More to see than a canvas in a white cube: For an art in the streets

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More to see than a canvas in a white cube
For an art in the streets

Joe Austin

Graffiti art is neither ‘simply graffiti’ nor ‘simply art’, but a new kind of visual cultural production that exceeds both categories. Graffiti art moved beyond the neo-dada/pop art strains of (post)modern (galleried) painting and took the next dialectical step, out into the streets: no longer paintings on canvas that mimic the image-strewn city walls, but the city walls themselves as the canvas for new image-making. Street art has read the signs of this historic move correctly, and has followed graffiti art in ‘taking place’ in the public sphere of the public square. These new art forms are an enhancement to contemporary urban living, a welcome growth in the living city, a disruption of the unexamined assumptions connecting urban visual culture and the existing social order. Another art city is now possible if the art in the street is taken seriously.

Key words: graffiti art, public space, pop art, street art, everyday urban life, neo-dada

Urban studies and art history (both broadly construed) have had a productive if somewhat narrow conversation, long institutionalized in academic subfields like architectural history and urban design. Clarke’s classic study connecting the French impressionists and Haussmannization of Paris in the mid-19th century usefully pulled the history of modern painting into the discussion, opening a new series of investigations into urban visual culture (1999). Drawing from this legacy in art history, a number of outstanding studies of more mundane visual culture and experience within cities have recently appeared (Tagg, 1992; Bright and Bakewell, 1995; Zukin, 1995; Goldman and Papson, 1996; Mirzoeff, 1998). In particular, I want to take note of the ways in which the turn towards the everyday has adjusted the analytic lens to center on the mundane experiences of urban walls and streets, including aesthetic experiences. Art history has extensively examined this local urban place-scale, and found that a considerable portion of modern art has been created in response to the human-scaled city experience (Sommers, 1975; San Francisco Museum of Art, 1978; Ramirez, 2000; Morley, 2003; Taylor, 2008; Shannon, 2009). Despite the new scholarship on the rich visual artefacts of urban walls and streets, many long-standing phenomena within this realm have mostly gone unnoticed and unincorporated into these conversations, including graffiti art.
The new writing that appeared on New York City’s public walls in the late 1960s and early 1970s (hereafter, graffiti art) was unprecedented in modern history, and as such, the history of its development does not easily or adequately fall into common categories of understanding nor of established academic discipline. Despite the claims (but mostly presumptions) of city officials, policing authorities, and their journalistic and academic supporters, graffiti art is very poorly understood as vandalism. Although somewhat more grounded, there is little gain in contextualizing this art within the history of graffiti. These two related ‘common-sense’ approaches are, however, quite useful in the work to justify and implement the authorized municipal viewpoint against graffiti art, and as the city’s authoritative voices, municipal officials have dominated the discussion of ‘illegal’ graffiti art in much of the mass mediated public sphere (Austin, 2001). Several alternatives to approaching graffiti art as ‘vandalism’ and ‘graffiti’ exist among existing academic researches, including approaching it sociologically as ‘youth subculture’ and/or historically as ‘urban cultural history’ (Castleman, 1984; Ferrell, 1996, 2001; Austin, 2001; Miller, 2002; Macdonald, 2003; Snyder, 2009). Most urban policymakers have not found these approaches useful, since they draw attention away from their own preferred framework for graffiti art as an urban problem confronting the city-state.

In a direct challenge to this viewpoint, I am proposing that graffiti art is a potential enhancement to everyday urban life. Such a reversal of perspective requires a significant change in the framework of understanding. Missing from most current understandings of graffiti art (municipal or academic) is a framework that takes the ‘art’ seriously and places it at the center of analysis, particularly the art that has been produced illegally in the shared public spaces of the modern city. Shifting the lens of analysis towards aesthetics, art and urban visual culture offers new understandings of graffiti art, but it also reveals an under-explored but pervasive cultural investment: a transparent, ‘common-sense’, socially unconscious connection between definitions of urban visual order (a kind of aesthetic imperative) and urban social order (a kind of political imperative).

In this paper, I make a sketch of this alternative lens within urban studies for viewing graffiti art. My argument proceeds through a set of qualified exclusions. Framing graffiti art within the history of graffiti (and thus affirming its connections to simple vandalism) cuts off significant possibilities for understanding what is historically unique about this aesthetic form. In a similar way, framing graffiti art within the history of modern painting, to which it also bears strong family resemblances, hinders our understanding of the significant differences that graffiti art has with the galleried art world. Common terminology aside, graffiti art is not well understood as graffiti or as (fine) art. Removing these two frameworks opens up new space for seeing graffiti art as a valued addition to contemporary urban life and a new kind of urban art that has already spawned a second, more expanded variety: street art.

More for the eye than a scratch on the wall: graffiti art is not graffiti

Almost every municipal office on the planet dealing with graffiti art approaches it as a simple and clear instance of the everyday, common graffiti that is imagined to have been scratched into urban walls throughout human history. Pictured simply as graffiti, graffiti art is a violation (defacement, vandalism) of property law, and thus under modern municipal responsibility, surveillance and police. Is the (timeless?) history of graffiti an adequate framework for representing this contemporary urban visual phenomenon? The affirmative presumption was common enough for artist and art historian Jack
Stewart to carefully sift the evidence in one of the early and key academic works on the subject. Stewart found that the new graffiti-writing that began to appear in New York City around 1970 did indeed deserve mention in the history of graffiti, and as assumed, it bears some comparison to names that have been scratched, carved and written in urban public places for a very, very long time. But Stewart also found that graffiti art was historically unique in almost all of its significant distinguishing characteristics. Graffiti art’s recognizable visually aesthetic intentions, the physical size of typical individual productions (throw-up, masterpiece), its rapid proliferation and collective coverage of urban visual space, the locations it occupies within the urban landscape, and the complex social organization of graffiti art production are unprecedented in the history of graffiti. Graffiti art is a radical disruption in the history of graffiti (Stewart, 1989).

Graffiti art is a face-to-face, social practice with clear aesthetic intentions and unlike traditional graffiti, the semantic content of graffiti art is secondary to its visual aspirations. The identity of the individual (name and/or signature) is a crucial component of both, but graffiti art developed and is practiced collectively within skilled, locally organized subcultures. Since Stewart published his dissertation, graffiti art has become a self-consciously globalized practice (Ganz and Manco, 2004; Monfort, 2004; Almqvist and Hagelin, 2005; Camerota, 2008). All of these qualities constitute a graffiti art that is very different from isolated, self-selected individuals writing in the anonymity afforded by chance opportunities in public places for a mostly imagined audience, as is true of popularly produced public toilet graffiti or latrinealia (Dundes, 1966). While the long history of graffiti on city walls might provide some unexplored avenues for future investigations of graffiti art, the elements that are most characteristic and significant to this art are not to be found in any available histories of graffiti. Thus, the history of graffiti is at best an unstable framework for understanding much of anything about the graffiti art of the last 40 years, beyond a few banal observations affirming (or suspicious) of a putative ‘timeless human nature’ made to stand in for a more foundational fear of young people in cities. Nonetheless, framing the unprecedented phenomenon of graffiti art as a clear (and expected) instance of traditional graffiti does allow municipal authorities and property owners to easily mobilize efforts to contain the unauthorized visual use of their property and to punish its producers by portraying them as historically recurring, youthful, simpleton assailants on the shared moral order of their elders, or more degradingly, as animals ‘marking a territory’ to which they are not entitled.

New contexts are necessary to construct new, shared meanings, and after 40 years, it is due time. In the last four decades, graffiti art has produced a culturally rich visual history that links artists, city spaces, urban audiences and media technologies across the globe. The art form’s collectively sustained duration, its historically complex social and institutional development, and its aesthetic sophistication place it among the longest-running, global visual culture movements originating within the 20th century, and perhaps the most important of the last decades. These facts render unreasonable any approach to graffiti art as simply vandalism or as a disposable ‘youth fad’, lacking seriousness, importance or significance (Ricard, 1981). Likewise, the overused connections between graffiti art and the history of graffiti have covered over much more suggestive comparisons and contexts that have gone unexplored.

More to see than a canvas in a white cube: graffiti art is not (galleried) art

Graffiti art, like 19th-century Parisian impressionism and many of the modern art movements that followed, emerged and took shape as an aesthetic response to changes in the common experiences of the modern urban environment. Graffiti art’s origination in the
‘bad neighborhoods’ of the city that stole modern art from Paris, in the streets of the city that claims to be the art capital of the world, in post-industrial New York City, is immediately suggestive and difficult to ignore. Art most clearly matters in New York City, and the city has continually asserted and built upon its global reputation as a center for visual art culture and commerce in the last half-century. Graffiti art bears strong family resemblances to the visual forms within the history of modern art that have made New York City famous (Guilbaut, 1985). These visual forms more closely match the spatial coverage, the ubiquity, the composition, and connections between producer, work and audience characteristic of graffiti art. These are family resemblances worth exploring, even if (as I will argue later) they do not add up to an adequate framework.

During the early years of its development (roughly the period before 1980), graffiti art was shaped in a direct dialogue with urban events and the constantly remade places in New York City. Given the centrality of the city to modern art, connections between New York City, graffiti art and newly emerging modern art movements of the 1970s might reasonably be expected. Corrinne Robins’ *The Pluralist Era: American Art, 1968–1981* (1985) proposes a synthetic historical narrative of the art of that period, although graffiti art is not mentioned in Robins’ study. Like graffiti art, several of the new or renewed art movements of that decade shared an exploration of aesthetic priorities and social identities traditionally overlooked or excluded from the institutions and canonical narratives of modern art, including the art of women and people of color, the artwork of political insurgency, and art produced from industrial, mundane and non-traditional materials.

Robins notes that several new movements of this period were connected to civil rights and social identity movements (1985). Many of the early writers held sympathies for assertive community-based (re-)definitions of identity, centered around notions of ‘pride’, ‘liberation’, ‘people power’ and countercultural movements. These struggles for new and community-legitimated social identities and aesthetic priorities in shared public life—a kind of cultural citizenship—are often cited as causal links in early graffiti artists’ accounts of the art’s origins (PHASE 2 and Schmidlapp, 1996). In the US social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, aesthetic sensibilities and adequate representation were community property, located in a lineage of (sometimes imagined) traditions or embodied practices. Retentions of the myriad visual cultural traditions that artists brought into graffiti art are important aesthetic traces, and many of these have not been adequately detailed. Historical memories and social experiences can be carried forward, reshaped, reflected and maintained within cultural forms, graffiti art no less than quilts, customized chopper motorcycles, oil paint on canvas or the potter’s arts.

Graffiti art is heavily inflected and cross-cut with clearly articulated sensibilities belonging to numerous social and ethnic communities: African American, Puerto Rican, immigrant, poor, countercultural. In this regard, graffiti art is not so different than other aesthetic agendas that formed in this decade that attempted to find aesthetic grounding in a narrow range of shared identity. But locating graffiti exclusively in a narrow range of identity–community sensibilities present within New York City during the 1970s also ignores the socially heterogeneous and historically/geographically contingent network of the subculture at that time, a heterogeneity that is even more clearly in evidence in the last 20 years. While I am not doubting the central importance of aesthetic preferences drawn from the multifaceted history of the Black Atlantic, particularly in the earliest years, this history alone leaves too much of graffiti art unexplained. It is true that in most artworks the writer’s social connections—including city and neighborhood (often codes for ethnic identity in the USA)—are acknowledged, visually maintained and conventionally expected.
These are important, but locating a common aesthetic tradition in an ethnic or national identity has not proven satisfying for the kinds of modern art contextualizations I am interested in here.\textsuperscript{7} Some of the historical memories embedded in its forms are connected to alternative visions of urban order that continue to challenge New York City’s status quo.

Robins did not put \textit{The Pluralist Era} forward as a complete and finished road map of US artistic production during the 1970s. I cite her work here as an attempt to narrate the complex connections between some of the key actors, groups, events and movements within the history of modern art in New York City during that period. More importantly than the similarities between graffiti art and other art of that period, Robins argues that neither a majority aesthetic nor a dominant art movement continued or emerged in those years, at least not in the way that abstract expressionism is imagined to have preceded and been overtaken by the dominance of pop art in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{8} Instead, \textit{The Pluralist Era} plots several of the alternative aesthetic visions that circulated and established themselves in particular high-profile galleries, sales, exhibitions and publications. Even in retrospect, none of those alternatives, or the aesthetic formations that had originated in the 1960s alongside or after pop art have become a singular or dominant artistic icon of the period. Thus, graffiti art emerged in a historical era in which even avant-garde aesthetic assumptions and possibilities were fragmenting, shifting and perhaps decentralizing within the authorized, institutionalized New York City art world. We might approach graffiti art as a more or less bounded enterprise, as Robins did with other movements—fragments that began or were recognized during the 1970s.\textsuperscript{9}

Robins’ narrative analysis provides strong support for turning towards the internal development of graffiti art within its own immediate visual boundaries: pluralism requires a much greater degree of specificity. If graffiti art is best located in dialogue with the Pluralist Decade (which describes both a rupture in the interconnected art historical frameworks of the past, but also proposes a new, more fragmented stage in that same narrative) then perhaps an appropriate framework would map out connections between graffiti writers and their myriad aesthetic influences, local scenes, new techniques and visual innovations, with little emphasis on their significance in the longer history of modern art. This perspective has framed almost all of the important non-fiction and academic writing on the aesthetic dimensions of graffiti art to this point, including my own (Austin, 2001). The recent proliferation of histories of individual artists and particular city and national scenes is a welcomed and astoundingly important development in documenting the history of graffiti art. We can create a history of graffiti art (at least a viable working draft) by synthesizing the scholarship and critical writing on the art with the artist’s accounts and autobiographies that are currently available. But this important history alone would not be able to adequately answer how graffiti art could be best situated within the histories of the modern city and modern art, or within everyday urban visual cultures.\textsuperscript{10} The fragmentation of mainstream (post)modern art histories is no justification for the continued segregation of graffiti art.

I want to turn towards another and more well-established, though equally multi-form, aesthetic trajectory connecting modern art and the city suggested in several recent studies (Morley, 2003; Taylor, 2008; Shannon, 2009). Connections between graffiti art and particular modern avant-garde movements of the past have been proposed by other observers of graffiti art, though not within a broad lineage of modernism. Briefly, I want to suggest a way that graffiti art might be profitably connected to a critical strand of modern art history that conventionally connects the dada movement of the early 20th century to neo-dada and pop art of the 1950s and 1960s and from there into the pluralist era of the
1970s. Dada and its many legitimated progeny work with bits of typography and language as constituent visual elements of the everyday urban landscape, as does graffiti art. Posters, product labels, slogans, signs, illustration, newspapers and photojournalism as well as typographic letter-forms themselves are approached as the ‘natural flora’ of the cityscape and are central to the visual vocabulary of any number of key modern painters, movements and new art forms, particularly collage.\footnote{11}

Representations of the urban wordscape (banners, signs, posters, newspapers) have been a notable part of modern art since impressionism (Morley, 2003). Collage moves dialectically beyond the conventional representational vocabulary of painted image and introduces iconic and indexical signs—material fragments of everyday visual life from outside the art galleries—into artworks for the purposes of artistic, social and political critique as well as to create visual pleasures or to induce and create memories. Much of collage is (seemingly) guided by a ‘found aesthetic’ where happenstance is deployed in selecting images, words and materials, with individual artists placing varying emphases on formal qualities (color, texture, shape, line, etc.) and/or on the symbolic-representational affinities and meanings associated with these images, works and materials in everyday (non-art) life (Jencks and Silver, 1973; Waldman, 1992; Taylor, 2008; Shannon, 2009). Collage has also been guided by an aesthetic of juxtaposition and montage, strategies of making new and unexpected combinations and comparisons from elements not typically found together. Montage is a technique for making the socially invisible re-appear through abrupt comparisons, and in so doing, opening up assumptions or claims that might otherwise go unnoticed or unchallenged. Montage has long been associated with a critical tradition within modern art, often explicitly connected to overt political struggles (Hamilton, 2001).

In a parallel way, graffiti art has selected and drawn attention to certain ‘found spots’ on the city walls including the sides of trains, buses and trucks—areas colonized by advertising or simply ignored altogether. The montage technique is also part of graffiti art’s ‘found’ aesthetic: graffiti art’s placement in the urban landscape is both opportunistic (found) but also selected for its juxtapositions. Graffiti art has appropriated billboards and outdoor advertising (inviting comparisons), for instance, as a way of calling attention to the occupation of the city by authorized interests that are anything but democratic. In both collage and graffiti art, the city ‘appears within’, shapes and partially constitutes the artwork itself. The city and its myriad writings are fundamental contextual references, without which graffiti art is poorly understood. Within graffiti art, the city itself is deployed as an artistic material.\footnote{12}

Thus, a main commonality between collage and graffiti art is their intimate relationship to the transforming-decaying-destroying-(re)building-expanding-spectacular city of the 20th century. Both art forms rely on the city-in-process to cast up new art materials and artistic opportunities. Graffiti artists and collagists select from the frequent change and constant novelty in the urban visual landscape for material inspiration and visual vocabulary, including borrowings from the commercial public sphere of newspapers, magazines, comic books, advertising and films, among a long list of other cultural products. For most graffiti artists, and for several canonical collagists, common yet constantly changing visual forms and locations in the cityscape are of key importance: windows, walls, billboards and outdoor advertising, placards held in street demonstrations, city signage and the visual experiences of human movement through the city. The ubiquity and mundane repetition of these forms, locations and perception-in-movement (that is, their indexical everydayness) provide opportunities to visually disrupt common sense and redirect the attention of urban audiences.

Neo-dadaist Robert Rauschenberg’s assemblages and silk-screened collages of the
1950s and 1960s are among the best known and frequently reproduced examples of the collage tradition within modern art. Taking debris from New York City’s ever-rebuilding projects and selecting images blowing through its public sphere, Rauschenberg created gigantic collages that mimicked the visual experience of moving through the city, the ‘vernacular glance’ and dis-orderly montage of visually passing by locations dominated by images (O’Doherty, 1973). Warhol and the pop artists followed Rauschenberg as inheritors of dada’s critical stance, again making juxtapositions between images, objects, materials and locations that call caustic and ironic attention to the enormous emotional, spiritual, cultural and financial capital that is socially (mis?)placed in visual image. The mixture of advertising and popular culture forms with fine art painting is a key element of pop art, a modern movement that has been proposed as a ‘fine art’ context for understanding graffiti art. In ways that easily can be over-emphasized, graffiti art also can operate within an ironic space, similarly questioning while enthusiastically participating in self-promotion and popularity. Like graffiti art, pop art liberally borrowed from the visual vocabularies of city lettering and the advertising image-wind circulating in New York City’s public spheres and shared public spaces. Both are concerned with celebrity, public renown, and the cultural strategies of advertising and propaganda, including the spectacular presentation of the name in public life, slogans and signs, and the kinds of urban visual culture that I described earlier in relation to collage. Popular print culture, particularly comic books and popular illustration, provided important backstock images to both pop and graffiti art. I also note a similar back and forth exchange between gallery art and commercial design that has characterized the careers of important graffiti and pop artists (The Institute of Contemporary Art et al., 1988).

Unfortunately, the narrative trajectory connecting pop art to graffiti art has usually left most graffiti artists (if they are mentioned at all) in the footnotes on the way to validating Jean-Micheal Basquiat and Keith Haring as the best representatives of graffiti art within the modernist traditions. Basquiat and Haring have legitimate social connections to and influences with graffiti art, but much better connections to pop art. Competing assertions that graffiti art is best represented by Phase 2 or by Keith Haring do not necessarily contradict each other (they could both be true, if their respective spaces were properly circumscribed), and each of these versions of ‘graffiti art’ has its institutions, its critics, its collectors and its academics (Becker, 2008). But neither Haring and Basquiat nor the vast majority of graffiti artists would likely acknowledge an equivalence between these two competing versions of graffiti art. I interpret the fact that these two histories of ‘graffiti art’ do not contradict as evidence that the graffiti art that I am attempting to place is not pop art. That is, one cannot encompass the other.

First, graffiti art’s relationships to the art object it produces and to the image-wind it borrows from is significantly different from pop art. Unlike pop, graffiti art’s investment in authentic self-expression outweighs ironic distance, and is better positioned on the engaged and expressive side of the engaged/detached opposition in art. Selection of name, style and image in graffiti art might begin at some abstract distance as it is designed, and there is indeed an ironic appropriation of celebrity or superhero status. However, that initial self-detachment from the name and signature is lost over time as it is intimately socialized and socially produced within the graffiti artists’ community. Often selection of a graffiti artist’s name and image begins with a personal preference, an opportunity for a virtuoso design display, or some other self-expressive investment before it is collectively weighted and validated within the artist’s crew or local urban scene. Conflicting claims to ownership of a name or style or image in graffiti art are likely to end in fisticuffs: there is a real, personal investment of identity at
stake. It is more difficult to imagine a pop artist (reasonably) fighting for exclusive claim to an image that was intentionally selected because of its ubiquity and lack of recognizable or exclusive ownership.

Likewise, pop art’s overt meta-critical commentary on living within a mass-produced commercial popular culture—an inside joke made by slicing out popular imagery from its usual consumption places and (dis)placing them into fine art galleries for contemplative consideration—is not a central concern for graffiti art. Graffiti artists are not detached observers of popular culture, making sly insider jokes about the humanistic presumptions of (post)modern art, but then neither are they naive consumers. Having observed that public discourse is primarily a matter of circulating name-images, most graffiti artists position themselves as engaged, outlaw participants in popular culture production.14 As participants interjecting themselves into the public image-flow, they circulate their own names. Though it shares some important intellectual and aesthetic similarities and engages similar urban visual phenomena, the graffiti art of concern in this paper is not adequately understood as an extension of the pop art movement.15

Modern art (including graffiti art created by graffiti artists as painting and sculpture for public show or sale in a gallery), even art that is overtly and caustically critical of authorities, can live happily and mostly undisturbed (though selected and regulated) in its designated areas of the city: galleries and interior exhibition spaces, art fairs, museums, art schools, semi-public corporate plazas, businesses, homes, the lawns and lands owned by the city, state and nation. Modern art is authorized, expected and posed in shared public spaces and in those places, can say what it will (within bounds). But graffiti is an unauthorized artistic act that collectively and illegally ‘takes place’ in shared public space. One may assert a right to the public square as the proper exhibition space for graffiti art, but graffiti art in most US cities has never been, nor is it likely to soon become, public art by current institutionalized definitions. Most graffiti artists do not seek the permission of owners, an established art world and/or official municipal representatives, three very powerful audiences and important supporters for public art. Graffiti art appears in public space, and is in dialogue with the city’s legal public sphere, but it is not public art.

Art history is well recognized as an institutionalized story and a story of institutionalizing particular artists within particular historical narratives. Graffiti art was schooled in another art academy, starkly different from the institutions of modern art, and that difference in schooling can’t be ignored (Figure 1). Graffiti art did not originate in any recognizable way as a response to a prior modern art movement, a key element in establishing the historical lineage needed for inclusion in the modern art narrative. The intellectual, social and cultural wars over form, substance, influence, canonical qualities and ideologies of art that have inspired modern movements since the early 20th century are irrelevant to most graffiti artists.

Several of the individual eras and movements within the history of 20th-century modern art could be characterized (at least initially) as ‘disorderly’, and ‘not knowing their proper place’. Like graffiti art, part of modern art’s established historical identity has been staked on offering up an immoderate and critical, public visual notice to authorities variously defined. Modern art and graffiti art stand to provoke, and ‘the shock of the new’ is still a valued and practiced ritual of both, even if postmodernism’s corrosive gaze has reshaped modern art’s shock into an anxious self-consciousness in the viewer. An important failure in the attempt to locate graffiti art within modern art coalesces around matters of private and public property, matters that deal with ownership and authority as much as aesthetics, at least on first glance. Despite the family resemblances to other, recognized art forms, graffiti art has enjoyed no tolerance or
celebration in the USA, certainly not New York City where the practice came of age. During a 20-year period in New York City, the crime of creating graffiti art in shared public spaces changed from a bench violation (usually requiring a chat with a municipal judge and some sort of minor restitution, but no jail time) to a felony with jail sentences akin to what other nations allot for violent crimes. A felon is not allowed to vote in most public elections in the USA—the felon is cast out of the democratic community, and becomes simply an inhabitant, no longer a citizen.

Unlike modern art, graffiti art has a criminal record in most jurisdictions where it is practiced, and most large cities host at least one and often many anti-graffiti groups, including expensive and elite police squads devoted to arresting artists. Although linked in many ways to authorized forms of visual culture, graffiti art continues to insist on a deviant claim, a minority report, a militant critique and an alternative vision of urban social order in situ, outside the white cubes of the gallery district (O’Doherty, 1986). Graffiti artists painting and making work in the street and/or on trains have been engaged in law breaking—violations of property rather than a singular creation of aesthetic commodities and objects of ownership. It is for these reasons that it has been easier to ignore or misrepresent graffiti art’s aesthetic and visionary implications than one might otherwise expect. The protection and maintenance of property along narrow legal guidelines is fundamental in all dominant modern social orders. Defacements of any sort (imagined or actual) can incite deep fears of erosion at the social bases of property ownership, understood to be the pillar of urban life. Also, most graffiti artists have been young men, a group whose relationship to ownership and property in the city is frequently assumed to be criminal, particularly in US central cities after the 1960s.
I do not mean this to be a simplistic, blanket dismissal of galleried art, and one can immediately cite works by Haacke, Spiro, Golub and a long list of others that are much more overtly critical of the dominant social and political orders than graffiti art, at least within the content of their works. But form matters, and it matters in fine art perhaps more than anywhere else. The white cubes of the galleries and the museums in part determine the artistic forms they contain, and at the same time, are themselves an urban form. The shared public spaces of the city are another urban form, which shape a significantly different and new art (Figure 2).16

For an art in the streets

New contexts reflect and shape new meaning. Though by no means conclusive nor beyond reproach, my brief survey above suggests that key characteristics of graffiti art are left outside the modern art framework. Just as graffiti art has a branch in the family tree of graffiti, but is like no other in that family history, graffiti art is art, but like no art currently narrated in modern art history. To accommodate that difficult uniqueness, I want to propose a different trajectory: indeed, a turn in the opposite direction. I want to conclude by proposing that illegally placing work on public walls is a significant contribution to, even a step forward for, modern art. That is, graffiti art was a new departure in the history of modern art, and this departure opens up new potentials for modernism, potentials already in view within graffiti art’s progeny, street art.17 Through graffiti art, another trajectory within modern art history can be assembled that took place in the city, and has become ‘disorderly’ in a new way. I affirm the life-enhancing qualities of the fine arts for urban living. I see graffiti art and street art as an indication of a new stage in that life-enhancing project.
To make this turn, to see beyond what graffiti art is or is not, and towards what modern art might become if it were to follow graffiti art out into the street, a first anchoring stitch requires a brief return to earlier connections made between the collage and the modern city. Collage brought bits and pieces of the city into the picture frame and the artwork. Rauschenberg gathered up the trash of consumer culture and the rubble of the post-industrializing urban transformation of New York City that was taking place around him, re-assembled it, and took it into the ‘proper place’ of fine art in the urban landscape: galleries and museums. These are safe spaces, where the emperors can be challenged and disrobed, but they are also contained places. The urban glance is captured and put on display within the white cube. Art in these spaces is not taken seriously as a threat to social order in the USA, or even as a disorderly party, for obvious reasons. Without doubt, images of public disruption are themselves potentially disruptive, with the possibility to motivate action. But the intended audience of the galleried artwork is the moneyed and tasteful bourgeois, come to be shocked and outraged, and then to select and purchase commodities in their delight. Whether the revolution will be televised is still an open question, but we can be certain that the revolution will not be offered for authorized purchase or display. Graffiti art, in many ways, did not have the opportunity to drag the decaying postindustrial city indoors, like dragging pieces of a rotting corpse onto an ironing board in a trendy nightclub for autopsy. Given its other opportunities, graffiti art has insisted that what is at stake in modern art is actually located (and alive) outside and beyond the velvet ropes, in shared public space itself. Rather than the walls of the white cube, isolating the art object for contemplation and commodity seduction, the city walls in shared public space are taken up as new canvas, new material, new frames. For graffiti art, it is here, where everyone can see, that a pleasurable critique of the standing order should ‘take place’.

Dominant expectations of visual order seem to be most pervasive when they are socially ‘invisible’ and unmentioned in public because of a socialized lack of awareness or concern. ‘Move along on your way’, the mundane order collectively instructs us, ‘nothing unusual to see here.’ Voluntary consent and continual socialization (a pedagogy of numbing repetition) allow foundational visual norms to ‘disappear into the usual’ of urban experience. Urban social order is, for a great many city leaders, a matter of ‘common-sense’ visual order. This is, the social order is (partially, tenuously) held together by cultural agreements about aesthetic matters. The hegemonic common sense of public order has, in part, a founding justification in conservative aesthetics—traditions should be maintained or new functional rituals should be institutionalized, even in the face of factual evidence that the social system is seriously malfunctioning. The moral order has a visual vocabulary at its assistance, an aesthetics of moral order. We do not at all become blinded by these arrangements, but a narrow range of acceptable public visual orders appear to be the laws of human nature to the powerful and sometimes to the majority of a city, as they collectively pass along, presume, maintain and attempt to adjust the established commonsense orders and the urban networks of everyday life. This need not result in a rigid, bland or overwhelming homogeneity of experiences. But the urban visual orders of the last half-century have secured ways to conceal massive historical injustices as well as current practices of systematic inequality in the USA, and make oppression appear to be natural and unavoidable or episodic and individualistic. These cultural orders powerfully shape our understandings of past experiences and guide social actions, but remain mostly unexamined.

New contexts can shape new meanings. Taking place in shared public space is tactical and materialist, asserting that the common-sense aesthetic is not an adequate reflection of our collective everyday lives. Graffiti art
disrupts the coherence of common-sense aesthetics. It violates the urban habitus. Graffiti art defaces the commonsensical, recognized, expected authority lodged in the property ownerships of classical (and neo-) liberalism, public or private, effecting a detraction of pleasure and security in some viewers. It performs a re-writing of foundational cultural symbols and materials.

Jane Jacobs observed in the classic *The Death and Life of American Cities* (1961) that the city cannot and should not be a unified work of art, even at the neighborhood level. The modern urban planning movement has frequently drawn upon justifications of legibility, efficiency and coherence, and indeed, it was against these sorts of city planning initiatives that Jacobs’ tome was aimed. Recently, Miriam Greenberg’s *Branding New York* (2008) has moved critical attention up a scale, and has shown how the war on graffiti art is but one small part of a larger pattern of initiatives to commercially revitalize the city’s visual order to attract and maintain national and global corporate headquarters, as well as bolster the tourist trade. New York City governmental strategies of removing the homeless, regulating sexually oriented business to force them away from Times Square, and making war on graffiti offers instances in which an authorized aesthetic—always operating under other guises—undertook direct action. Notions of urban visual order, usually less noticeable, were overtly mobilized within ‘anti-graffiti’ legislation, policing practices and litigation against offenders. Presumed categories of analysis and action (e.g. ‘normal’ ideas of vandalism, defacement, ‘cleanliness’, visual order) are implied in the established strategies of municipal agencies and in city regulations regarding private property ownership, as well as in some popular film and other forms of mass culture that attempt to re-present (neo-)New York City. Here was a nostalgic dream of a formerly ‘clean modernity’ that had (thankfully) never existed, a unified aesthetic design for a unified social ordering that was never fully able to take place.

Graffiti art provided (and still provides) a way of seeing something new: an-other visual order is possible, and so an-other city is possible, and so an-other life is possible as well. Of course graffiti art and street art are certainly not the road maps or the avant-garde of a more satisfying urban redemption. However, their disruption of the authorized visual order demonstrates a new tactic in the pedagogy and socialization of the eye, a fresh and unexpected new skirmish line in modern art. Like galleried art, like the city imagined as artwork, graffiti art is a site of aesthetic pedagogy. Art is work: labor on and in the social world that reshapes the ‘found’ opportunities in our encounter with the city, creating new locations, new places through which we might travel or locate. Spontaneous and unauthorized public art has value in its potential to reflect the ignored or yet-unarticulated public sentiments, offering an alternative public venue for public discussion, information sharing and creation. But perhaps the real question is whether we—as urban citizens—are ready to allow ‘unauthorized’ people (including ourselves) to write on the public walls.

Graffiti art is aesthetically credible as art and it bears the marks of connection to widely accepted and valued visual traditions, traditions that have made New York City a global art hub. Graffiti art has added a new and important repertoire of iconic elements to the discussion and the narratives of visual order in the modern city and to modern art. Graffiti art performs the theatrical right to the city, to the streets, to the shared public spaces of urban modernity. It enhances city life. A revolution that does not allow the citizens to write on the city walls can be no revolution at all.

Notes

1 On the unprecedented nature of graffiti art, see quotes by Phase 2, IZ THE WIZ and others in PHASE 2 and Schmidlapp (1996). In my view, this book published in Italy by PHASE 2 (the godfather of graffiti art style) and David Schmidlapp (editor of

The history and significance of collage as a modern form has been well studied, and only a very brief summary can be offered in this paper. For a more adequate accounting, I recommend interested readers to the introduction in Taylor (2008).

See Ferrell and Weide, this issue.

See, for instance, Hager (1986), Taylor (2006) and Sladen and Yedgar (2007). I do not at all mean to imply the art championed in the halls of (post)modernity is of no relevance or value. Indeed Hager produced one of the first and best books on hip hop, which included important chapters on graffiti art, and Haring, at least, made his considerable debt to graffiti art explicit. But a reader searching in these and most other books attempting to chronicle New York art history will have dim luck finding more than a mention and perhaps a photograph of the graffiti artists I write about in this paper.

See Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Just as Haug describes shoplifting as an unintended consequence of the confluence of commodity aesthetics and self-service retail store, and shoplifters as motivated by the same impulses as buyers, so too are graffiti writers sensitive and sophisticated readers of the commodity aesthetics and the urban landscape, and have appropriated the name-brand of the star for unintended, unauthorized purposes.

Finding the history of modern art lacking in important and substantial ways, one might consider one other art world network that has crystallized in the USA during the 1990s. At present, there is very little critical work on the artists assembled variously under ‘the Juxtapoz Factor’, ‘Pop Surrealism’ or ‘Lowbrow Art’. Lowbrow is a popular and commercial art movement cobbled together from a wide range of visual culture vocabularies and their audiences, including the art of west coast surfer, chopper motorcycle, hotrod and lowrider car subcultures; underground comics and psychedelia; tiki and several other ‘retro-exotic’ consumer design styles of the postwar and early cold war eras; tattoo culture; as well as the advertising and television imagery typical of canonical pop art. A coherent institutional matrix for this art world would include Art Alternative and then Juxtapoz magazines, Copro/Nason gallery in Santa Monica, California, Last Gasp publishers, a handful of key exhibitions at regional or city museums (mostly on the west coast), and the substantial list of commonly referenced artists represented in these spaces. It has developed a
new art market where the connection between the market and the creator is shaped by the norms of poster production, graphic and product design, and tattooing, but also the local/regional museums whose prestige is closely tied to ‘breaking’ new artists as well as drawing viewers from populations not traditionally raised on museum fare. Several major graffiti artists have participated in exhibitions and gallery showings and many more have been featured in the art press of this movement. Can graffiti art be adequately described within the history of lowbrow? Ultimately, I do not think it can, although lowbrow is still evolving, and its relationship between graffiti art (or other precursors) and lowbrow is not yet institutionalized. A more nuanced examination will have to wait for another essay. See Anderson (2004), Cushner et al. (2007) and Laguna Art Museum (2008).

Even the more liberal voices in the graffiti art debates have asked why graffiti artists do not simply paint on canvas and sell it like all the other artists, in the (authorized) traditional commercial spaces—galleries, design firms and the arts press. Of course, many graffiti artists create opportunities to do just that, but only a small number completely stop making art illegally in public space on that account alone. Certainly graffiti art’s US detractors, who make a claim about form rather than content: graffiti is a common-sense and transparent criminal defacement of private and public property, regardless of any message or content.

See, for instance, Schwartzman (1985), Hundertmark (2003), Ganz and Manco (2004), and Gastman et al. (2007).

References


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