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From Primitive to Integral: The Evolution of Graffiti Art

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ABSTRACT

Art is about expression. It is neither right nor wrong. It can be beautiful or distorted. It can be influenced by pain or pleasure. It can also be motivated for selfish or selfless reasons. It is expression. Arguably, no artistic movement encompasses this more than graffiti art. Because of its roots in ancient history, reemergence with the rise of the hip-hop culture, and constant transformation, graffiti art is integral. Its canvas can be a concrete building, paper, or animal. It can be two- or three-dimensional; it can be illusionistic and inclusive of various techniques. It can be composed with spray paint, marker, acrylics, or steel. Moreover, it appeals to consumers of fine and street art, designers, grassroots politicians, and musicians. This paper looks at the history and evolution of graffiti art through the various structures of consciousness to demonstrate that contemporary graffiti is indicative of integral art.

Keywords: art, graffiti, evolution, integral

Introduction

Once considered a primitive art form aligned with the seemingly unrooted hip hop movement, graffiti art has evolved from a street style resigned to the walls of buildings and subways to fine art that graces the walls of the world's galleries and mirrors the contracted murals completed by Mexican artist, Diego Rivera. It is more than the spray painted arrowed words of teenagers; its artists now employ various styles and mediums. Graffiti art embodies illusionist realism, pop art, modernism, and three-dimensional statues. English-born artist, Banksy (2003) noted the complexity of the artform, citing that "Graffiti is one of the few tools you have if you have almost nothing. And even if you don't come up with a picture to cure world poverty you can make someone smile while they're having a piss" (p.20). Arguably present since ancient history but with a modern emergence in the late 1960s, graffiti has become the visual language of social equity, personal expression, and integral art. This paper explores the history of graffiti art, examines its evolution, and discusses how it embodies the essence of integral art.



This Jackson Pollack-like piece was completed by a collective of women for the Indrains Light Foundation.

Graffiti Defined

Graffiti derives from the Latin, *graphōre*, which means to write but is directly related to the Italian *graffito* for inscription or design; the noun literally means “to scratch.” Oxford dictionary (2013) defines it as “writing or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place.” Other definitions mirror this description, highlighting that graffiti includes any unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface. Interestingly, the word, graffiti, and graffiti art often share the same definition. This presents a conundrum as one considers the movement of graffiti art from an underground style to fine and sanctioned art. Some scholars have expanded the definition of graffiti art to include the desire for personal expression: “Graffiti can be understood as concrete manifestations of personal and communal ideologies which are visually striking, insistent, and provocative” (Phillips, 2006). It personalizes “depersonalized space, construct landscapes of identity, make public space into private space, and act as promoters of ethnic unity as well as diversity” (Ibid). Subway graffiti artist and cofounder of The Drawing Board, Cey Adams, likewise describes graffiti as “visual language” (Chang, 2006, p. 120). Although the definition for graffiti art is vague, the history of graffiti art is equally as conflicting.

History

Scholars and art enthusiasts debate the origin of graffiti art just as they debate the influences for its creation. The form received attention as a means for gangs to mark their territory in urban areas (Friedman, 2008) and as the visual parallel to the burgeoning hip hop movement of the 1980s. However, curators have proven that graffiti art existed long before the 20th century. During ancient times, it was utilized for a number of purposes

that ranged from indication of hidden brothels, proclamations of love, or expressions of political discontent ((Olmert, 1996).



Early Roman caricature of a politician

Like contemporary graffiti art, works in the ancient period were not confined to visual imagery. Images were appealing to specific individuals, especially those that were illiterate. However, historians have discovered a number of poems expressing love or discontent. One such piece was written on the wall of a tavern:

Landlord, may your lies malign
Bring destruction on your head!
You yourself drink unmixed wine,
Water [do you] sell [to] your guests instead (Ibid, p. 48-49).

Words and names in the form of graffiti have survived in Mayan, Viking, and Renaissance cultures.

Ancient Egyptian works also included graffiti elements. The Palace of Merneptah, for example, was erected to celebrate Pharaohs, the kings and sons of the god, Ra. The entrance, columns, and doors were erected from massive stones of guards, gods, and maidens. These beautiful structures were not above “vandalism.” As Christianity was ushered in at the twilight years of Egyptian religion, believers of Christianity etched images of fish, a symbol of Jesus Christ, by the celebratory murals. Similarly, images of the mother and child (Mary and Jesus) were found suckled underneath another image on a gateway jamb (“Something Fishy,” 2013).



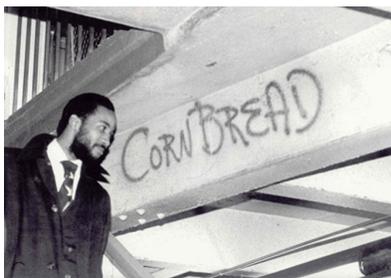
Graffiti at the palace of Merneptah

Although currently considered its own genre, recent theories on Paleolithic Era cave paintings may demonstrate that graffiti art has an even older history. Paleolithic art is generally considered to concern itself with animals and fertility in the form of pregnant or Venus figures and is considered to be an attempt to magically control their environment. However, there are many pieces challenge the generalization. Recently discovered cave paintings of small hands prompted archeologists to reconsider the artists behind the works. Guthrie (2006) purports that individuals of “all ages and both sexes were making art, not just senior male shamans.” He challenges the idea that the Venus figures were necessarily celebrations of the feminine body, proposing that adolescent boys that were attempting to gain the attention of the opposite sex may have completed them. He points out that the main themes in the paintings and other artifacts—powerful beasts, risky hunting scenes and the over-sexual representation of women—are to be expected in the fantasies of adolescent males during the Upper Paleolithic. This perspective of male showmanship remained in human consciousness; it served as the catalyst for graffiti art’s reemergence during the last 1960s.

The Emergence of Modern Graffiti

Graffiti and graffiti art has existed through history. Counterculturalists beginning in the 1920s and soldiers during WWII drew humorous images to correspond with popular American terms (Whipps, 2008). It was, however, the discovery of a young man, Darryl McCray, better known as Cornbread that inspired a movement and propelled contemporary graffiti to its current trajectory.

Cornbread began his career spray-painting the sides of building in an attempt to gain the attention of a young woman that attended his Philadelphia high school. He wanted her and his fellow classmates to know the identity of the bold craftsmen so his name accompanied his work. During his pursuits, he perfected his signature, which, like his predecessors’ works, has remained preserved (De Melker, 2011). He is revered for his unique lettering



Cornbread revising an older canvas

but it was his unorthodox methods of presenting his work that also drew the attention of his peers. Similar to the ancient graffiti artists, Cornbread used his art as a means of protesting social inequities and police brutality in minority communities (Ibid). He targeted specific buildings and institutions, spray-painting police cars and paddy wagons in protest. He also challenged the traditional graffiti canvas—structures. His more popular stunts include illicitly painting the Jackson 5’s private jet and an elephant at the

Philadelphia Zoo (Currier, 2010). Members within the graffiti and street art communities memorialized the latter piece, creating art replicas. Its influence has also moved to installation artwork.



A sample of works inspired by Cornbread's elephant canvas

Additionally, Cornbread used a different style of painting to of creating his works. Pens, pencils, and etches were common in graffiti art before the 1960s. Spray-paint in aerosol cans, however, was a recent invention. Easy access and the affordability of spray-paint attracted Cornbread. It was also the portability in compromising situations that also made spray-paint a viable option for the evolving artist (McKnight, 2007).

The actions involved in this “illegal” artistry also moved graffiti to the level of performance art. Cornbread did not go to the store, purchase canvas, and paint using an easel. Instead, he stalked his canvases, hid, ran, and risked his freedom; these actions were a major component of his appeal and helped to construct early definitions of graffiti art. The innovative techniques, revolutionary canvases, and incorporation of performance elemental to his work brought popularity to graffiti art: “What Cornbread did in the '60s was to bring graffiti into the spotlight so everyone could see it” (McKnight as quoted in Currier, 2010). He earned the moniker, “Father of modern graffiti” and ushered in the most popular era in graffiti art period (McKnight, 2007).

Hip-Hop and the Rise of Street Art

When hip-hop clashed with the urban art scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s, pioneers of the newly formed music genre argued that urban youth culture was “vibrant, transformational, and radical” (Chang, 2006, p. 116). Modern graffiti, which had been as revolutionary, revivalist, and bold as hip-hop, became the official visual art form for the

genre. Similarly, both art forms came under attack. Young urbanites sought to carve their space in the world; they yearned to express themselves in a post-Civil Rights nation that represented the mainstream suburban culture. The form created a deep tension between private expression and public space (Phillip, 2006, p. 153). Newer graffiti artists followed in the footsteps of Cornbread, breaking laws and making simple words artistic with vibrant colors, varying lettering, and placement. Buildings, bridges, and walls remained the canvas of choice but other elements were introduced to demonstrate the changing landscape of the urban environment (Chang, 2006, p. 116-118).

A particular element was parallel to the hip-hop music movement, which incorporated elements of jazz, blues, funk, and rock-n-roll; that element was the imagery of movement. In graffiti art, the arrow became the symbol of movement. An arrow is a powerful, visual tool that is often combined with letters to give them motion and dynamism. They express movement and energy. An arrow guides the eyes of the viewer in a specific direction and could project out from any side of a letter, weaving in and out, backwards and forwards, and around in circles, across a two-dimensional surface, creating depth and rhythm. Moreover, it demonstrated the chaos in the inner city, often creating a message that can only be understood when one steps back and examines the image as a whole (Freidman, 2008).



Arrows incorporated in graffiti art

During the 1990s, hip-hop moved to the mainstream and took graffiti art with it. Popular videos also featured graffiti-covered urban backdrops. Hip-hop journalism emerged; the editors wanted graffiti, the visual language of hip-hop, to grace the covers of their magazines. Musical artists, networks, and sports teams hired young graffiti outlaws to design for their products (Miller, 2006). Mainstream legitimization of graffiti art attracted commentators—“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 (Phillips 1996)—and fine artists, who sought to further legitimize the burgeoning art form. Artists, such as Roger Gastman, Banksy, and Caleb Neelon moved from subway walls to the walls of galleries and private collectors in the USA (Friedman, 2008; De Melker, 2011). Whereas aerosol spray-paints were once the primary method of graffiti art, mainstream and fine art acceptance provided more resources and opportunities for graffiti artists. And the buildings that once served as canvases? They still serve as a popular canvas but are now considered murals to beautify urban centers; they are often

funded and sanctioned by galleries and the governments that once sought to stop them (Gastman, 2011).



Urban beautification projects in London

Is Graffiti Art Integral?

What is integral art? Is it the thoughtfulness of the artists, the spirituality and the suspension of time that makes art integral? Or is it the integration of various art forms and styles? These are questions that have yet to be clearly addressed. Ken Wilber argues that it is the artists' ability to look through "integral eyes" that creates integral art (Hammond, 2010). Common definitions border on vague, agreeing only that integral art reaches "multiple quadrants and levels," "transcends and includes all limited forms, interpretations, or perspectives," and is "integral to all human endeavors" (Integral Art, 2013). Exploring integral art through an understanding of the structure of integral consciousness may help to provide some perspective.

This highly flexible, new form of experience "escapes linear time" (Combs, 2009, p. 74). Combs articulates:

The Ever-Present Origin gives the example of snow falling during the night. A mental perspectival understanding of the snow would specify when it fell in clock time. "It snowed between three and five o'clock this morning." But an integral experience of the snow might emphasize that it is "The night's snow; the gift of the night," or some other poetic representation emphasizing the quality of the experience of the night and the snow, rather than abstracting an event outside

of experience that presumably occurred during a particular episode of clock time” (Ibid, p. 75).

According to Gebser, the structure of integral consciousness essential integrates elements of the magical, mythical, mental, and perspectival structures. Juxtaposing the seemingly vague yet accurate definitions of integral art along with the explications of integral consciousness and the evolution of graffiti art, it is easy to argue the integral nature of graffiti.

Since the Paleolithic period, graffiti art has included various mediums and been inspired for reasons that transcended personal gain but captured the essence of human existence. Consider the hand painting in the cave or the discontent expressed by the tenants poem on the landlord’s tavern. These emotional motivations (magical structure) exist in modern humans as does the desire for individualistic expression in society (mythical structure). Aspects of the mental and perspectival structures find their way into graffiti art as well, creating a depth in an art form that is perhaps the oldest known to man.



Magical Structure



Mythical Structure



Perspectival Structure



Mental Structure

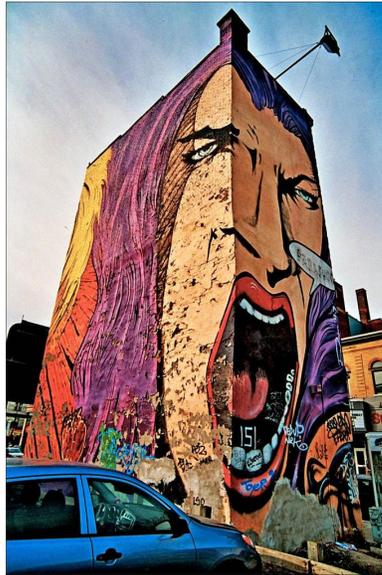
Graffiti art is also one of the few art forms that transcends genres, generations, styles, and class. It can be pop art on canvas that appeals to lovers of neo-soul...

From Primitive to Integral



Erykah Badu

or elaborate 1960s' aesthetics on buildings...



Building in Montreal

or Renaissance on a dilapidated wall...



Pieta, Yola

or a mixed method piece on a public walkway with hidden messages, including “Fine mist washes over my face” and “Gray skies seem bluer here.”

From Primitive to Integral



*Painting by Ken Wenner;
hidden messages are inscribed on the image's walls*

Graffiti art can be sculptures created with foam and metal...



Le Malin, Shaka

can contain elements of primitivism and expressionism...



Untitled (1981), Jean-Michel Basquiat

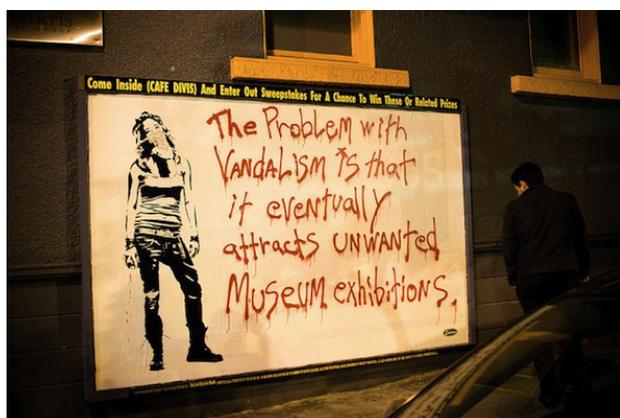
and can even include the individuals that it is created to touch.



Amalgamation of graffiti and body art

Conclusion

Legendary British artist, Banksy (2007) wrote “Some people become cops because they want to make the world a better place. Some people become vandals because they want to make the world a better looking place” (p. 23). Despite its lengthy history, graffiti art long served as the art world’s stepchild, being treated as unsophisticated expression while the artists were regarded as unrefined, unskilled criminals. However, modern history demonstrates that graffiti art captures the essence of art; it embodies the aesthetic truth and feeling of the artist, community, and society. Moreover, it transcends time and demonstrates the integral mind of many of the artists’ work. The consciousness of the genre is especially enthralling. Graffiti art is genuine without being too serious, opting instead to maintain the essential element of art—expression. With unlimited inclusivity, mediums, accessibility, and motivation, graffiti art is integral art.



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