

Drawing the Line: the cultural distinctions between street art and graffiti



Nathan Lambert
Department of Geography and Anthropology

Abstract

The urban environment has been a canvas for graffiti writers since the early 1980s; in more recent times a new cultural movement, called street art, has emerged that incorporates the act of putting art into public space much like graffiti, and yet contains a distinct aesthetic. This study suggests that street artists behave differently than graffiti artists, provide alternative messages, have different motivations for their work, and come from a different demographic than their graffiti writer counterparts.

The researcher collaborated with several artists who live and work in the Atlanta area. The study answers several questions about this scene including why street artists chose to create art in public spaces, what challenges they face in working in this genre, and what factors distinguish them from traditional graffiti writers. Through interviews and observation, it is apparent that street artists incorporate political voice into their work and often express themes of generosity and goals of beautifying the urban landscape.

Background

There has been little done in the way of scientific study on street art. In the 1980s and into the 1990s, graffiti was studied primarily as a practice of territory control. Only recently there has been some interest into recording and examining the culture and aesthetic of these groups. Graffiti is primarily the act of marking a wall or other surface with a stylized signature, typically an invented moniker, with spray paint. Graffiti can incorporate a number of regional styles. Graffiti writers seek recognition through unique style, technical skill, and prolific work. There exists a hierarchy and etiquette among different types of graffiti markings. Breaches of etiquette can lead to conflict.

Street artists use similar techniques and put out work in similar areas as graffiti writers but incorporate more mediums, broader subject matter and often political messages. Street artists attempt to minimize the physical impact of their work on the environment. Common forms of street art include stencils (Fig. 2), magnets (Fig. 6), stickers (Fig. 4), and wheat pastes (Fig. 8).



Figure 1: Production



Figure 3: Burner



Figure 5: Throw-up



Figure 7: Tag



Figure 2: Stencil



Figure 4: Sticker



Figure 6: Magnet



Figure 8: Wheat Paste

Methodology

This project used methods of participant observation through viewing, discussing, and photographing examples of work in the urban setting alongside artists as well as attending art gallery shows that the artists were featured at and conversing with groups of artists in various public settings. The project also used a series of in-depth interviews with six participants. During interviews, participants were each asked key questions about the nature of street art, why they participated in it, how and when they started, if and how they collaborated with other artists, how the internet and photography played into the dissemination of their work, how being featured in a gallery affected them, or if they had not been, how they felt about gallery work, and what distinctions they saw between themselves and traditional graffiti writers. By comparing answers to these questions the researcher was able to determine a general consensus of the population on certain topics. The researcher's notes and interview transcripts made up the qualitative data this study is based on.

Results and Conclusion

When asked about the distinction between street artists and graffiti writers, the participants stated that the differences lay in the motivations behind work and the nature of the work in its impact on the environment. As one participant stated: "To me it becomes graffiti when it becomes part of a fossil or becomes an intentionally permanent marking" (Fig. 3 & 4). According to interview responses, street artists seek to beautify the city and share their art in the public sphere where all can enjoy it for free, as well as generate exposure for the artist to build a career. The sample population also stressed the importance of collaboration in creating art as a community which contrasts with their view of graffiti writers who compete against each other for space, territory, and control. There is an emerging theme among street artists in the creation of removable art that has no lasting impact on the environment it is placed. Several street artists in the sample population have also found success in using photographs of their art in gallery shows, and have gained recognition and have begun to establish a career in art and a presence in the Atlanta fine arts community.

Photo credits: Nathan Lambert.

References available upon request.

Acknowledgments

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Brandon D. Lundy.