

# Art or vandalism? essay sample

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I believe that Graffiti is most certainly a valid art form. The question as to whether any forms of graffiti can be considered art is a controversial area. Is it vandalism when it is placed on the side of a building or a car and art when it is on a canvas on someone's wall or in a gallery- what is the difference? Graffiti, in its more complex forms, can be considered art because it clearly contains artistic elements, it communicates the artist's expression to the viewer, and the traditional art community has already accepted it. The objective of this essay is to explain how graffiti art overcomes the concerns of illegality and vandalism and can be considered as a true art form.

Graffiti has been around for a long time; its birth goes back to the beginning of human society. It has been found in prehistoric times in cave drawings and on the uncovered in ancient Egyptian monuments (Stowers). The actual word graffiti is derived from two different words. First the Greek word "Graphein," meaning "to write" and secondly, the Italian word "Grafficar," which means "drawings, markings, scribbles, patterns, or messages that are painted, written, or carved on a surface" (Dennant).

More recently, in the early 70's, modern day graffiti began to develop in the streets of New York and soon spread across the world. This began in the form of 'tagging' a fancy, scribble-like style of writing that purely served to represent a person's nickname. Tagging was never produced to grasp the viewer in an artistic manner and did not account for aesthetic style. A diverse crowd of youths in New York saw this as a way of getting their name seen around the city and acquiring fame. As more and more people caught on to this new thing, the trains and subways got more filled with these tags and so a need for more artistically elaborate designs began. A New style

emerged which went beyond the elements of just a normal tag. Writers fought for the position of “ King” or “ Queen” which meant that, not only did they produce many tags, but style and artistic talents were also taken into consideration (Stowers).

Known heroes such as STAYHIGH 149, PHASE 2, STASH, Zephyr and Futura 2000 began to advance in style and creativity utilizing the streets and trains of New York as their canvas. Most of these all-stars were represented by the U. G. A. (United Graffiti Artists). The U. G. A. was the first group that attempted to make the transition from subway yard to gallery walls. The U. G. A. was a cross-section of the most famous artists of that time, their exhibition at the Razor Gallery in Soho was what gave graffiti its first taste of commercialism (Futura). I believe the more complex forms of graffiti developed by such artists contained distinct artistic elements and can be considered art, while the beginning forms of graffiti, such as Tags, do not contain these elements and should not be referred to as ‘ art’.

With the discovery of spray-paint by writers, new and more colorful styles emerged, starting out with the second form graffiti, the throw-up. This is the simplest form of graffiti that is used to create a large piece of work. This is done by using two colors, one for the outline and one for the fill in, and bubble lettering to display the writer’s nickname. The next step up from the throw-up is a stamp. A stamp is a little bit more difficult than the throw-up and involves straight lines that produce a three-dimensional effect. These two forms are still simple in that they contain few colors and are done quickly. Although they are done very quickly, they are still more complex than a tag and require some amount of artistic talent. The next two forms <https://assignbuster.com/art-or-vandalism-essay-sample/>

take more time and are carefully planned out before they are done. The piece, which is short for masterpiece, is a large multicolored work. The colors and design are carefully chosen ahead of time. This form also takes a lot more time to produce and, therefore, has to be done at odd times in difficult places.

The largest, most elaborate form of graffiti is a production. A production is a piece the size of a mural. It usually includes cartoon characters, some of which are made up by the writer and some that are taken from popular comics. This form also takes much planning. Writers usually do a sketch beforehand, carefully outlining, drawing the characters, and inventing a color scheme (Stowers). When writers finish planning, they pick their choice of canvas and begin. A Piece or Production is created in steps. First, an outline of the sketch is done in a light color to get the feeling of how things will look on the large scale. Then, it is gone over adding color and background to the work. Different nozzles are used on the spraypaint cans to create diverse effects. When everything is in place, crisp outlines are painted with the intent of having no drips. The clearness of a work signifies the artistic talent of the writer.

The latter forms of graffiti style I have mentioned consist of fundamental artistic elements such as line, shape, color, and dimensions. The fact that more complex graffiti forms contain such elements is clear evidence that graffiti is a valid form of artistic expression. Many would argue that the placing of graffiti illegally on the streets makes it impossible to consider as art. I firmly believe that no matter where graffiti is placed, whether on the

subway or art gallery it is a way of expressing oneself in an aesthetic and artistic manner.

Rebellion is one explanation for why writers use graffiti. Graffiti cries out from places that would otherwise not be heard. It is noticed because it is controversial and the point is brought across because of this. It gives the silent a voice. Graffiti is a perfect medium for people to express their views to a large number of people.

Another primary reason why people turn to graffiti is to establish a sense of belonging. Graffiti provides people with a way of expression and ‘ crews’ provide them with a sense of belonging. According to T-Kid in the book *Subway Art*, a crew “ is a unit of dudes who work together to achieve a goal: to get up and to go all city.” Crews are made up of close friends and other writers; “ a bunch of brothers that are down by street law with each other” (Cooper). These crews create a strong sense of belonging and community. They also emphasize teamwork. It is said that one writer can always tell another by the paint on their hands and the way they watch the trains as they go by (Cooper).

There are several reasons why graffiti is done, including fame, self-expression, power, and rebellion. This adds obvious meaning to graffiti that may not have been apparent originally. Graffiti expresses meaningful elements that represent the writer’s thoughts and feelings in an aesthetic manner, and therefore is another reason why graffiti is art.

People have now begun to recognize these elements in graffiti and the traditional art world has taken it in. When graffiti first began to become

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popular, the art community noticed it and it began to get more publicity. It soon could be seen in galleries and shows along with the typical art of that time. Shortly after this, graffiti died out in the art world but made a comeback in the 1980's through the hip-hop explosion (Dennant).

Hip-hop is composed of four different elements: graffiti being one of them along with rap, break dancing, and Djing. The eighties were really the first time that graffiti had been publicized in a positive way by such a large group of people. With graffiti as one of the hip-hop elements, it too became more popular, not just among writers, but among the art community as well.

As the art world took in graffiti, many artists transferred from doing street art to gallery art. Keith Haring is a good example. Haring had professional training at a school of visual art but dropped out before he completed his degree. Haring went to New York and launched his career as a graffiti artist. It was done in subways of New York and it was and still is extremely recognizable. They regularly include somewhat simple looking chalk drawings of barking dogs, crawling babies, telephones, and outlined human figures. Haring's work was unlike most graffiti in that it was universally admired by all, other writers and the community as well. It was not long before the art world took another interest in graffiti and gave way to artists like Haring. Some writers switched entirely to gallery art while some remained true to what they knew, subway art. The ones who went mainstream had to change their style somewhat to fit their work on a canvas instead of a train. Many of the artists that did not go mainstream thought that doing so would be selling out. They thought that graffiti was made for everyone to see and own, not to be hung in a gallery.

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It has been claimed that art takes us to other worlds in a way that is quite fulfilling sensually and aesthetically. This removal from the real world is enhanced by the mood of an art gallery. Most of the time when we look at art we are transported by it to other worlds, we are in a location in which we expect this to happen. However, this is not the case with graffiti art. For it appears suddenly and in unexpected places. Therefore, when we are presented with street graffiti we are transported to these other worlds at a time and in a place that we are not used to.

We are not used to art approaching us outside of conventional settings such as a museum. Instead of the audience going to view the art form, spray can art actively reaches out to its viewer.

While graffiti became popular in the art world, the surrounding communities started catching on as well. As more people viewed graffiti as art, many freshly commissioned works began to show up. Small businesses realized that hiring a graffiti artist to paint a mural would cost a lot less and was easier than paying a professional or doing themselves. This is what Pharmacist David Archer did. Archer wanted to paint something on the outside of his building but did not have the money to pay a professional. After unsuccessfully trying to do it himself, a graffiti artist offered to paint whatever Archer wanted for free. He ended up with an anti-drug message that appealed not only to his regular customers but to surrounding teens in that area that seemed to have a problem with pressure to do drugs. Graffiti can provide positive and visually pleasing outcomes at a low or no cost at all for small businesses. This is just another way that the world as a whole has already accepted graffiti as a form of art.

Schools too have also seen a need to embrace graffiti as one of society's realities. Most schools have recognized graffiti as something that is currently present and that will continue no matter what people's views on the issue are. As an extreme example, an American inner city high school in Brooklyn offers a course called " Hip Hop 101." This course covers four different aspects of hip-hop: how to do graffiti, deejay techniques, break dancing moves, and about rap. The teachers claim that they are not telling kids to do vandalism even though many think that they are. They claim that they are teaching things that are relevant in the student's lives and also making learning more fun (Lehrer). Although this is very rare, it shows that society has already begun to accept graffiti as an art form. Since more people are turning to graffiti as a form of art, the general perception of graffiti's role is continually changing.

Although it seems that people are beginning to change their views, graffiti will always be a controversial issue. The fact that it is a kind of advertisement forced on the public, who many times see it as vandalism, can be viewed differently. People have no say in the public funds that are spent to remove it. It is estimated that graffiti removal and resistance has ended up costing the United States Government and society, over \$4, 000, 000, 000 per year and this number is still rising (Dennant). Although graffiti may be forced on the public, so are flyers, billboards, and advertisements. There is more " trash" on television than can be seen almost anywhere else. Also, if the public does not want to pay, they should stop or help the fight against elimination of legal graffiti walls. Legal graffiti walls provide a safe and easy place for writers to display their work but most of these walls are being



abolished. Society may not agree with graffiti in that they are paying for something they may not want, but graffiti is not going anywhere. The destruction efforts are wrongfully placed. There needs to be an alternative instead of just trying to stop it completely.

Spray can art suffers other criticisms because of the generic characterization of all graffiti as being gang related and simply a matter of tagging. However, only 20% of graffiti is gang related and it should be noted that not all instances of graffiti art are good examples of the art form; just like not all framed artistic creations are good examples of painting or even worthy of being called art.

Graffiti is often criticized for being too hard to understand, but certainly this cannot keep graffiti art from being art anymore than the obscurity of abstract art or Picasso's cubism prevents either one of those hard to understand art forms from being considered as art.

Graffiti, in its more elaborate forms, can be considered art. It contains artistic elements, gives an outlet for self-expression, and has already been accepted by the art community. Graffiti is now a major part of modern culture and has had a major influence on traditional designers and artists. Graffiti is a positive art form as it conveys a point and can often give strength to an otherwise silent voice.

Graffiti is just another form of expression created by the human imagination. Graffiti art is not to be disqualified as art simply because it might appear illegal or unsolicited. It has clearly progressed from simplistic tags on subway trains into a sophisticated art form requiring thought and skill. To conclude,  
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graffiti in the form of spray can art is as artistically valid as any other work that might be found in a gallery or a museum.

#### Citations

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