

IS GRAFFITI SIMPLY FREE ART, OR A CRIME? - Arts administrators defend the notion of graffiti with high artistic merit while city politicians ponder a punitive new bylaw

Edmonton is grappling with the issue of graffiti by creating an anti-graffiti bylaw - the first of many communities that have enacted laws as a means of discouraging graffiti. In 2006 London, Ontario, and Winnipeg, Manitoba were of the first communities in Canada to create anti-graffiti bylaws that ban the sale of spray paint to minors. It is a misnomer that only youth create graffiti, and it is impossible to make all graffiti-related materials inaccessible, such as paint, markers, and etching materials, as there innumerable materials available to create graffiti.

Our own bylaw, which administers fines to property owners who do not clear up graffiti on the buildings they own, is also aimed at eliminating graffiti. This singular and punitive attempt at "eliminating graffiti" will not be successful, because it implies that graffiti is synonymous with vandalism and does not address the nature and potential of the medium of graffiti as public art.

Therefore the question posed to Edmontonians is: while we try to discourage illegal graffiti on private property, how can we encourage and appreciate legal graffiti and street art with high artistic merit?

The word "graffiti", of Latin origins, is formally defined as an "inscription made on a wall or other surface, usually so as to be seen by the public". Historically, even the Roman Empire and Ancient Greece were prone to graffiti tagging and scratching on walls and public surfaces - scratching which advertised services from bakeries to brothels, proclaimed religious and political sentiments, and even declarations of now long-dead love. Arguably, ancient graffiti gave rise to our current communication forms of advertising, public art, and the medium of mural painting.

Over many years, the meaning of graffiti has expanded to include complex graphics and visuals such as drawings and painting. Many types of people have used the technique of graffiti to communicate to the masses: political activists, gangs, artists, and, most importantly, regular people. It has become a very broad term that can include street art, tagging, political expressions and messages that are displayed in public space, both legally and illegally.

Take a look at your city: buildings and streetscapes are covered in messages and images designed to catch your eye. Some of it is street art, some is graffiti, and of course, some is the most prevalent of all public messaging, advertising. Are advertising images and messages graffiti? Are all legal expressions and freely available messages desired by the public? Who controls the urban environment? Does private ownership of spaces accessible to the public equal control of the public domain? Graffiti responds to these questions of ownership by assertion of the individual within the public domain.

Graffiti becomes very interesting when you talk about where it is placed: graffiti is found in public spaces, accessible and visible to anyone. However, most "public spaces" are actually privately owned; hence the illegality of defacing private property. Illegal tagging and graffiti are largely considered vandalism, similar to computer hacking or home invasion in nature, where an offender asserts their criminality on the territory of others.

Part of the subversive reputation of graffiti culture is the idea that you can claim your city. This concept directly relates to modern art movements that advocate that the city can be viewed as an outdoor gallery. And that art should be for everyone, and should not be restrained to the context and regulations of a traditional white-cube art gallery exhibition space, which is usually considered to be exclusive in terms of which artists are represented and how the artwork is presented.

In this context, the medium of graffiti provides a creative expression that initially managed to bypass the bureaucratic systems of the art world. Banksy, an anonymous British street artist, has gained notoriety through his graffiti interventions of seditious spray painted and stenciled public artworks, which are now sold by Sotheby's auction house in London for over \$500,000 CAD. The popularity of his works reflect both the prevalence and range of graffiti in mainstream culture and have elevated Banksy to the status of an icon, as evident in his nomination as the Greatest Living Briton 2007 in the award category of the Arts.

One example of an initiative to promote positive graffiti relations is for a municipality to designate areas as legal graffiti walls. Legal graffiti walls are really just open source murals, where artists have permission to create street art and graffiti-style public artworks, which are often complex in technique and composition. Graffiti can have a significant artistic value, and does indeed have a legitimate place throughout art history. Renowned artists, including Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, have elevated the use of graffiti iconography and practice to that of avant-garde or high art. Recognizing and encouraging the aesthetic complexity and artistic merit in graffiti is important in discouraging graffiti which is created solely for the purpose of marking territory – essentially, quality versus quantity. Edmonton currently has one designated legal graffiti site, where the LRT emerges from the underground between Churchill Station and Stadium. A second commonly known site where graffiti is tolerated but unofficially sanctioned is the 109th Street pedestrian corridor near the Legislature grounds.

Street art and legal graffiti murals are an important example of how public art can transform a plain grey cement wall, providing free art for everyone. Creating bylaws to limit the sale of spray paint or enforcing property owners to clean up defaced buildings will not eradicate graffiti because it is a demonstrated medium of communication that has been used for centuries. Anti-graffiti bylaws created by the municipality should be accompanied with a plan to significantly increase the number of legal and sanctioned graffiti areas as well as an education strategy that promotes the development of graffiti with high artistic merit for graffiti artists, and encourages the public to appreciate the aesthetic elements and incredible skill evident in high quality graffiti.

Encouraging legal spaces for street art is an essential strategy as a proactive means to discouraging illegal vandalism; it allows spaces for creative and healthy public expression, creating interesting and dynamic cultural cities with images and artworks that beautify the city environment, and challenge and inspire its inhabitants.

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