

Criminal Compositions

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Every great innovation in art has been received with resistance. One of the first reviews of Claude Monet's work compared the pieces, which are arguably among the most universally beloved works of art ever produced, to an unfinished sketch for wallpaper and *found it lacking*.¹ This unfortunate recurring distaste for progressive art has left no movement unscathed. But the global graffiti art movement has felt the wrath of skeptics more keenly than any movement that has emerged before. Uninformed observers see graffiti works as nothing more than delinquent vandalism that attacks family values and creates unsafe environments. Frank Fouchalk, a security expert and contributing writer for the New York Post states, "Graffiti is like a contagious disease; if left untreated, it will only spread." He goes on to affirm that "[graffiti's] only goal is to degrade the business community."² This statement exemplifies the unfortunate assumptions held by many who, blinded by their lack of knowledge, see only the crime and not the art. Some skeptics cite gang-related graffiti as support for their claim that

graffiti is inherently harmful. While there is no denying that there are links between some forms of graffiti and gangs, the relationship is not causal. Graffiti does not create gangs. Graffiti is a diverse and powerful medium, with the potential to connect to the masses in ways that are simply unachievable to most forms traditional art. Graffiti is the transcendence of high art from the sterile confines of the art gallery into a direct, unadulterated and unfiltered union with the viewer made more meaningful by its ephemeral nature.

Its creators often function as social and political commentators while utilizing traditional artistic devices in new venues. The commentaries of graffiti artists are one of the many common threads that weave between graffiti and what is accepted as high art. Other stylistic similarities between specific examples of fine art and examples of graffiti works will be discussed at length. To facilitate that discussion, some vocabulary must be clarified:

The different types of graffiti are created by individuals, or writers, but also by groups, typically called crews, which function as artistic communities with a deep sense of camaraderie.³ Graffiti, like all art, is comprised of works of varying degrees of sophistication and technique. It is important to note that while graffiti as a whole has the potential to be high art, the subgenres of tagging and throw-ups typically do not possess the technical merit or artistic intention that would validate their inclusion in the category of high art. Graffiti works can be

¹ In a famous remark, art critic Louis Leroy has offered the following response to Monet's *Impression: soleil levant*: "Impression I was certain of it. I was just telling myself that, since I was impressed, there had to be some impression in it — and what freedom, what ease of workmanship! A preliminary drawing for a wallpaper pattern is more finished than this seascape."

The review was printed April 25, 1874 in *Le Charivari*; the art movement took its name from the above statement. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Leroy

² Fouchalk, Frank. Security. Troy: Jan 2008. Vol. 45, Iss. 1; pg. 14, 2 pgs.

<http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.lib.csustan.edu:2048/pqdlink?Ver=1&Exp=12-02->

2016&FMT=7&DID=1412658791&RQT=309&clientId=17873#indexing

³ Grody, Steve. Graffiti L.A.: Street Styles and Art. New York: Abrams, 2006. Print.

loosely organized into three main categories:



Figure 1

Tags consist of quick one color text-based designs, like figure 1⁴. They often state the artist name and/or crew affiliations. This is the type of graffiti preferred by gang writers for marking territory boundaries. These rapidly executed signatures typically would not be considered a high art form. As the anonymous graffiti writer U in Mark Halsey and Alison Young's article '*Our desires are ungovernable*' : *Writing graffiti in urban space* states, "I'd say the actual tagging part of graffiti is just downright vandalism. It has no art or beauty to it." Authors Halsey and Young go on to explain that "such views are generally consistent with ways in which writers defined 'graffiti,' separating 'art' (piecing) from 'vandalism' (tagging) and 'artists' (or writers) from 'taggers,' 'bombers' and 'vandals.'"⁵



Figure 2

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http://www.graffitibegone.us/images/graffiti_lamp_post_before.jpg

⁵ Halsey, Mark, Young, Alison. 'Our desires are ungovernable' : *Writing graffiti in urban space. Theoretical Criminology*. 2006. Pg. 275

tags, throw-ups, and pieces.

Throw-ups are also generally texted-based designs commonly notifying the viewer of the artist and possibly the crew to which the writer belongs but are executed in two to three colors. Classic throw-ups are composed of a silver fill with black outlining, such as the one pictured in figure 2⁶, but palettes vary artist to artist depending on preference and availability of paint. This type of graffiti generally lacks the sophistication of form and content⁷ to be considered fine art.



Figure 3

Pieces, an abbreviation of the term masterpiece, constitute the category in which graffiti achieves its high art standing. Pieces are complex and diverse; they consist of numerous hues depicting infinitely varied subject matter that generally take entire crews to accomplish. Pieces can be text-based or figurative, often featuring caricatures of individuals or fanciful creatures.⁸ Pieces can be purely freehanded, painted without stencils or the use of photos, as pictured in figure 3, as well as feature a combination of techniques.

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http://aeroghost.blogspot.com/2005_01_23_archive.html

⁷ Form refers to what the piece of art is- the medium, the stylistic devices, etc. Content is the message of the work- what the artist is attempting to convey to the viewer.

⁸ Grody, Steve. *Graffiti L.A.: Street Styles and Art*. New York: Abrams, 2006.



Figure 4

Stencils are used frequently to produce sophisticated images very quickly. The famous artist known as Banksy is best known for his stencil pieces such as the fox⁹ depicted in figure 4; wheat-pasted images on paper are also used for the same reason. The most renowned wheat-paster is artist Shepard Fairey, creator of the OBEY art works and subsequent brand. His most notable motif, the stylized face of Andre the Giant, is portrayed in image 5.¹⁰



Figure 5

Pieces are not confined to the wall; there is also a sub-genre of graffiti in which the artists produce three dimensional and often interactive works.



Figure 6

The piece pictured in image 6 by artist Joshua Allen Harris was created using plastic trash bags. The creatures are inflated and given life by the air currents that pulse through the city's sidewalk grates from the subway moving below.¹¹ Then the creatures slowly deflate- symbolically dying, as the subway moves on. His charming creations warn of the dangers of global warming in a unique, approachable way that appeals to passing children and adults alike.

Harris uses the gentle charm and child-like wonder his creatures evoke to discuss his ecological commentary. Artists Banksy and Shepard Fairey both tend to use sarcasm and humor that has a habit of being rather coarse to discuss their ideas. The work of Banksy typically draws attention to the injustices of capitalism as well as the issues of surveillance. Fairey's work explores the way in which repetition of an image gives it power. The messages of graffiti artists are as unique as the people who create them. What is essential to note is the directness with which their messages are delivered. The decisive advantage graffiti has over traditional fine art is that it avoids the filtering that occurs when art is placed in a gallery. Art galleries create barriers—physical, psychological, and social—between the viewer and the art works. The physical barriers are blatant; one typically cannot physically interact with the art; galleries post signs and frequently have guards preventing the public from fully engaging with the work. The psychological barriers are more subtle. Art galleries have a tendency to feel sterile, almost hospital like, resplendent in pristine white walls, attended by personnel who speak in hushed tones as though in a funeral home. As owner of Detroit art gallery Art Effect confesses in a recent interview, “I believe that commercial art galleries feel very cold and unapproachable in general. I never feel dressed-up enough, that I’m talking softly

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http://lh4.ggpht.com/_9F9_RUESS2E/SsTOPfi6b5I/AAAAAABQY/M8qsiRdemew/s800/banksy-graffiti-street-art-kentuckyfox.jpg

¹⁰ <http://twistedstifter.com/2010/04/awesome-street-art-by-best-ever/>

¹¹ <http://www.dtail.com/category/sculpture/page/5/>

enough, and that I have enough money in my wallet to justify crossing the thresholds of most galleries.”¹² Art galleries have an unfortunate tendency of draining the vitality and approachability out of the work that is housed in them. The work is ripped from the creative environment of its birth and stagnates, hindered by its context that is bereft of the energy with which it was formed. In stark comparison, graffiti exists eternally within the moment of its creation; its vitality is untouched by artificial constructs and continuously replenished by new artists’ contributions and even the weather. The most intriguing aspect of this dynamic is that to most viewers this lack of a traditional art context, the gallery, which is graffiti’s most powerful characteristic, is the main reason they find difficulty accepting it as art. The Christian teen website Creation Tips proclaims, “that is the problem with graffiti — it is ‘unauthorized’, as the dictionary says, and it destroys someone’s property.”¹³ To them the issue is not that the work lacks the virtuosity and sophistication found in the masters of art, it is that is outside, unsolicite



Figure 7

¹² Thedetroiter.com. Detroit Gallery Week Spotlight: Art Effect Detroit. 2011.

<http://www.thedetroiter.com/v3/2011/10/detroit-gallery-week-spotlight-art-effect-detroit/>

¹³ Graffiti: Vandalism posing as art? 2009.

<http://www.creationtips.com/graffiti.html>

Graffiti artists draw on the same wealth of artistic knowledge as traditional artists; the work of British graffiti duo Best Ever¹⁴ blends loose expressive gestural movements that function to flatten the picture plane with photorealistic areas of the human form in a style similarly employed by Renaissance mastermind Leonardo Da Vinci.¹⁵



Figure 8

Both bodies of work define forms utilizing chiaroscuro, the soft gradual transition from light to dark, to model the face. Both artists also intentionally leave parts of the compositions in apparently unfinished states, creating works more visually stimulating than if the artists had rendered the imagery entirely. The blending of loose, sketchy regions with highly realistic elements creates a dynamic push and pull between the illusionistic and the intentionally flat areas of the picture plan that engrosses the viewer

¹⁴ <http://twistedstifer.com/2010/04/awesome-street-art-by-best-ever/>

¹⁵

<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/vinci/sketch/theadjman.jpg>



Figure 9

In the very large composition displayed in figure 9¹⁶ by the Montreal-based crew known as A'shop, the Art Nouveau artist Alphonse Mucha is referenced extensively.¹⁷ A'shop samples Mucha's compartmentalist formatting featuring a large female figure set against decorative floral motifs as well as the quintessential whiplash curves the art movement is famous for. A'shop's composition also employs a color palette similar to that of most of Mucha's work. A key difference between the graffiti work and the work by Mucha is that interspersed with the typical floral and harvest imagery this modern work depicts the city in which it resides. This inclusion of local imagery

¹⁶

<http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/massive-art-nouveau-inspired-mural-in-montreal>

¹⁷

http://www.joieart.net/artwork/spotlights/mucha_champagne.jpg

creates a stronger resonance with the viewers; it gives them something concrete to connect with.



Figure 10

Purely text-based pieces can also reference great works.



Figure 11

Artist Greg Paragrighoriou of Athens creates text based pieces¹⁸ that reference classic Arabic calligraphy art such as the tile piece from the 1635 AD Wazir Khan Mosque¹⁹ pictured in figure 12.



Figure 12

Paragrighoriou employs the same elegant interlocking lettering as the great masters of calligraphy to create forms.



Figure 13

¹⁸ <http://twistedifter.com/2011/04/calligraffiti-by-greg-papagrighoriou-25-pics/>

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Arabic_Calligraphy_at_Wazir_Khan_Mosque2.jpg

Graffiti can incorporate existing art as well as reference it; the simple minimalistic piece shown in figure 13²⁰ becomes a part of the bronze statue when lit at night, creating a dynamic installation piece out of a rather common sculpture. Part of the magic of graffiti is its ability to shift one's perception of the world- often by simply a small addition of paint.

The pieces mentioned are a minuscule sample of the varied and vibrant world of graffiti. But even from such a small sample as this, one can plainly see the connections between what is accepted as art and graffiti; it becomes clear that graffiti is indeed a new facet of art. Galleries have begun to recognize this and are even beginning to feature premier graffiti artists (this relocation in the gallery space begs the question- can graffiti remain such when it is placed in such an unusual venue?). The art culture is slowly finding a place for graffiti amongst the accepted mediums, but the general population, those who make up majority of graffiti's target audience, are continuing to be resistant. This is partially caused by the prevalence of the notion that graffiti is only a pastime of criminals bent on disturbing the peace. This, quite simply, is not the case. Graffiti artists come from all walks of life, drawn together by a shared love of the art form and often a desire to beautify the buildings upon which they paint.

The piece by A'shop, mentioned previously, is an example of the crew's efforts to beautify the old building. It was the crew's goal to transform the building from an eyesore to a focal point of the community. In an interview A'shop artist Kris Wilk discusses the project: "the idea was to step out of our comfort zone and show the public what graffiti artists can be capable of. There is an amazing amount of quality work being produced within Montreal's graffiti scene. Unfortunately, bad press and political

²⁰ <http://www.streetartutopia.com/?p=2014>

strategies often only show the ‘negative’ side of it, creating unneeded friction between citizens and our culture. Graffiti as a form of visual language can be hard to comprehend for most. We thought it would be interesting to paint this mural in a more common language, using imagery that anyone can understand, initiating dialogue and building bridges.”²¹ The point Wilk makes about graffiti being difficult to understand is also typically a factor in why most people fail to see it as art. How can one appreciate a great work of art if one doesn’t understand the language it is create in? The problem with this is that most viewers do not pursue any knowledge to help them contextualize and understand the piece. They simply dismiss it as vandalism. This attitude is what must change. The public is depriving themselves of a beautiful, as well as free and widely accessible, art form by refusing to broaden their artistic horizons.

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<http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/massive-art-nouveau-inspired-mural-in-montreal>