at auction. Whilst it is still true not everyone approves of the spray-painted images and words, as “certain types of graffiti and street art are valued, others are devalued if not criminalized” (Ross, Lennon and Kramer, 2020) people’s perception of graffiti has come a long way from what they once were.

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Images

- Figure 1: View all posts by Kat Weaver (2016). *who is samo*. [online] SAMO and the Radiant Baby. Available at: <https://eraofsamo.wordpress.com/2016/05/20/first-blog-post/> (Accessed 9 Dec. 2020).
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- Figure 3: Dream McClinton (2019). *Defacement: the tragic story of Basquiat's most personal painting*. [online] the Guardian. Available at:
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- Figure 9: Banksy Painting 'Devolved Parliament' Sells for \$12 Million (Published 2019). (2020). *The New York Times*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/03/arts/design/banksy-devolved-parliament-auction.html#:~:text=Banksy%2C%20the%20world's%20most%20famous,%2412.1%20million%2C%20at%20Sotheby's%2C%20setting> (Accessed 7 Dec. 2020).