

## The Relationship between Street Art and Contemporary Culture

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**Abstract:** Most people might see graffiti and street art as two similar art forms. They decorate the buildings and walls of city streets. There is some truth in making this assumption. Both are forms of creative expression found on walls and other parts of the city. However, there are some notable differences between the two. The most well-known difference is that graffiti is illegal. Street art has a history of approval to improve and revitalize areas of the town or city. Well-known artists are often asked to put together these works of art. Street artists willingly sign their works with their own names. Graffiti artists remain anonymous and hide behind tags or work in groups to make illegal art expressions. Graffiti and street art are among the contemporary art genres and can be seen side by side in the same environment. Culture draws attention as the whole of life activities organized in certain periods of humanity with social values, norms and relations. Culture, as the whole of these life activities specific to each period and society that is in a constant state of being, changing, develops with the norms and values that are accepted as the common acceptance of the majority in some similar societies and forms the current culture, while at the same time completing its structure with cultural subcultures with their own distinctive styles. The purpose of this article; to define street art and to examine the relationship between contemporary culture with examples.

**Keywords:** Culture, Art, Street Art, Graffiti

### Introduction

The holistic relationship of the cultural structure with the subculture comes into being with the harmony of subcultural communities, sometimes as an opposition, and sometimes with an effort to create a difference. Cultural structure is not a static structure and updates itself with developing experience, technology and movements. In this update, the sub-structure and the cultural structure to which it is connected, taking into account all the differences, emerge with meaning perceptions and images, especially in the context of city and space. When street art is evaluated within the concepts of city and space, it provides a presentation opportunity in its most popular places as well as in the vacant places of common use areas. While "graffiti", which is

considered as the art of self-expression, existence or resistance, contributes to the contemporary culture, the street art works that reveal the cultural values of the city or as an advertisement product also decorate the city. In the process of formation, street art, which is a symbol of resistance to cultural structure, has been transformed into an objective phenomenon and has been domesticated. The role of institutions and organizations in changing the meaning and direction of street art is to understand the relationship of street art with contemporary culture. The point where the contemporary cultural nature of street art has reached with brand-advertising relations, and its place in galleries and museums, the problems faced by street artists in the process of change and their solutions and the works presented will contribute to the relations of street art with contemporary culture.

Art and artists do not exist only within the walls of museums and galleries. Street art and graffiti have been known to exist since cities and streets became a part of human life. Illustrations for advertising, which were seen before in the formation of street art, the dressing of huge walls with visuals, draw attention as communication tools that refer to different cultural syntheses within the production-consumption balance (Whitehead, 2004).

As in the example of electrical transformers of public institutions and organizations, walls or similar places to hide from plain sight, It is known that street art has been used of wall paintings to decorate or cover the places and that they made references to the cultural accumulation of the city or society in the painting of these places. In addition, the mural that was put into use for the promotion of knowledge and values also draws attention with the symbols and symbols of the city and reveals its connection with the culture. Street art, known as graffiti in the individual sense, is seen as socio-cultural and political in action, as well as being the works that reflect the feelings and thoughts of the society in which the discourses are expressed through these efforts (MacMaughton, 2006).

Understanding and defining street art as we see it today begins as a subculture of graffiti art, often crossing and borrowing from one another. Simply describing street art has never been a uniform or effortless task as there is no single definition of it. Street art, originally coined by Allan Schwartzman in 1985 (Lewisohn, 2008), is an all-encompassing variety of artistic expression, directly derived from the graffiti revolution, in a two-dimensional or three-dimensional situation against an urban backdrop, often referred to as post-graffiti (Bou , 2005:7). It carries a new set of aesthetic ideals, media, and techniques unheard of in the graffiti art movement of the 1970s and 1980s in New York.

Tagging as it is called in the graffiti art community is considered the root of graffiti and the most common way to mark one's territory (Bowen, 1999). Simplified forms of fast, stylized signatures consisting of letters or numbers (Gomez, 1993), labels often contain highly stylized typography and letters that are unreadable by outsiders (Gross, D. & Gross, T., 1993).

According to Lewisohn (2008:23):

*"Graffiti writing has a very specific aesthetic: it's about label, it's about graphic form, it's about lettering, styles, and spray paint application, and it's about reaching to difficult places."*

## What is Graffiti and What Are Its Main Features?

Based on words and letters, graffiti comes from the Greek word "graphein", which means to write. Graffiti is also linked to the Italian word "graffiato", which means scratch (Wither, 2019).

Graffiti art has historically been seen as a form of vandalism, a curious enigma, and a threat to society. Infused with the emergence of hip-hop culture, the graffiti revolution took place mainly in New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, urban youth began spray painting subway cars, trains and walls, providing a voice to disenfranchised, anti-authoritarian rebels seeking an identity to be seen, felt and heard by all. This seemingly graffiti-inspired style of art still exists, but it has been transformed and altered, blurring the line with another art form now called street art. A close cousin and successor to the graffiti revolution, street art keeps pace with contemporary, mainstream urban culture but still clearly influences its roots in graffiti art (Gomez, 1993). While graffiti art has traditionally been viewed as an art form that emphasizes the self-reproduction of a namesake using creative, bold lettering with spray paint, street art is borderless, often involving writing but also using stencils, painting, wheat pasting and stickers. "Bombing" (sticking and pasting) as art forms that share a similar aesthetic.

The words and letters of the graffiti artist have a scratched appearance. The tagger must spray the paint manually so that the work is not literally painted over. Graffiti predates street art, and most people associate this form of expression with vandalism. Graffiti artists often work in groups known as teams. The artist is called the tagger and each graffiti item has tags to share as a form of identity. Nicknames and abbreviations are often used to express who the artists are. Due to the illegal aspect of the work, real names and signatures are not shared. Graffiti began as a form of expression for urban youth. 'Tags' are forms of personal branding by taggers. There is a whole graphic culture attached to graffiti. Followers of this artistic mode of expression enjoy the peril element of stealth writing when no one can watch them. They like to write in hard-to-reach places. A graffiti artist sees a deeper meaning of the flow of lines with colors and unique labels, while those outside of this culture see a messy mix of words and letters.

According to Christina Wither (2019), the main features of graffiti are as follows:

- Graffiti is an illegal art form and is part of street culture.
- Graffiti is word-based and is used to promote or express parts of urban culture. It draws attention to the issues raised by the artist or writer applying the graffiti message.
- People risk their lives to express themselves with graffiti. The risk involved is breaking the law and finding dangerous places to perform graffiti art.
- Graffiti is a form of advertising and branding. Graffiti taggers make their mark on buildings and other urban landmarks through this art form.
- Graffiti artists use nicknames. They like to pick superhero names or make abbreviations with other artists in their group. They do not sign under their own names for fear of arrest.

- The graffiti changes as other taggers write on each other's work. It is a temporary form of artistic expression and is often seen as vandalism.
- Graffiti has a culture and language of its own, with phrases like 'burning' referring to a two-color label, black and chrome. A 'throw-up' refers to the use of more than one color, and 'blockbuster' is a phrase used to describe a piece of graffiti that goes up very quickly on a wall.

The street itself has become an explosive platform for artists to express themselves, often conveying their personal visions, values and views on a daily basis. Artists like James de le Vega love the idea of opening up to the world and creating a dialogue. So, they try to write something they think people should hear or rehearse. Something to make them think, for example; "to be in the moment" (Fleming, 2007:98).

This form of communication, unintentionally or deliberately, has become a part of our daily visual culture and develops through two different art forms, street art and graffiti art.

Manco (2002:9):

*"Graffiti art, as an idea, has always existed alongside the efforts of other artists, and the difference is that it is specifically sanctioned or commissioned art rather than a form of self-expression using methods seen as a crime or outside the traditional art world."*

According to many graffiti artists, this art; is defined as the voice to the weak and brings beauty to an ugly place (Howze, 2008).

Tagging as it is called in the graffiti art community is considered the root of graffiti and the most common way to mark one's territory (Bowen, 1999). Simplified forms of fast, stylized signatures consisting of letters and/or numbers, labels often contain highly stylized typography and letters that are usually unreadable by outsiders (Gross, D. & Gross, T., 1993). Lewisohn (2008:23), "Graffiti writing has a very specific aesthetic: it's about tagging, it's about graphic form, it's about lettering, styles, and spray paint application, and it's about reaching to difficult places."

Curwen and MacGillivray (2007) argue that tagging is a social practice (set of rules and codes), however, where literacy is permeated with intent and meaning, giving an individual graffiti artist the opportunity to shape an identity belonging to a particular community, group, or "team". Among these rules and codes, "bombing" (labeling or spray-painting multiple surfaces in one location, often using quick tags) is a way to maximize visibility as a labeler, thereby gaining respect and prestige among fellow graffiti artists. It is also seen as appealing to young people, innovation in language, and "visual representation with a unique and holistic aesthetic" (Kan, 2001:21).



Image 1

### **On Street Art**

Street art is another form of art that is expressed on walls and buildings outside of urban areas. It has different rules and uses different materials. Street art is a legitimate form of artistic expression. Street artists are asked to use their talents to create a mural or painted effect on an outside wall. Some cities have promoted street art and created open-air galleries. An industrial building can be enlivened with street art designs and colorful murals. Street artists paint in broad daylight and sign their work, acknowledging their artistic creations. Street art is also called Urban Art or Public Art to distinguish it from graffiti.

According to Christina Wither (2019), the main features of street art are as follows:

- Street art is legal and the artist fully signs his/her work, acknowledging his/her role in designing the artwork and painting the wall space.
- Street art focuses more on images and designs that will enliven and embellish an urban area.
- Street art is painted by artists and they are often hired to create murals that can celebrate an event or convey a message to residents and visitors.
- The street artist uses equipment such as floodlight projectors, ladders and scissor lifts to achieve the best effects in the work, while the audience marvels at his/her skills.





Image 2. Heinrich Heine Strasse, Paris/France

Street art, unlike the majority of graffiti art, varies according to the media used. Street artists have free space to include media that best serves their artistic style, in addition to the spray paint, permanent markers or markers often used by graffiti artists. Street artists typically enthusiastically use one or more forms of media such as charcoal, paint, collage, spray paint, pens, felt-tip pens, airbrushing, and wheat paste (Walker, 2008). Street artists mostly want to be a voice for the society they live in and have expressive features.

Street art, which has found a conceptual direction in today's modern and post-modern approaches, has now become widespread by becoming open to all kinds of discourse on the subject of an opposition, attention and awareness with the language of the picture.

Street art, which also draws attention with its performance arts, is accepted in today's modern understanding as it carries art to the street and carries the discourses to a better place other than visibility.

If we look at the examples of Street Art, we come across common examples especially in Europe today.



Image 3. Heinrich Heine Strasse, Spain



Image 4. Wilhelmstrasse 7, Kreuzberg/Berlin/Germany

Graffiti is actually a very old art form. Think of the figures drawn on cave walls in primitive times. Since then, people have loved to draw on walls. Graffiti is also a rebellion; This trend, which spread to the world as an extension of the American Hip Hop culture in the 1960s, had its golden age in England.

It is impossible not to mention Banksy's name when talking about street art. Banksy is an artist whose works can now be distinguished by gallery owners or collectors who buy and sell works, as well as an ordinary art follower from anywhere in the world. In one hand, there is an anonymity that makes it even more mysterious, on the



other hand, the fact that he is a prolific artist who carries out large-scale works and projects, opens exhibitions and shoots films, makes him even more valuable. Banksy no longer confronts us with Banksy works, but rather political or social messages that he uses Banksy works as a tool, and playful and actor projects where he makes his own works a part of a larger work. He can take it so far that he will open so-called amusement parks and so-called scenic hotels - and yes, he would still do them anonymously.

*“Banksy is important because he is one! He is a silent voice of protest that strikes at the distortion of the system! At night, while we sleep, he paints the walls with political criticism. The artist, who is against being a pawn of popular culture, started the most popular rebellion by himself with his brush strokes. Therefore it is ironic.”*



Image 5. South Pank, Banksy, London/England



Image 6. Banksy, 2005



Banksy began painting the streets as a freelance graffiti artist in the early 1990s. He attracted attention for the first time with her graffiti art in London and Bristol. He is generally famous for his thoughtful visualization of anti-war, anti-capitalist and anti-establishment in his works.

The crisis has always had a style that produces works that will touch the problems of the people in the middle of the conflict, in other words, draws attention to bleeding wounds of the world. He uses certain images in his works, such as children, balloons, old people, policemen, soldiers and monkeys...

The work, which is one of the most well-known works of Banksy, which adorns many walls of London, is called The Girl with the Red Balloon (Image 5). The work has the meaning that "There is always hope!".

And the work, titled The Girl and the Soldier (Image 7) was painted in the Bethlehem area of the Israeli wall. Banksy used this painting in the promotion of the 'Santa's Ghetto' exhibition. He explained that he chose the Bethlehem region for the exhibition as it is the birthplace of Jesus and is also the center of all allegations of human rights violations.



Image 7. Banksy, 2007

Child Labor, one of Banksy's last works, shows a child from the Far East as he sews British flags. It is a reference to the scandal of child labor and contract manufacturing in England. This work, which was suddenly stolen from the wall one night, later found a buyer at an auction in Miami with a sales figure of 450,000 pounds. Even though this situation infuriated the residents of the neighborhood, no criminal complaint was filed against the person or people who stole with the idea of that "the streets belong to everyone".



Image 8. Banksy, 2013, Child Labor

Futura, who used the name Futura2000 when he first started working, is one of the street artists who has revealed his identity. Lenny McGurr, with his real name, is a New York artist who started working in the 1970s and changed the fate of street art.

With his works that add abstraction to street art and graffiti, he inspired many New York street artists who were content to paint letters on subway cars in those days. Today, Futura has turned into an artist who creates works in different forms such as photography, sculpture, graphic design and painting, and collaborates on album covers and even fabric, sneaker and toy designs. Even though there are artists and fans who think that by entering museums and galleries and selling works to collectors, they contradict the street art philosophy, Futura continues to express his creativity.

A work of Futura, one of the indispensable names of street art exhibitions, examples of which we have started to see in museums in big cities in recent years, was also included in the street art exhibition titled "The Language of the Walls" organized by Pera Museum in the summer of 2014.



Image 9. Futura, 2009



Image 10. Futura, 1982

## Conclusion

Street art and graffiti art continue to slowly gain fame on the walls of famous galleries and museum spaces, but still lag behind traditional, mainstream accepted art forms. Street art and graffiti art styles are increasingly used in mass media, from advertising to product placement to appeal to young consumers around the world. The importance and prevalence of street art can be easily seen in our everyday visual culture on a smaller scale, from the world's largest cities to smaller rural areas. Today, it seems increasingly difficult to distinguish between street art and graffiti art, as the two are so closely related and often overlap in terms of subject matter, media, aesthetic appearance and installation as a public art form. Distinguishing between street art and graffiti art is vital for this work, as the two contain several differences that cannot be understood by the discerning eye.

As a result, in terms of history; Graffiti has been a part of society for longer than street art. Although both are considered art forms, Street art is more pleasing to the eye. It pertains to areas where buildings may need to be decorated to raise the space.

In terms of art form; Art is often very subjective and a matter of personal opinion. Street art has a wider appeal to the majority because of the pictorial aspect of the work.

In terms of the meaning behind the work; Both art forms have a meaning or message that needs to be shared. However, street art can convey the message to a wider group because it relies on images, not encrypted messages.

In terms of legality, Graffiti is also illegal and people caught in this activity will be arrested. Street art is often commissioned and artists create something attractive for city walls.

When considered as the culture of every art form; Graffiti appeals to a selective group.

Street art draws attention as an art that includes all the arguments of modern art in today's world, sometimes naive, some other times with prepared conceptual framework and based on philosophical and social discourses. As it is known, society is a dynamic structure that moves forward with time, place and various developments. All kinds of social, political, technological and economic movements of the period play a role in the shaping and change of this structure.

Culture, which is considered to be up-to-date and draws attention in a dynamic structure, is also affected by these developments, making its acceleration, especially its artistic integration, fast and up-to-date. The street, which is also accepted as a place, is at the focal point of this movement thanks to street art. In this respect, the research has been revealed with important findings in terms of revealing the relationship between street art and culture.

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