

Is street art a
legitimate art form?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Street art originated in the late 1960s with the advent of graffiti and tagging in Philadelphia and New York City (Walsh, 1996: 3). It has been developing ever since as new styles, forms and techniques are created and utilised by street artists (Walsh, 1996: 12). But street art is not generally viewed as “art” worthy of the status of works in a gallery or a museum, although as Walsh says, it is not strictly denied the status of genuine art because it utilises various aesthetic elements (1996). However, street art is often seen as radical or unconventional because of its location – on walls and doors, on train carriages and in tunnels (Cooper et al, 1984: 15). These public spaces provide blank canvases for street artists, yet using them means that street art is almost always illegal – viewed as a form of vandalism (Cooper et al, 1984; Chaflant and Prigoff, 1987: 42). While more legal spaces for street art have opened in recent years, there still remains the question: is it really art? In this paper I would like to explore this idea by making reference both to the history of graffiti and street art, the (il)legalities surrounding it, the ideas expressed through it and the ways in which the aesthetics created by some street artists make their work undeniably “art”.

Street art as vandalism

I’d like to explore some of the oppositions to street art, to understand why street artists are vilified and their work denied the status of ‘art’. Walsh argues that the only reason why this occurs is because of the location of street art (1996: 2-3). He strongly believes that street art cannot be disregarded as a criminal act simply because it is not presented in a conventional manner, that is, framed and placed in a museum or gallery (1996: 3). I agree with Walsh, and believe that while street art may be

unsolicited, and sometimes termed ‘vandalism’, that this does not mean it is not art. Nonetheless, the illegality of street art has stood in the way of it becoming recognised as a legitimate art form. As Ferrell explains, there are an impressive ‘array of control technologies and techniques aligned against [street art]’, including a sort of public surveillance of street artists by concerned citizens who have been led to believe that street art is criminal (2004: 35). Ferrell cites examples from the United States in which antigraffiti campaigners have proposed punishments for street artists, including:

a bill requiring that kids convicted of writing graffiti be publicly paddled ... public caning ... suggestions of lopping of hands ... and publicly spray-painting [street artists’] genitals (2004: 36).

Understanding these angry sentiments means understanding why street artists are vilified. This also means recognising the terms ‘street art’ and ‘graffiti’ as having two different connotations. Street art has in recent years been seen as something with intrinsic value, with artist Banksy earning large sums of money for his wall stencils, and street art in Melbourne, for example, being recognised as part of the city’s heritage and culture. However the term ‘graffiti’ is still linked to the notion of criminal behaviour, and anti-graffiti organisations such as Removal of Graffiti Everywhere (RAGE) are committed to making street art in all forms illegal. Both Walsh and Ferrell argue that graffiti’s negative associations are due to its links with tagging, a style of graffiti ‘done very fast, within a few seconds’ with the aim that ‘his or her tag be seen by as many people as possible’ (Walsh, 1996: 12). But Cooper et al argue that tagging is in a different category to other forms of graffiti

because it does not have the same aesthetic qualities (1984: 15). It is, in their words' 'scribble' (1984: 15).

Here therefore I would like to make a distinction between graffiti as street art and graffiti as tagging. I agree with Cooper et al (1984) that tagging does not hold the same aesthetic or expressive qualities as other forms of street art such as stencilling or graffiti murals. But what I find interesting about tagging is the fact that it involves anonymity and an alias 'which gives the writer ... a new identity' (Walsh, 1996: 12). This idea I would like to explore further with reference to street art's illegality.

Anonymity, resistance and historic significance

Like taggers, acclaimed stencil artist Banksy does not reveal his identity to the public. This reinforces the idea that there is something even about his widely celebrated form of street art that is illicit. Similar is Melbourne street artist Deb, who goes only by nickname and is hard to track down to a name or place. In fact many street artists use either aliases or nicknames that ensure them privacy and no attention from lawmakers. The anonymity of street artists once again goes back to the beginnings of graffiti writing in the 1960s, when gang members and other individuals graffitied and 'tagged' urban spaces as a means of self-expression. Walsh argues that the monikers adopted by graffiti artists at the time worked both to allow the individual to remain anonymous, but also to provide him or her with a means to express outrage and resistance through a persona (1996: 122). Ferrell agrees with Walsh's idea that street art is a form of resistance, stating that such artists 'employ particular forms of graffiti as a means of resisting particular constellations of legal, political, and religious authority' (2004: 34).

I would like to consider the idea of street art as resistance as the first part of my argument for street art as a valid artform. As a form of self expression, street art is a creative method of communicating with the general public, in a forum much more open than an art gallery. Street art communicates the artist's identity and his or her ideas, and because it is visual, it appeals to people regardless of their cultural, lingual, or racial differences (Cooper and Chalfant, 1984: 66-67). Walsh notes that street artists see their art as a rebellion against a repressive political and economic order: against established art markets or gallery systems, against Western ideas of capitalism and against ideas about private property (1996: 47). What comes out of Walsh's analysis is that street artists are doing what all other great art movements have done before them – rebelling against established ideas and mores about what art “ should be”, and using the power of self-expression to appeal to certain audiences. In this way, street artists can be compared to groups such as the Fauves, the Futurists or the Impressionists, breaking from tradition and forging new ground in the world of art. According to Walsh, such aspects of street art make it important as an art form not only for its rebellion against art traditions, but those of politics and the state (1996: 49-50). This also fits into Camnitzer's argument that art should be recognised as ‘ a universal set of skills and values within which everybody has freedom of expression’, showing how art as a form of resistance works:

to perturb society and achieve results similar to those of political actions. But distinct from political actions ... art should shape culture on a deeper level and have a more long-lasting impact (1994: 38).

Arguably, street art works to shape culture through resistance and rebellion while also influencing and ‘perturbing’ society because of its ability to straddle the line between vandalism and art. Because street art is unique both due to its location and often its themes, it has the potential to influence the viewer and create change. As Williamson argues, it is the resistive power of street art that makes it important because it allows for the expression of ideas outside hegemonic norms (2004). She gives the example of street art in South Africa during apartheid which was the means for individuals to speak out against oppression, thus showing ‘that popular culture resistance has a vital role in the life of the community and the struggle for freedom’ (2004: 8)

Following Spitz I would also argue that street art is important as an art form because it represents history through its acts of resistance (1991: 17). As Ferrell discusses, the fact that places like the Berlin Wall were decorated with images representing hope and freedom, and graffiti that denounced the separation of East and West Germany shows just how much street art can act as a symbol of the times (2004: 34). This makes me think of works such as Goya’s Guernica – a mural not unlike some of those on the Berlin Wall, that shows the horrors of war and suffering. If we are to think about street art as representative of such historic and often horrific moments, then it is hard to denounce it as ‘vandalism’.

Aesthetics of street art

While I have argued that the expressive, resistive qualities of street art are undeniable, analysing the aesthetic qualities also show that street art is a viable artform. The production of street art requires established techniques

and styles, most particularly in the use of spraypaint. Spraypaint is used in various ways for different artistic effects. As Walsh explains, street art developed over the years from tagging to established graffiti practices such as wildstyle, an integral, flowing piece of art (1996: 61). In more recent years the advent of stencilling has introduced a new technique into street art which requires artists to learn different effective ways of expressing their ideas (Melbourne Street Art, 2010). The techniques learnt add to the aesthetic qualities of street art and therefore show how image is linked to insight, which Spitz argues is of central significance to considering something 'art' (2004). This is because 'emotional and intellectual responses' to art cause a 'transfer of meaning between the artist's intentions and the image he or she produces' (1991: 2).

The completion of street art involves imagination, planning, and effort, and is therefore similar to the execution of a more traditional form of art like a painting. The street artists must first do a sketch, then plan out characters and select colours. Next, the artist selects the surface on which her or she will work and creates a preliminary outline. If it is a stencil, the artist will draw the outline onto thick film and cut it out. Colours and ornamentation can then be applied using spray paint. Walsh argues that the completed product can be analysed according to the elements of aesthetic style: line, colour, composition, balance, time and harmony (1996: 81-86). The structures and characters in the work can be read as a narrative, and the artist's intentions communicated to the viewer (Walsh, 1996: 86). I would also argue that street art also improves areas that would otherwise be considered ugly, like abandoned buildings or industrial areas. One only

needs to look at all of the street art in Melbourne's colourful lanes to see how a place that could otherwise be an eyesore is made beautiful through street art.

The impermanence of street art

It is interesting to consider Walsh's ideas about the impermanence of street art as a unique artistic factor. He argues that because of its quick removal from surfaces by councils and other clean up services that street art needs to be appreciated as fleeting, especially as:

A piece which might be sixty feet long, twelve feet high, and take twenty to thirty cans of paint and at least eight hours to produce might be gone in a matter of minutes (1996: 108).

In that sense, it is understandable why galleries such as Sydney's May Lane and Melbourne's Graffiti Management Plan work to protect street art from being obliterated. May Lane provides removable outdoor panels on which street artists can work, and which are stored for later exhibition, while the Graffiti Management Plan works to protect laneway graffiti. Although they failed in April 2010 by accidentally painting over a Banksy work in Hosier Lane, the Graffiti Management Plan protected another Banksy work by placing it under perspex to remain forever as a street artwork. And as more and more tourists flock to Melbourne specifically to see street art, the lanes of Melbourne are taking on the form of outdoor galleries – perhaps not that unlike traditional exhibition spaces, yet more public and therefore accessible.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that street art in both stencil and graffiti forms should be considered viable forms of art. I have shown that while the location of these works might make them unconventional, and indeed deemed vandalism in many cases, that they are nevertheless important both as an expression of individual identity and as a mode of resistance. Like all art, they act to reflect the artist's ideas and the historical period in which he or she lived. They provide a break from tradition and they inspire the viewer, while also being aesthetically pleasing. While I differentiate some forms of street art from others, and show that tagging is perhaps less likely to be considered "art" than stencilling or mural graffiti, I believe that street art generally should be recognised as an important part of our society and an expression of culture and heritage.