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Ways of Thinking

ADDA4022

Why Choose the City as Your Canvas?

‘If the work was taken out of its urban context, placed on a canvas, given a hefty price tag and hung up in a gallery, its likely those same people that viewed it as vandalism would see it as art. [...] There is something missing like the interaction and conflict of the work in location. The smack between the eyes of an amazing reach, the build-up of tags on a shutter or the layering of stickers on the back of a street sign. Each mark is a reminder to those visually aware enough to notice that we were here.’ (Hundertmark, 2003, p6-7).



Fig 1. Several Banksy works on buildings/ walls/ garage doors/ signs



Fig 2. An exhibition of Banksy's work in a gallery, losing much of its impact and essence

Graffiti, street art, urban art, defacement or vandalism. Is it just a product of the 'Broken Window' theory? The theory created by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, is an example of how graffiti takes the blame for larger societal issues. What makes painting the side of a train or an alleyway wall, as opposed to a canvas, so appealing? Why do these writers, risk so much to put up a tag that, for the average eye, blends into all the others?

One discovers a culture of street art, an all-encompassing lifestyle. There is a certain creative thirst, that only graffiti can quench. In comparing Fig 1 and 2, one learns that the poster, sticker, tag or motif is made whole only by its placement on a street sign, garage door, or on the side of a building. In a sense, when one studies the brave world of street art, all other art seems cowardly in comparison. Why not utilise the

enormous supply of brick and metal canvas around you, instead of limiting yourself to a sketchbook or studio?

Graffiti is not just a movement or genre. It is a way of living and breathing, saturating one's whole life if you dare to join in.

It is widely assumed that graffiti began in 1970s New York, however, writer Cornbread/Darryl McCray (often called the founder of graffiti), pulls the origins to Philadelphia. In graffiti terms, a 'writer' simply put is a graffiti/street artist.

Cornbread's pieces consist almost entirely of tagging – a writer putting up their signature, logo, or pseudonym. A simple yet core aspect of graffiti, coming long before the elaborate 'Wildstyle' lettering and two-story murals we see today.

'[...] it is not enough to think of the childlike desire to see one's name ride by in letters large enough to scream your ego across the city, [...] If our name is enormous to us, it is also not real – as if we have come from other places than the name, and lived in other lives.' (Naar and Mailer, 2009, p31).

In Fig 3, one observes the earliest evidence of modern graffiti. Police had recently shot someone they mistook as Cornbread, so he came up with the most outrageous way to prove he was still alive. Naturally, he tagged 'Cornbread Lives' on the side of an elephant in bright red paint, eliciting a huge response from the public and, of course, the police.

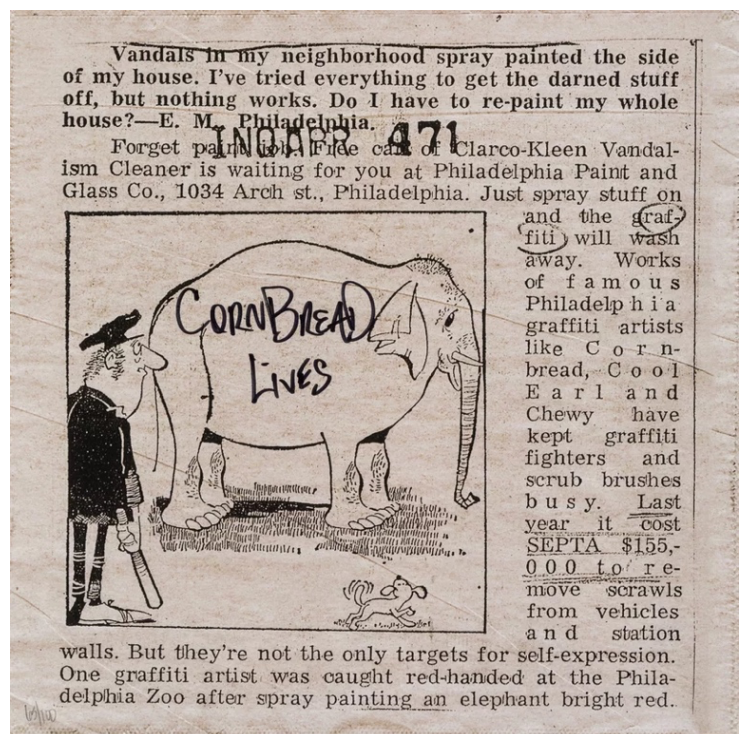


Fig 3. 'Cornbread Lives' A newspaper clipping about Cornbread tagging an elephant at the Philadelphia Zoo

Here, one discovers the power of a tag. As a young writer, trying to make a name for yourself in the art world, let alone as a graffiti artist, is a difficult task. With thousands of already existing up-and-coming writers, one has to get creative in the construction of your image. A tag is where it all starts. Whether it is your name, a nickname, or even a word, as long as it stands out and is prevalent throughout your city, you may get noticed.

'The name is at the centre of all graffiti art. The writer usually drops his given name and adopts a new one – a new identity.' (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984, p45).

This leads one to explore the culture and identity of graffiti.

'A youngster starting out finds a new community, [...] which brings together kids from all over the city. He gets a new name and a new identity in a group which has its own values and rules. He finds the particular subway stations where other writers congregate and where they form new alliances that transcend the old parochial neighbourhood and traditional gang territory.' (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984, p23).

It is evident that graffiti has a positive influence on communities. It encourages a kind of creativity that eliminates isolation. It is an extremely social creative process, unifying the youth of gangs, and as a result, slowly easing the tensions around them.

However, it is important to explore the negative connotations of graffiti to properly understand the context that surrounds it as an art form.

The 'Broken Window' theory, in short, theory claims that the presence of graffiti (and other visible crime) in a neighbourhood is responsible for its deterioration.

'Broken windows policing tries to regulate low-level crime to prevent widespread disorder from occurring. If these small crimes are greatly reduced, then neighborhoods will appear to be more cared for.' (Ruhl, 2021).

This, however, assumes that the presence of graffiti means a neighbourhood is disjointed and lacks in community. Considering the arguments of the essay thus far, it is easy to debunk this opinion. Graffiti unites people, hardly the opposite.

'[...] Harcourt also criticized the broken windows theory for fostering "zero-tolerance" policies that are prejudicial against the disadvantaged segments of society.' (McKee, 2013).

With this in mind, it is clear the theory doesn't hold up.

Visual literacy is vital to graffiti. For a piece to catch your eye, the niches of colour, form, technique, and semiotics must be considered.

In Manco's book '*Street Logos*' he says 'People have become immune to tagging, so when an artist starts using an image instead we suddenly take notice. [...] Icons predate words, using the more emotive, visual language of symbols.' (Manco, 2004, p16).

This highlights the competitive and ever-changing nature of graffiti. Its aim remains to grab your attention, changing and adapting as a result. Writers must constantly consider how to keep their pieces relevant and unique. Manco goes on to discuss the term 'Subvertising' – a form of graffiti that entails slightly altering an existing sign or advertisement to elicit a reaction from the public. Through this, writers have found an alternative exciting outlet for their graffiti.



Fig 4. 'Sign Action' (Top) 'Headless' (Bottom).
P. Baranowski

Fig 4 is an example of this. Though Baranowski's 'Subvertising' is simple at first glance, upon further inspection, the viewer becomes increasingly interested. The pink frilly skirt pasted on the zebra crossing sign, as well as the detailed face, creates textural variety. The viewer may wonder what the writer is trying to say, perhaps a play on the terms 'cross-dressing' and 'zebra-crossing'.

The piece 'Headless' in comparison, is quite straightforward. Much of the meaning behind the semiotics in graffiti is reactionary. Often confronting themes of politics, money, violence, status, and love. 'Headless' could easily fall into any of those categories, as it is often up to the viewer to decide the meaning, like much art.

The debate on graffiti's legitimacy as art must be put to rest.

In Norman Mailer and Jon Naar's book the '*faith of graffiti*', Mailer explains 'There was always art in a criminal act – no crime could ever be as automatic as a production process – but graffiti writers were somewhat opposite to criminals since they were living through the stages of the crime in order to commit an artistic act [...]' (Naar and Mailer, 2009, p11).

To let something as uninspired as law decide what counts as art makes no sense. Saying what is and isn't art based on where it is painted is as absurd as claiming rain stops being rain when it falls on your neighbour's roof instead of yours.

Graffiti exposes society's hypocritical views on creativity in a way other art forms don't.

'America really has no problem with graffiti- as long as they can make a buck off it. [...] Yet despite all this love, the act of getting up, putting the paint on the walls is still punishable by jail time and large amounts of debt.' (Gonnella, 2008).



Fig 4. NYPD Police and public painting over graffiti



Fig. 5 A designer shirt by 'LYST' retailed for £500

How can one justify condemning graffiti when it inspires so much mainstream consumerism (see Fig 5)? How can something so creatively rich be completely dismissed as a respectable art form? Too often, we let unreasonable laws influence our opinions. One must question how society can hold such contradicting opinions on graffiti- painting over it in Fig 4 but profiting off of it in Fig 5.

'Graffiti art is free – made by people because they want to, not because they need to.' (Manco, 2004, p9).

With no monetary intentions in its creation, it exists only as a result of raw creativity and passion, an urge to provoke and confront. Some may argue this is art at its very core. Too many harbour bias against street art, remaining unquestioned for far too long.

It is clear that utilising the city as your canvas holds great value. Art plastered on the side of a skyscraper or train has that much more impact than on a 20x16-inch painting in a gallery. Would you not rather be inspired by a vibrant mural on the side of your weekly train than by a dull sea of grey, empty walls, void of creativity? Graffiti is essential to the world's art, and all creatives should learn from its bravery.

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