

Graffiti

Term applied to an arrangement of institutionally illicit marks in which there has been an attempt to establish some sort of coherent composition: such marks are made by an individual or individuals (not generally professional artists) upon a wall or other surface that is usually visually accessible to the public. The term “graffiti” derives from the Greek *graphein* (to write”). Graffiti (s. *graffito*), meaning a drawing or scribbling on a flat surface, originally referred to those marks found on ancient Roman architecture. Although examples of graffiti have been found at such sites as Pompeii, the Domus Aurea of Emperor Nero (AD 54-68) in Rome, Hadrian’s Villa at Tivoli and the Maya site of Tikal in Mesoamerica, they are usually associated with 20th-century urban environments. Graffiti range from simple marks to complex and colorful compositions. Motives for the production of such marks may include a desire for recognition that is public in nature, and/or the need to appropriate public space or someone else’s private space for group or individual purposes. Illegitimate counterparts to the paid, legal advertisements on billboards or signs, graffiti utilize the wall of garages, public rest rooms, and jail cells for their clandestine messages. This illegal expression constitutes vandalism to the larger society.

Because of the illicit nature of graffiti, a can of paint and a brush are impractical while spatial considerations may make a pen or pencil ineffective. To accommodate the need for size, visibility, speed, and convenience, the ideal vehicle is the spray-can, which combines medium and applicator into one relatively small parcel that is easily concealed, transportable, easy to use; spray-paint may be applied to most surfaces. Different sized nozzles are used to achieve various effects, for example, a thin line as opposed to a wide band of paint. Where spray paint is not used or available, almost anything may serve as substitute: the aforementioned pen, pencil, paint and brush, as well as chisels, knives, felt-tip markers, blood, or even a finger on a dirty wall or window. Most media used for etching, sketching, painting, marking or writing can be adapted to such a purpose.

Because it is impossible to limit or regulate the resources that are available, graffiti as an art form and expressive medium is expandable, flexible, and difficult to control. The graffiti medium constitutes an open channel for its users to manipulate and mould to suit their needs. It represents a type of discontinuous communicative strategy through which people can engage in a visual dialogue which does not rely on face-to-face interaction or necessary knowledge of the writers’ identities.

Individualized or popular graffiti include bathroom wall marking (*latrinalia*), signatures, proclamations of love, witty comments in response to advertisements, and any number of individual, political, or social commentary (*folk epigraphy*). In general these graffiti have no affiliation beyond the scope of the individual. It is close to impossible to locate their source.

Communities that produce graffiti (as opposed to the individual “scribbler”) may target cryptic messages toward their own closed community, producing a seemingly confusing and unreadable product. The writers may not sign their real names; they instead employ the use of nicknames, codes, and symbols within stylized aesthetic systems. This type of graffiti is geared toward people who already understand the messages and may act to enhance group solidarity. Such graffiti can easily be elevated to the category of “art form” because the symbolic codes, generalized content and aesthetic features of community-based graffiti usually outlast the duration of an individual’s membership within the community. If a community’s ideological focus is geared toward the larger society or the politics of the larger state, graffiti messages usually lack cryptic symbolism, make use of the national language, and retain a more straightforward aesthetic style.

An example of this cross-culturally prevalent genre of graffiti, political graffiti may combine with other artistic and expressive forms, such as poster and comic book production, mural painting, newspaper and pamphlet production, and political art exhibitions. The marks may represent the work of unrecognized or underground political groups, radical student movements, or simply dissatisfied individuals. Political graffiti may also arise from sudden emergency situations (e.g. riots) or in response to concurrent political legislation and party politics. Although concerned with state politics, the groups that produce this type of graffiti generally comprise some

“sub-cultural” elements and may make wide use of symbols to further internally relevant quests for power and solidarity.

A second genre of graffiti, gang graffiti are used as markers by gangs usually active in urban areas. The content and form of their graffiti consist of cryptic codes and initials rigidly styled with specialized calligraphies. Gang members use graffiti to indicate group membership, to distinguish enemies and allies and, most generally, to mark boundaries which are both territorial and ideological. In this case, graffiti may merge with other art forms, like tattoo and clothing styles, to create a bounded system the concerns of which may incorporate illegitimate economic and social practices that branch far beyond the reaches of the actual graffiti.

A third genre of graffiti, graffiti art, is commonly called “hip-hop” or “New York style” graffiti and derives from a tradition of subway graffiti that originated in New York during the 1970’s. This type of graffiti has spread to large urban centers around the USA and the rest of the world, especially in Europe. Where subway cars like those in New York are unavailable, walls, rocks, road signs, billboards, train carriages, and even motor vehicles are considered suitable canvases. Graffiti artists may or may not belong to “crews,” which are groups of artists at differing levels of proficiency. Their work ranges from simple monochrome “tags” (the artist’s “name tag,” often represented in an exaggerated cursive style) to elaborate, multicolored works called “pieces” (derived from the word “masterpiece”) which are considered in some circles to be of museum quality (see fig.). As graffiti has begun to find its way from its original urban locations to the walls of galleries and museums, the question of vandalism and graffiti as an art form has provoked endless controversy, raising such questions as whether vandalism can be considered art or whether graffiti can be considered graffiti if they are made legally. The simplified imagery of graffiti has also become attractive to certain professional fine artists -- the work of the late Keith Haring in particular became “legitimized” as it moved from New York’s subway walls to the walls of galleries and private collectors in the USA. It is in part the rapid movement hip-hop graffiti art and its concomitant controversies which has spurred the development of scholarly interest surrounding people’s use of graffiti in all its aspects.

Graffiti are cross-cultural phenomena common to every literate society. Within the variable contexts of their production, graffiti personalize de-personalized space, construct landscapes of identity, make public space into private space, and act as promoters of ethnic unity as well as diversity. Graffiti can be understood as concrete manifestations of personal and communal ideologies which are visually striking, insistent, and provocative; as such, they are worthy of the continued attention of art historians, social scientists, and policy makers alike.

<http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graf.def.html>