

Commercial Break

My project is an exploration of the concept of authenticity in modern culture, and its relation to the commercialization of urban art. In simplest of forms, authenticity can be defined as being true to one's own self. Graffiti, a medium rooted in personal expression, has been changed in recent years due to an increased interest and demand for "authentic" artwork. This shift in the perception of street art has changed the way we, as artists, create, as the words "art" and "commodity" become one.

Inspired by my research, I created a graffiti mural to illustrate the removal and sale of public art on the secondary art market. The brick wall and painted-out patch define the term "graffiti removal" in two senses. Whereas the white paint naturally covers the work underneath, the wall, hanging in its frame, appears out of place in its gallery setting. The subject, a woman equipped with an audio guide, mirrors the viewer (you) as they observe art stolen from the public sphere.

This piece highlights the exploitative actions of a modern art market, and questions our standards for art evaluation. Street artists make art for two reasons; they have a message, and they believe in the power of art in everyday life. For gallerists and collectors to remove their work from the public with the intent of selling it can only be described as criminal. Not only is it disrespectful to the artist, it shows a tremendous lack of understanding about what makes a piece of art valuable.

Hayden I.
California

Street Art: A Quest for Authenticity

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In this paper I explore the concept of authenticity in modern culture, and its relation to the commercialization of street art. In simplest of forms, authenticity can be defined as being true to one's own self. Graffiti, a medium rooted in personal expression, has been changed in recent years due to an increased interest and demand for "authentic" artwork. This shift in the perception of street art has changed the way we, as artists, create, as the words "art" and "commodity" become one.

Many in our modern culture have become concerned with the idea of authenticity. I myself became interested in it when I saw a video of Banksy's *Girl With Balloon* shedding itself at live auction, moments after it sold for a staggering \$1.4 million (Times). Banksy, anonymous England-based street artist and political activist, had just punched the art world square in the mouth.

Nothing like this had ever been done before, and so no one knew what would happen next. Would it be called off? How would this affect the resale value? "Sotheby's has not named the client whose \$1.4 million purchase was destroyed," reported a New York Times article covering the incident. In the chaos that ensued, everyone had failed to see the point. The painting wasn't destroyed, it was transformed; a perfect example of the art world's inability to see past an object to the intention behind it.

In the beginning, even I was confused. Unconcerned with the financial aspect, I instead wondered why the painting had only shredded halfway. Perhaps it would boost the resale value, but then again, why had Banksy chosen to put his work up for auction in the first place? The answer is, he didn't. Looking into it further, I learned he had built the shredder into the frame three years prior, in the event that it ever went up for auction (Banksy). The so called "destruction" of the work wasn't a destruction at all; it was a premeditated response to the actions of an exploitative art market.

My initial worries of it being a publicity stunt gone, I realized that the only thing it made public was the sheer insanity of where we place our values. Which got me thinking... when did street art become such a commodity? The whole idea behind street art—as Banksy puts it—is that art is free and isn't meant to be owned. Perhaps that is what makes it so coveted, the reason why wealthy collectors are prepared to spend millions of dollars on work that was created for the sake of anyone to see.

It is the desire to possess the un-possessable.

Of course, some art is made to be possessed. Artists like Shepard Fairey, who began their career plastering up images on walls around LA, now sit among creators in an industry with far more money and power than street art—fashion. Some continue to push their political and social

agenda through their art, but have moved from the streets into galleries and museums. Others, like Banksy, remain anonymous.

The huge commercial success of some of the biggest names in street art history got me thinking: if an artist begins producing work for the purpose of being sold, using and perhaps *exploiting* that same anti-establishment aesthetic that drove them to create art in the first place, do they lose their credibility as an “outsider?” Graffiti by its very nature is political, so when you move it from the wall to the canvas, does it maintain its value as authentic artwork? Do actions speak louder than words?

This brings us back to the quest for authenticity in fine art culture and everyday life. It seems that there is a delicate balance between integration and commercialization, the lines of which have been blurred by modern consumer standards. In a society where anyone can become an artist overnight, it is increasingly important to ask the question: “what is authentic?”

Authenticity Defined

In a society that places so much value on authenticity, many questions have arisen. Some fear that our sense of authenticity has been lost and we can no longer find a “center of self” (Erickson 122). This is especially relevant in the art world, where “authentic” artwork seems to be the latest trend, replacing the desire for craftsmanship with that of individualism and originality. But what makes a piece of art authentic? That is the question which I asked myself in the beginning of my research; a question it now seems few know the true answer to.

In order to understand authenticity, one must first define it. In his book *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling, American writer and literary critic, said that, “A work of art is itself authentic by reason of its entire self-definition” (Erickson 124). It is a concept of self-reference, and therefore has nothing to do with one’s relationship to others. In its most basic form, authenticity is simply being true to one’s own self.

The growing interest in the concept of authenticity can be attributed to two sets of factors: external and internal. External factors include anti-establishment sentiment, the rise of “consumer culture,” and a reduced significance of traditional norms in an increasingly tolerant society. Internal factors, on the other hand, suggest that the rising interest in authenticity is a result of biological factors, rather than environmental ones (DuBois). Cause aside, there is no doubt that modern culture places heavy emphasis on authenticity—especially within the fine arts. In the art world, authenticity comes from being original, while at the same time maintaining a sense of familiarity. This definition suggests that the importance of originality comes from both external and internal factors. But when analyzing our desire for authenticity, it is equally important to assess an artist’s motives. Graffiti art, unlike traditional fine arts, exists in somewhat

of a grey area; unlike fine art, the authenticity of street art is defined wholly by its artist's motivations.

An artist's motives are what distinguish street art from vandalism. Initial motivations for the medium were its aesthetic appeal and insider community, but with the passing of time, its motivations have grown to include pride, pleasure, and recognition. Graffiti is, more than anything else, about pleasure—primarily the emotional pleasure of expressing oneself in a public environment. Emotions, our basic indicators of self and identity, reflect the self, and therefore reflect authenticity. Ultimately, street art is a form of “identity art,” a reflection of its creator's motivations (Fine 155).

By its very definition, then, street art is authentic. And for artists who have spent years developing their style and perfecting their craft, it is. But like any industry, there are copycats—people who exploit the ideas of others for person gain, financial or otherwise. In his documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, Banksy calls into question an artist's emotional motivations, stating his belief that pleasure alone does not make art authentic; there must be something more.

The missing piece here is experience. In his article “Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Authenticity in Self-Taught Art,” Gary Allan Fine, an American sociologist and author, explores how self-taught artists' identities affect their art. “Closely tied to the motivations and inspirations of artists are the presentations of their biographies. The biographies of self-taught artists justify their authenticity, serving as a primary criterion of evaluation” (162). In other words, the biography and experience of an artist define the authenticity of their art, and their background is what gives the work meaning.

Artists like Banksy hence feel cheated when a newcomer walks onto the street art scene and—with no previous experience in the medium—begins gaining recognition for ideas that aren't necessarily theirs. Looking at the commercial success of these “copycat” artists, one might question how *our* eagerness to call art authentic results in *their* success.

Appropriation vs. appreciation

The trouble is, anyone can become an artist. Before I begin this next section, it is necessary to define two terms: plagiarism and intertextuality. Plagiarism is defined as the close imitation and publication of another author's work, ideas, or expressions and representing them as your own. Intertextuality is defined as the shaping of one text's meaning through other texts, either through referencing or by borrowing and transforming that work into something different (Gilbride).

In the modern art world, few works are produced that are completely original. Most are a mash-up of what has already been done; new art, old ideas, all the while giving credit to the narrative

which informed it. As the cycle continues, however, the line between what is derived and what is copied becomes increasingly blurred, provoking the debate of inspiration vs. imitation, and questioning our understanding of how old ideas drive new innovation.

“Good artists copy, great artists steal.”

This quote by Pablo Picasso illustrates perfectly the existing divide between inspiration and imitation. The distinction is intent. Imitation is laziness and refusal to accept your own influences. Inspiration is recognizing your influences, then creating something new through those ideas (Gilbride). Artists may tweak the work, adding or subtracting certain elements to better convey their own personal aesthetic or narrative.

The phrase “great artists steal” is, in its most basic sense, about finding inspiration in the works of others. The word “steal” has been given a negative connotation by our society, but in this case, it simply means “to borrow.” And there *is* honor among thieves. Giving credit and having the right intentions is the difference between appropriation and influence.

Take a look at Shepard Fairey for instance. Beginning his career as a street artist in the late 1980s, Fairey established his name in the art world with his ubiquitous images of pro wrestler Andre the Giant. Appearing in the form of stickers, posters, and stencils, these images played off of themes found in advertising, pop art, and pop culture—their focus set on quick and effective communication. The images, style, and color palette were all inspired by things that had worked on him.

As his career kicked off, Fairey continued to draw from new sources of inspiration, using images from various social and political movements in his work. Not long after his commercial success came about, he began to face accusations of appropriating images that weren’t meant to be owned or commercialized (O’Donoghue). When asked about this in an interview with *Mother Jones*, he said, “I can see that gripe, but that’s coming from a perspective of insiders.” Instead, Fairey sees his work as recirculating these images and ideas back into a new crowd. “When I’m using someone else’s work as a reference point, I’m just trying to give them props.”

The irony of the accusations against him is that few actually know the story behind *OBEY*. According to Fairey, he created his clothing line after seeing his star logo bootlegged on shirts at Urban Outfitters. As an up-and-coming artist, he described the experience as “upsetting,” explaining that “[He] didn’t build up the resonance for that image just to hand it off to someone to exploit.” The trouble is, we live in a society governed by an exploitative art market; one that values profit over permission.

Commercialization

In today's art world, graffiti artists are faced with constant opposition, whether that be the media, law enforcement, or even competing artists. With the constant integration of street art into modern culture, this list sees a new addition; the trend of money-hungry gallerists and collectors who steal works of street art from the public sphere in order to personally profit from them on the secondary art market.

“Graffiti art has a hard enough life as it is before you add hedge-fund managers wanting to chop it out and hang it over the fireplace.” —Banksy

In an interview back in 2006, Banksy criticized the art market for their commodification of street art. “For the sake of keeping all street art where it belongs, I’d encourage people not to buy anything by anybody unless it was created for sale in the first place.” In fact, it is not uncommon for well-known artists such as Banksy to occasionally create art for the primary art market, in order to finance their original pursuits (Rabin).

For the most part though, street artists make art for two reasons, neither of which involve making a profit. In fact, unless a work is commissioned, the artist doesn't make a dime. Rather, they have something to say, and they believe in the power of art in everyday life to communicate that (Rabin). Therefore, to remove their work from the public sphere with the intent of selling it can only be described as criminal. Not only is it disrespectful to the artist, it shows a tremendous lack of understanding about what makes a piece of art valuable.

This brings me back to the concept of authenticity in modern culture, and its role in the commodification of street art. The growing interest in authenticity can be attributed to several factors, namely the rise of consumer culture. We, as consumers, place a heavy emphasis on originality, so much so that we devalue craftsmanship. In a society where artists appear to learn the rules only to break them, it is increasingly important for us to assess our standards for art evaluation, especially in relation to our quest for authenticity. This assessment has the potential to affect the vitality of street artists—and all artists—for decades to come.

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