Introduction

Sorting it all out

Jeffrey Ian Ross

Introduction

Graffiti has existed since the dawn of civilization (McCormick, 2011), however, since the mid-1980s, most large urban centers throughout the world have experienced an increase in unique styles of graffiti and street art (Ferrell, 1995). Naturally this has led to several efforts to understand this phenomenon. Indeed, the world of graffiti and street art is complicated and includes numerous subtypes and participants. Thus, it is not surprising that multiple, sometimes complementary and at other times competing, definitions and interpretations of what constitutes “graffiti” and “street art” exist. Much of this debate stems from the viewpoints by which practitioners, social control agents, and scholars examine and/or locate this phenomenon. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to briefly outline the definitional challenges of graffiti/street art, comment on the general state of scholarly research, and provide a brief history of graffiti/street art.

Definitional issues

Despite a tendency in some circles to ignore defining graffiti and street art, numerous definitions and attempts to define these phenomena exist (e.g., Lewisohn, 2008; Young, 2014). In general, there are approximately four interrelated contextual axes that one can use to identify, classify, and/or examine graffiti and street art (i.e., legal/sanctioned/authorized versus illegal/unsanctioned/unauthorized; content/aesthetic; perpetrator; and location). First, traditionally graffiti and street art have been seen as illegal actions. According to this perspective, graffiti typically refers to words, figures, and images that have been drawn, marked, scratched, etched, sprayed, painted, and/or written on surfaces where the owner of the property (whether public or private) has NOT given permission to the perpetrator. Likewise, street art refers to stencils, stickers, and noncommercial images/posters that are affixed to surfaces and objects (e.g., mail boxes, garbage cans, street signs) where the owner of the property has NOT given permission to the perpetrator (Ross, 2013). Thus, at a bare minimum, in most countries because of its illegal nature, graffiti and street art are legally speaking considered acts of vandalism.

Second, other scholars identify graffiti not based on the illegal/legal or sanctioned versus unsanctioned criteria, but on its content, composition, and/or overall aesthetic. For example, Bloch...
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(2012) identifies graffiti-murals as “those produced by self-described, acknowledged, and active members of the graffiti community in public view with, primarily, the use of aerosol spray paint. Graffiti-murals are also visually thematic in that they cover the entire surface of a wall with a balance of letters, characters, and/or images painted against fully painted backgrounds. Graffiti-muralists . . . are motivated to produce their work for the sake of fame and personal expression in addition to critical concerns for community and artistic concerns for aesthetics. Graffiti-muralists also work independently and illegally . . .” (p. 124). Snyder (2009), who explores the burgeoning legal graffiti movement in New York City, states: “In the post-train era legal walls have become essential to the progression of the art form . . . many pieces done today are done on legal walls on which writers have been granted permission to paint by the building owner. Legal walls allow writers to take their time, and this results in some really good art” (p. 97). In this rendering of graffiti, the legal/illegal dimension is less important than the quality of the artwork. Building upon this notion is the idea of graffiti style, which can be extended to include the use of graffiti-like imagery on articles of clothing (e.g., shoes and t-shirts), in commercials, and on artwork that appears in galleries (Avelos, 2004).

In distinguishing graffiti from street art, Wacławek also relies upon the idea of content rather than issues of legality/illegality. According to her, the two styles differ in “visual and material terms (whereby one is focused on the rendition of the name sometimes with accompanying imagery and is most often executed in spray paint/markers, and the other is less concerned with letters/name and the abstraction of the alphabet and more with using recognizable/accessible imagery diffused in all manner of media). Typically then, I make the distinction between the two not only through a recounting of the movements’ different histories/methodologies/ideologies, but also through the visual and material distinctions.”

Another form of graffiti/street art that highlights the importance of thinking about different types of content/aesthetic is knitting graffiti (also known as yarn bombing), which involves wrapping light poles, monuments, statues, bicycle racks, street signs, and other public structures with wool/yarn. This practice does not involve damaging the object, but simply placing a more appealing/interesting covering on top of it.

An additional contextual issue is who gets to define the perpetrators and practitioners of graffiti/street art? Is it the state (via agents of formal social control – politicians, law enforcement), the local community, or the graffiti/street artists themselves? In other words, whose perceptions are being privileged? According to Snyder (2009), “There seems to be a consensus in the mainstream that graffiti murals are art while tags are just vandalism. Within graffiti culture itself, however, no such strict division exists between the various forms of contemporary graffiti. Pieces, throw-ups, and tags are all ways in which writers attempt to get their name seen for the purpose of achieving fame” (p. 47). On the other hand, “Anti-graffiti advocates attempt to separate the tag from other forms of graffiti by arguing that tags can never be art, only vandalism” (pp. 47–48).

Added to the mix are the numerous situations where the community eventually accepts works of graffiti and street art that were initially considered illegal, and thus unsanctioned, and become illegal but sanctioned. Bloch (2012), for example, outlines this dilemma in his description and discussion of the murals along Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles that started to appear during the 1960s. Over time the community, with the assistance of a local Chicano activist and muralist, and the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, sought to protect this artwork.

Over the past three decades, graffiti by “artists” has eclipsed gang-based graffiti as a subject of scholarly study and news media attention. Thus, Bloch (2012) restricts graffiti to “systematic, stylistic, and name-based marking of infrastructure with implements such as markers and spray paint by acknowledged members of the graffiti community” (p. 125). Other scholars omit this
restriction because this distinction clearly privileges one type of perpetrator/practitioner over another. In sum, there is considerable nuance of style and content that the untrained observer is not privy to with respect to the graffiti and street art world. And simple classification is extremely difficult (Taylor, Cordin & Njiru, 2010).

Finally, although graffiti and street art is more pervasive in some cities and neighborhoods than others, they are typically found on the walls of bathrooms (i.e. latrinelia), buildings, road and freeway overpasses, retaining walls of streets, and highways, as well as along train tracks. Graffiti and street art can also be placed on sidewalks, streets, floors, ceilings, light poles, billboards, and bus shelters. Not limited to physical structures, graffiti and street art can be placed on semi permanent and/or moveable items, like park benches, trash/garbage cans/bins, street signs, mail and newspaper boxes, and means of transportation, such as freight trains, metro/subway cars, buses, trucks, vans, and cars. Moreover, “with the proliferation of graffiti Websites and magazines and the emphasis on photographs of graffiti, writers can now go worldwide with their work as well” (Ferrell, 2013, p. 181).

Because both graffiti and street art are disproportionately done in public spaces (i.e., shared social space), graffiti and street art are considered a type of public art. In general, public art includes: “a vast assortment of art forms and practices, including murals, community projects, memorials, civic statuary, architecture, sculpture, ephemeral art (dance, performance theatre), subversive interventions, and, for some graffiti and street art [...] that can be experienced in a multitude of places – parks, libraries, public squares, city streets, building atriums and shopping centres” (Wacławek, 2011, p. 65). Although much of this work is commissioned, unlike a museum or an art gallery that may require admission, these public spaces are freely accessible.

There is no easy way out of these conflicting/competing contextual definitions. Moreover, according to Weide, “Attempting to objectively define any of these terms is an exercise in futility. The various perceptions and uncertainty of their definition is in fact one of the most interesting things about them. I think that different people having different definitions add to the academic discourse, and any attempt to privilege any definition over any others is an uncritical abomination. I am vehemently opposed to any effort to arrive at any consensus definition.” Thus, this handbook allows contributors the latitude to explore the different meanings of graffiti and street art and reactions to this work, while understandably this kind of difficulty has resulted in numerous debates inside the practitioner community (see Figure I.1).

That being said, perhaps no other contemporary predominantly urban phenomenon is as misunderstood as graffiti and street art. Numerous articles, books, documentaries, websites, and blogs have been published and/or produced about the field. Not all of this work is of equal value/rigor. Some of it approaches the subject uncritically and from a romantic notion, ascribing all sorts of intentions and motivations to the perpetrators/practitioners of graffiti and street art. This is often done without interviewing or observing them. Other work use research methods that are ad hoc and unsystematic. And there are no shortages of so-called experts. Missing, however, is a sustained series of scholarly studies of graffiti and street art. The current collection goes beyond romanticization from a distance and questionable methods, and it approaches the subject from a more objective social scientific perspective.

**Contemporary literature on graffiti and street art**

Two basic types of literature on graffiti and street art have been published. One comprises the popular writing on graffiti and street art, while another is comprised of the scholarly work on graffiti and street art.

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Popular literature

Over the past four and-a-half decades, a number of trade publishers have produced books that document examples of graffiti and street art, and those who create this work in various cities and countries. Some of these monographs have been general treatments (e.g., Reisner, 1971; Kurlansky, Naar, & Mailer, 1974; Reisner & Wechsler, 1980; Gastman & Neelon, 2010; Seno, 2010). Alternatively, almost each major city has a thriving graffiti and street art scene, and site-specific ‘zines have been produced and books published documenting many of the artists/writers who have created the pieces that have appeared in these locations (e.g., Gastman, 2001; Grévy, 2007).

One of the results of this trend is that some graffiti and street artists have achieved celebrity if not cult-like status (e.g., Campos, 2013), becoming the focus of an array of publications. For example, not only has the Britain-based street artist Banksy released a series of bestselling books, including *Wall and Piece* (2006), showcasing some of his most infamous work, but he is responsible for directing a documentary, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010), which has had reasonable commercial and cult following success. Alternatively, one could mention Shepard Fairey, an American street artist, who originally focused his art on transforming the image of wrestler Andre the Giant into the pervasive OBEY icon, and helped turn the image of Barack Obama, a relatively unknown Senator from Illinois, into an aspiring presidential candidate and then into a worldwide figure. The books focusing either on cities or artists predominantly include numerous photographs of the works with limited text by the graffiti or street artist, by selected contributors, and/or by the editor. These efforts may also include interviews with graffiti and street artists, and thus are celebratory in nature, seem to romanticize the graffiti and street artist’s subculture (Campos, 2013), and are minimally interpretative.
Scholarly literature

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a moderate amount of scholarly literature on graffiti and street art. Most of this has been in the form of articles published in peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed journals in a variety of social science and humanities disciplines. Although one academic journal published a special issue on graffiti, no one scholarly venue specializes in publishing articles on graffiti and street art. Some of that research has included ethnographies focusing on different cities, including Los Angeles (Philips, 1999) and Denver (Ferrell, 1996). One of the most popular urban locales for ethnographic study is New York City (NYC) (e.g., Lachmann, 1988; Austin, 2001; Snyder, 2009; Kramer, 2010). The NYC subway has been the source of numerous scholarly articles and books (e.g., Castleman, 1984; Austin, 2001). These ethnographies typically include interviews with graffiti and street artists, observations of their work, and in some cases, participant observation. Some of the scholarly research is couched in the theories of youth subculture and/or psychosocial development (Lachmann, 1988; Snyder, 2009; MacDiarmid & Downing, 2012; Taylor, Marias, & Colman, 2012), labeling (Lachmann, 1988), or masculinities (e.g., Macdonald, 2001). In this context, there is some attempt to understand the motivation of graffiti artists, seeing their work as a means of communication, attention-seeking behavior, legitimation among their subculture, or an avenue to develop important life skills.

Few studies focus exclusively on public or official reactions to graffiti/street art. Another rather underdeveloped area have been studies that looked at how graffiti and street art have been used and/or appropriated in other forms of popular culture (Alvelos, 2004; Ross, 2015). Finally some work has examined official reactions to the presence of graffiti/street art (e.g., Austin, 2001; Halsey & Young, 2002; Graycar, 2003; Iveson, 2010; Kramer, 2010; Taylor, Cordin, & Njiru, 2010; Taylor & Khan, 2013; Ross & Wright, 2014). For reasons that are not entirely clear, missing from this array are studies (e.g., surveys) that look at public reactions and business reactions to graffiti and street art.

Theoretical concerns

A number of relevant theoretical approaches can be examined in relation to graffiti and street art. One of them focuses primarily on the result, the graffiti and street art, in an attempt to deconstruct it. For example, Gottlieb (2008), building on Panofsky’s model of iconographical analysis (1939/1972), has developed a classification scheme that categorizes different types of graffiti and street art. Taylor, Cordin, and Njiru (2010) have also developed a classification method that they argue would assist municipal authorities in making decisions about graffiti removal. Alternatively, the fledgling scholarly research on this subject, particularly the ethnographies, tends to see graffiti and street art as an expression of youth subculture (Ferrell, 1993). In this manner, graffiti and street art are intimately tied to juveniles’ and young adults’ desire to achieve “sneaky thrills” (e.g., Katz, 1988). The argument here is that their lives are otherwise boring and that engaging in low-level crime, in this case vandalism, gives them a rush that other age-appropriate activities cannot give them. Others have taken this idea one step further and argued that graffiti and street art are an expression of masculinity (Macdonald, 2001). Some of this work views graffiti and street art as a stage in an individual’s development, whereby he or she graduates into other kinds of pursuits (Lachmann, 1988; Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2009). Still others (Taylor, Marias, & Colman, 2002) argue that graffiti offenses are a step towards more serious kinds of criminal activity. Taylor (2012) sees the production of graffiti as an attempt, particularly amongst juveniles, to gain recognition among their peers. Finally, some researchers examine
the political content of graffiti and see it as a form of resistance and/or political communication (e.g., Ferrell, 1996; Waldner & Dobratz, 2013).

Broad treatments

Despite the previously reviewed research, the field lacks a relatively comprehensive textbook, and/or a scholarly overview that does justice to the subject matter. Although there are a handful of compilations that primarily include photographs of graffiti and street art from well known locations around the world (e.g., Ganz, 2004; 2013; Seno, 2010; Deitch, Gastman & Rose, 2011; Schacter, 2013), no comprehensive works of an academic nature have been published.

Wacławek’s book, *Graffiti and Street Art* (2011), which I use in my undergraduate “Graffiti and Street Art” class, is about the best comprehensive book on the subject. Wacławek introduces the subject and does a very good job in defining what both graffiti and street art are and describing their different types, before tracing the history of this unique art from its origins in New York City to other large cities around the world. In so doing, Wacławek locates graffiti in the framework of the hip hop culture that emerged in the Bronx during the 1980s and the struggles that New York City incurred trying to deal with graffiti in its subway system. The history is presented in an easy to understand, chronological order, outlining how graffiti has evolved as far as designs and meanings behind the work. She provides lots of examples to illustrate her points.

Wacławek also briefly reviews the commodification of graffiti. The author introduces us to the most well known graffiti and street artists, like Banksy and Shepard Fairey, and describes the meaning behind each artist’s work. The book includes numerous color illustrations that help the reader to understand what the author is talking about. Wacławek tries to explain why artists choose particular locations for their works and the relationship between particular spaces and works of graffiti/street art.

Although this text is a relatively comprehensive treatment of the subject matter, Wacławek’s approach is more useful to the field of artist history than to the social sciences. Despite its limitations, Wacławek’s study offers a basis from which further advances can be made.

From gang graffiti to contemporary graffiti

The history of graffiti and street art is long, and has been explored in various forums, this book notwithstanding. It is a common misperception that urban street gangs produce the majority of graffiti and street art. Politicians, community activists, law enforcement and the mass media, in particularly the news media, have perpetuated this myth. Moreover, graffiti and street art are not only done by people trying to make a name for themselves (i.e. fame/notoriety), but by individuals who are passionate about art and who need an alternative place to channel their creative energies.

One additional false perception is that only select “celebrities” of the medium, like Banksy or Fairey, do graffiti and street art. Indeed some of the individuals who work in this medium have achieved cult like status, but there are numerous others who toil in the shadows who need the recognition they deserve. Since the original appearance of graffiti on the streets of Philadelphia and New York City, and its spread throughout major cities in the United States and the world, there have been subtle shifts among the writers/artists in their subject matter, techniques and the locations where they have chosen to do their work. Graffiti and street art, as this book suggests, is done by a wide variety of people or groups. The chapters contained in this book highlight these changes in greater detail.
Culture jamming/adbusting/subvertising

Although it is not covered in any great depth in this handbook, a relatively nuanced form of graffiti/street art should be mentioned. Starting in the 1980s, the number of independent clandestine protests, integrating elements of graffiti and street art, and drawing upon the long tradition of political graffiti increased. This was variably called culture jamming, adbusting, or subverting (Dery, 1993; Klein, 2000). Although there are subtle definitional differences among the three terms, culture jamming typically refers to disruption, distortion, reconfiguration, subversion, and/or damage caused to publicly displayed cultural, religious, and political artifacts, icons, signs, logos, and images, including advertising, to create a different, sometimes humorous or mocking message. Adbusting, on the other hand, is a type of culture jamming where individuals or groups purposely distort and/or parody the advertised message of a business, corporation, or organization to create a different, sometimes humorous message. For example, sometimes words or images are added or removed from advertising slogans and images. Usually this is done on signs and billboards, but can also be accomplished with videos (e.g., posted on YouTube.com). Finally, subvertising usually involves making spoofs and parodies of commercial and political advertising. The resultant product looks as if it is the original advertisement, but on closer examination it is not. In short it has the look and feel of the original communication, but is changed in subtle and satirical ways.

In this manner, the persons or groups engaging in these protest activities do not need to throw rocks, smash windows, or hack into a corporation’s website, choosing instead to express their dissatisfaction with organizations (commercial or otherwise) through the techniques of graffiti and street artists (e.g., spray paint, paint, markers, etc.). So, why do people and groups do this sort of thing? They are often protesting against organizational power, in particular capitalism’s dominance of public messages. These activities or “weapons of the weak,” as Scott (1992) might call them, are a way for typically powerless individuals and groups to send a message to large corporations and the general public. The perpetrators might have problems with various products and services that are being manufactured and sold, because they may be unsafe and/or harmful to society. It is frequently the wish of graffiti and street artists who engage in this sort of activity that their actions may force those who view the adulterated images/messages to think about the negative effects of the original message, and perhaps be spurred into political action. Usually larger corporations do not want to sue the protesters because legal action would most likely draw negative publicity towards the products and services they would have to defend in a public forum.

The Internet and World Wide Web

Finally, the spread of graffiti and street art has been assisted through the development of the World Wide Web and the numerous social media that now exist.11 There are both positive and negative implications for graffiti and street artists placing their material on the Web. On the positive side, the exposure can lead to more fame/notoriety. On the other hand, it can also result in a distancing from the subject matter, and the possibility that others may alter one’s photo in ways that the original artist did not intend (Wacławek, 2011, pp. 178–180). Moreover, “What is online doesn’t ever get to represent the actual situation on the streets. It’s always a highly limited selection, esp. if you look any “global” platforms.”12 Clearly ownership is a contested subject matter. As Wacławek notes: “[t]he artists’ sentiment is one echoed time and again by graffiti and street artists who simultaneously value the internet and criticize it for complicating, and at times trivializing these art forms” (p. 180). Today’s Internet is clearly shifting the meanings of graffiti and street art in subtle ways.
Conclusion

The existing body of scholarly research on graffiti and street art forms a respectable base from which to grow. The study of graffiti and street art, however, lacks a consistent identifiable body of hypotheses/propositions, theories, and models. Although this is not necessary for studies in this field to progress, something of this nature is helpful to move beyond a field that is dominated by descriptive studies, and minimal theorizing supported with a paucity of data collection. A considerable number of untested and unquestioned assumptions about graffiti and street art exist, and are held not only by the public and agents of social control, but by graffiti and street artists themselves.

There are several ways we can improve scholarly research on graffiti and street art. First, it would be helpful if researchers had a better grounding in art, art history and aesthetic theory. Most researchers appear to be untrained in such areas and thus it is difficult for them to deconstruct the meanings of the work they observe. Visual analysis would help them and their audiences to understand the subtleties of the work and the creators they analyse. This includes the inside jokes and double entendres embedded in the work. Not only is a solid grounding in art important, but also because of the transgressive nature of graffiti/street art it would be helpful to get a better sense of the criminal justice system response to this body of work. Criminological theory might help shed light on practitioners/perpetrators motivations that underlie their choice of work.

In terms of ethnographies, more time should be spent with the graffiti/street artists during the times that they are not doing their work. Not simply ethnographies, but larger samples of graffiti/street artists followed would be helpful. As a method of enquiry, ethnographies are important to tease out these challenges and ideas, as is the systematic collection of data that are later subjected to critical analysis. Both of these approaches are in their infancy in the field of graffiti and street art. We must also acknowledge that, as subjects of study, graffiti and street art are moving targets. Practitioners are continuously exploring new techniques and surfaces, and we owe this development to both their creativity and to their adaptability against those who wish to control their efforts. There does not appear to be any upward bounds to their energy and tenacity, nor to the potential to create a social science of graffiti.

Not only can ethnographies be improved, but also so should surveys. These can include questionnaires administered to different segments of the public (e.g., retail store owners, landlords, etc.) to determine their opinions about graffiti/street art and solutions they propose. Likewise the integration of geomapping studies could help us understand the patterns of graffiti/street art dissemination (e.g., Megler, Banis, & Chang, 2014).

With respect to the wider public, including those who are responsible for monitoring or abating graffiti, they need to develop a greater literacy in graffiti and street art. If this was done perhaps there would be more acceptance of this work and more meaningful responses to this would develop.

As with all social science research, not to mention cultural studies approaches, it is important when conducting this analysis to keep an open mind and be as objective as possible. More research on culture jamming and adbusting, and their relationship to graffiti/street art, could be done in order to round out this body of work. Finally, this scholarship must be conducted in a manner that allows us to better understand graffiti/street art, especially its communicative and transgressive elements, not simply as another tool in eradications, abatement and desistance, but for the purpose of developing alternative, progressive approaches to the presence of graffiti/street art. This is a tough line to walk, and is no easy challenge.
Notes

1 Special thanks to Stefano Bloch, Rachel Hildebrandt, Ronald Kramer, and Minna Valjakka for comments.
2 Thus markings that appear on structures, such as houses in the wake of natural disasters, like “need food,” or houses with the iconic X placed on them with spray paint, or markings left by utility companies on sidewalks are not graffiti. These are makeshift signs to expedite a process of aid, recovery, or prevent the cutting or disruption of utility lines.
4 Weide, personal communication, January 9, 2014.
5 Or mocumentary as some people have opined.
6 For a review of Fairey, see, for example, Daichendt (2014).
7 For current purposes, this review does not mention the numerous documentaries that have been produced on graffiti and street art. These, however, will be examined in one of the later chapters in the book.
8 See City (2010) 14, 1-2. This issue also included feedback from graffiti practitioners.
9 In early 2015, Street & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal was formed with the express purpose of “publishing disciplines to discuss topics, research tools and methodologies used in advanced studies of the theme ‘Street & Urban Creativity’” (http://www.urbancreativity.org/). Contributors to this journal may include scholars writing on graffiti and street art.
10 Included in this array is a comparative study of graffiti/street art in New York City and London (Macdonald, 2001).
11 As of this writing, popular social media include Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest. Because of the rapidity of developments in this means of communication, by the time of publication of this monograph, this listing is most likely incomplete.
12 E-mail correspondence Minna Valjakka March 4, 2015.

References


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