

I started doing graffiti when I was about fourteen years old. I remember my friend showing me some tags he created in class. I knew what graffiti was; I just didn't know how deep it could get. I thought it was just about tagging and spraying cans, but I was wrong. After getting into it I knew it was more than that. It was almost like a drug because my mom didn't want me to do it, it's illegal, and it's also very addicting. When I started doing graffiti in 2009, I was scared to throw up tags. I was always worried about getting arrested. Until one day, when I met a kid that lived down the street from me who also did graffiti. The only difference between the two of us was that he was much more experienced than I was. He told me about graffiti legends, and graffiti artists from Boston that I had no idea about. The first book I actually enjoyed reading was Banksy's Wall and Piece. It was a gift from my friend who lived down the street. I couldn't stop reading it because every time I read it there was something new that I didn't notice the previous time. Banksy made me want to do stencils, and other kinds of things similar to his art, but I couldn't afford any of the materials he had. I also wasn't skillful enough to make my own stencils. Instead of trying to be like Banksy, I just went out and stole cans from local hardware stores and tagged my name on late nights. The real reason I developed a passion for graffiti was because I looked up to the skillful graffiti artists that I heard about in the streets of Boston. I didn't only hear about them but I saw their throw ups and pieces on train tracks. It was amazing to see the level of skill and respect that they reached. I figured the only way to get there was to practice. Every night, I would get a call from my friend inviting me to go tagging. Not only did I pick up the phone, but I also accepted the offer, and gladly. Sneaking out my house was the easy part since I lived on the first floor. This would happen at least 5 times a week, every week. Each time we went out bombing and tagging, I always got this adrenaline rush that pumped into my blood, which lead me to produce more tags and more bombs than I could even imagine. Next thing you know, I began to get some publicity from other graffiti artists. It was a weird feeling to be known as a writer, but in the end it felt good.

Graffiti originated in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during the early 1960's and was first practiced by political activists and gangs who used it to mark their territory across a city. It became popular among a wider range of people in the late 60's. The first writers who were noticed or made graffiti popular in the mainstream were "Cornbread" and "Cool Earl." Shortly after these Philadelphia writers got popular, graffiti extended into New York City. Taki183 was the originator of New York Graffiti, and had an article published about him in *The New York Times*, which increased his popularity. Taki183 was from Manhattan, and was a foot messenger who wrote his tag around the New York City streets as he did his job. Taki was a nickname, and 183 was the street he lived on. Once people became aware that Taki183 was gaining recognition for his graffiti, many more joined the movement. It became one of the many things that kids in urban areas began to do while others did drugs, and it became affiliated with gangs. Writers then began to move into the subway system, and "Tagging" became very popular. The goal was to create as many tags as possible and spread the tags across the city. Everybody

wanted to be crowned “king” after Taki183. The fame and recognition drove some graffiti artists, and the adrenaline rush and passion drove others.

It’s difficult to say when street art originated because it wasn’t as popular as graffiti was in the 1960’s through the 1980’s. Street art is a product of graffiti, a way for people to express themselves and their political views through art. These were artists who couldn’t get into galleries, so they went to express themselves in the streets. Many street artists feel like they are more in touch with the public when their art is on walls in the street. Street art started out as a very secret form of art just like graffiti, because it is illegal to make art on public or private property without permission. Some artists like to express their political opinions with their work, and others often like to protest against big corporations. Later, street artists began to have their work put in galleries, and many more people became fond of street art. Street art is all about sending messages, showing political views, expressing yourself, and making the world look like a better place.

Being a part of the art community in Boston, and also being well aware of my surroundings, I’ve noticed how people tend to disregard graffiti, and street art, as not being “real art”. This problem has stuck with me for a while, and leads me to the question, why does the art community treat street art and graffiti differently, and define them separately? To me it seems like it’s all a big misunderstanding because neither graffiti nor street art are placed in actual galleries. I think that the fine art community needs to be more open minded, and learn to accept more forms of art.

The way major websites like Wikipedia, Google, and the Dictionary define graffiti is not equal to my own definition. They define it as “Writings, drawings, scribbles, scratched or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public space/place” (Google.com). This definition is very offensive to me because as a graffiti or street artist I don’t believe that the art that I make in the streets should be considered a scribble, and definitely not a scratch. Graffiti is a type of art that is expressed in black books¹ and on street walls using different kinds of writing techniques. Graffiti is also the use of spray paint and markers to create a bigger picture of the word or nickname you gave yourself or were given. Street art is also defined very poorly by these major websites. Street art is defined as, “Any art developed in public spaces – that is, ‘In the streets’ – though the term usually refers to unsanctioned art, as opposed to government sponsored initiatives.” (Wikipedia.org). I don’t quite agree with this definition of street art because not every piece of street art is unlawful or illegal. Many artists have permission to do their work. My definition of street art is: imagination formed into a painting, drawing, or sculpture placed on an exterior wall, floor, or outside object for the public to see and for your own benefit.

Many times art forms have tons of similarities, and the art community tends to group them together. In this case, graffiti and street art can almost be called the same thing, but they’re always defined differently. They have many of the same materials, intentions, and audiences. The similar materials that they utilize are spray paint, markers, stencils, and regular paint. Graffiti and street artists tend to work around the same kind of medium when trying to send a message. When doing graffiti or doing street art, intention is everything. No real artist goes around the city making art with out a certain intention.

¹ **Black Book:** A black book is a graffiti artist’s private sketchbook where they practice all of their new hand styles and techniques. A black book is also where a graffiti artist has other writers they respect or look up to sign their names. It’s almost like a graffiti writers bible. They keep it with them at all times.

Common intentions are to express art through the materials, send a message, speak to the public, and last but not least, make a mark in history. Expressing yourself is what graffiti and street art are about, and they can be therapeutic for many who don't have anything else to run to. Often it keeps people from committing worse crimes. Sending a message is all about the passion one may keep within. The messages sent are usually to the government or society, due to being oppressed or suppressed as an individual in the community. Sending a message leads to speaking to the public because as the message is being sent, the people in the community will take notice and pay attention to what you have to say. Its almost as if you're speaking to the public with a kids book, using words and pictures. Making a mark in history is really important, because maybe the future could learn from the struggle that a graffiti artist or a street artist had to go through just to be accepted in the art community.

While the motives are similar, not everything about graffiti and street art are completely the same. Just like other art forms, they have their differences as well. In this case, graffiti uses a lot of different techniques compared to street art. For example, there are specific types of graffiti, like tagging², burners³, and throw ups.⁴ Graffiti also has major rules you don't break. For example, as a loyal graffiti artist you don't ever cross legends, unless you want to start a war. You don't spray paint over murals, or on cars, but vans and trucks are acceptable. You also don't write over your partners. The rules have a lot to do with respect, and disrespect for other graffiti artists. Graffiti artists are known to spray paint over trains, under bridges, the side of buildings, mailboxes and basically anything that is in their way that isn't breaking any of the rules that graffiti artist's go by. Street artists on the other hand usually make art pieces that send political messages. The artist Banksy is a well-known street artist who uses art in this way. He targets his messages directly to society, and to the government, using words, cartoons, and/or sculptures.

Many times in the art community graffiti is associated with crime. It's not considered art, but more a destructive activity. Noticing the opinion of other artists is always good because you get to see their point of view and how it differs from yours. The artist Barry McGee has a really interesting opinion on graffiti and its position in the art community, and is unique because he is part of the fine art community, the graffiti world, and the street art world. McGee says, "What kids will do just to have their names on something is just fascinating to me still" (Youtube.com: Art21: Tagging). This is interesting to me because it shows how the kids he witnessed have the same ambition and motivation as he did when he wanted his name to be all over the city. McGee, also, discusses legal advertising when he states, "It's indirect competition with advertising" (Youtube.com: Art21: Tagging). This quote is describing how graffiti can impact the world just as much as advertising can when advertisements want to sell something to its viewers. The reason why McGee says that it is indirect competition is because one is legal and the other is not. It also means that graffiti gets almost as many viewers as advertisements do, which makes everything more competitive.

² **Tagging:** When a graffiti artist repeatedly writes his/her tag name everywhere, usually on walls in the streets, and metal surfaces.

³ **Burners:** Burners are large pieces graffiti artists do that take a lot of time and effort to complete.

⁴ **Throw ups:** The act of doing a tag or large scale piece very quickly.

McGee is an experienced artist, and is well aware of the graffiti community. He speaks about graffiti and corruption when he discusses, “It’s still one of the last things I think, like hasn’t been corrupted, to me” (Youtube.com: Art21: Tagging). This quote is very special to me, because although graffiti has been passed down through many generations, and through different cities and countries, it still remains as true as it was back when it started in the 1960’s. It has changed its styles and techniques and limits here and there, but the movement only becomes bigger, better and stronger.

The legal issues surrounding graffiti are complicated and controversial. Barry McGee reminded me of what Terrance Lindall, an artist and executive director of the Williamsburg Art and Historic Center said, “Graffiti is revolutionary, in my opinion... And any revolution might be considered a crime. People who are oppressed or suppressed need an outlet, so they write on walls – it’s free” (Time Out New York). This quote is also very powerful because it describes how graffiti can be an outlet for people who are feeling oppressed or suppressed by the government and society. Graffiti artists just want to get a point across. Everyone has different motives and motivations, which differentiates what kind of point they’re trying to get across. But while graffiti may be free, it is technically illegal. A graffiti artist by the name of Anthony discussed the graffiti world and the laws against it: “This might make one wonder why graffiti is very high in charges and is very punishable, with people facing up to years in jail. It makes art a disgrace because where I’m from the Bronx is a place where graffiti was brought up in style. It shows who we are and what we feel inside and we express ourselves...Graffiti is art and a way you could express yourself to no limits” (YouthVoices.net). Giving jail sentences that last years for a crime as small as graffiti is insane. That’s almost equal to someone who has an illegal firearm. Anthony is describing how these high jail sentences degrade art in a way because, if you could get years of time for doing what someone may call art then there’s something wrong. If anything, the government should be appreciating the fact that graffiti artists take the time to make the world look like a better place.

For some reason the art community accepts street art a little more than graffiti. Some people consider it a crime and others consider it a form of art. In an interview on the subject, artist Shepard Fairy spoke about advertisers vs. artists: “It’s not appropriate for only advertisers to occupy...the graphic communication of public space” (Youtube.com: Shepard Fairy Street Art and Design). This statement is something that I could agree with because what companies do is mark their logo everywhere with posters or on billboards as advertisements. They do this just to get people to notice, so they can have more clients to sell items to. To me, this is the same thing as a street artist. The only difference is that a street artist isn’t selling anything, but putting great art on view for free. Shepard Fairy also discusses, “My talent is more for making a bold iconic graphic that is provocative” (Youtube.com: Shepard Fairy Street Art and Design). An interesting piece of art provokes the viewer, making them think, wonder, and want to explore. This then leaves the viewer wanting more, which is why Fairy is successful and popular: because he is known to provoke the viewer.

Not all law enforcers dislike street art. The LAPD Officer Jack Richter is one of the many police that appreciate it. He says, “I really respect the art form and quality of some of the work...but when you take it out of the museum and put it on somebody’s building or public property, then it becomes vandalism”(HuffingtonPost.com). This

officer is very interesting because he somehow learned how to realize what street art is as an art form even though he is on the side of the law. It shows that people notice the effort.

Before actually looking into Wikipedia after looking up “street art” I noticed that it says, “This article is about visual art practiced in the street” (Wikipedia.org). This really shocked me because before Wikipedia even said what street art was they defined the article to be about visual arts, which means they’re defining street art as an actual fine art. When I looked up “Graffiti” on Wikipedia it said nothing of that sort. Instead, it defined it as scratches and scribbles. This bothered me because in reality both street art and graffiti are on the same level of art. They both use spray cans, markers, stickers and many more similar mediums. They both are usually considered illegal, and many street artists start as graffiti artists anyway. It’s really annoying to see that they’re being defined as two completely different things, one positive and one negative. I think both art forms should be treated equally, even though there are a few differences between the two. They should also be able to fall under the category of “art” as well, because what makes one form of art higher than the other? Is it the medium? The intention? Or is it the steps one uses to create that art form? As an artist, I think that all ways to express yourself with mediums that are used in the art community should be considered art because in the end all the artist is trying to do is express themselves, and everyone has different ways of doing that. Just because some might choose the illegal way to do things doesn’t mean that it’s not equal to any other form of art. Its kind of funny how people who have no experience in the area of art have the most to say about street art and graffiti being considered art or not. How is it possible to give an opinion on something when you have no experience with it, and you’re on the outside looking in?

One day, the fine art community will be more open about what is art and what isn’t art, and graffiti and street art wont be disregarded as not being “real art.” But one day, these forms of creative expression will be involved in the art community as much as every other form of art. Eventually, graffiti and street art will no longer be defined separately, or defined differently. I hope that it will then bloom into something more powerful than vandalism, and people will come to the realization that graffiti and street art are valid forms of art and expression too.

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