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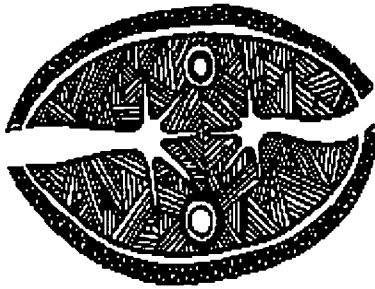
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ABSTRACT

Although by no means universally so, urban graffiti is commonly regarded as vandalism. It costs authorities in Australia hundreds of thousands of dollars to remove each year, and it offends many adults as callow effusions of the territorial markings of "human tomcats." Authorities are mounting campaigns to catch the offenders in the act and punish them severely. But the offenders mostly maintain that they are making "art"--a positive act, not vandalism--and improving the environment. This paper views this response as stemming from an inadequate and even totally wrong conception of what art really is. The paper locates graffiti conceptually within "design," but finds that even so it cannot be justified. The paper suggests a national regimen of teaching art in all schools. It is highly likely that the creative energy, a natural and laudable aspect of growing children, would be channeled into socially acceptable forms of expression, without repression. (BT)



“Is Graffiti Art?”

by

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IS GRAFFITI ART?

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(abstract)

Although by no means universally so, urban graffiti is commonly regarded as vandalism. Certainly it costs authorities in Australia hundreds of thousands of dollars to remove each year; and it offends many adults as callow effusions or the territorial markings of human tomcats. Authorities are mounting campaigns to catch the offenders in the act and/or punish them severely.

But, the offenders mostly maintain that they are making 'art' - a positive act, not vandalism - and, so, improving the environment. In the view of the writer, this stems from an inadequate and, even, totally wrong conception of what *art* really is.

This paper locates graffiti conceptually within *design*, but finds that - even so - it cannot be justified.

This paper was presented with the assistance of the South Australian Country Arts Trust

For over twenty years, state and local governments have had to waste millions of dollars each year cleaning up graffiti. In spite of the problem having been discussed seriously by government bodies for at least half this time-span, there has been little or no progress in preventing graffiti occurring; in fact, it has become a significant national urban crisis.

This paper proposes a solution - arguably the only feasible one. However, it will only be effective in the longer term, for it aims at prevention based on education of the elements in the population which perpetrate graffiti. As such, it will require both far-sighted political judgment and leadership, public patience, and a significant investment of money and resources - although this will be justified in the long run in terms of the savings which will ultimately be made to the public purse.

The maximum potential for success would require a state-wide - and, even, national - approach with all authorities acting in cooperation.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

Many think that derelict urban sites can be improved with colourful murals, and there is, undoubtedly, some truth in this. However, murals can take other forms - and be in other styles - than those used by graffitiists, and conflating murals *per se* and graffiti is totally unjustifiable, and it can obscure the deleteriousness of the more general use of graffiti.

Until recently, some individuals and authorities have been reluctant to curb graffiti in the belief that it is 'art' and that young people should be encouraged to exercise their creativeness freely (art educators know this argument intimately!). One well-documented scheme was promoted by a consortium of Victorian youth organisations, the Australia Council and the aerosol-can industry (!) in 1991-92: 'Pump Up The Can' toured twenty-odd large spray-painted pictures to a number of venues. Cartoonist and humorist Kaz Cooke wrote the catalogue essay, 'National Outrage - Stamp Out Other People's Fun', in which she was 'outraged' at the 'responsible, grumpy, tedious people' who wish to stop graffiti - but ignored the outrage of offended owners of walls! Was this a genuine sentiment or an expression of: 'If you can't beat 'em - join 'em'?

This must be the motivation of authorities who sanction - even sponsor - 'spray-art mural' schemes in the hope that the underground 'muralists' will come above ground.

A ruse that some communities have adopted is to declare selected walls in public places 'legal' for graffitiists to 'write' on. This may have some effect for a period, but there is a strict limit to the number of walls that can be declared legal, and what happens after they are used up?

But, none of these schemes work - nor can they be expected to work.

It is clear that the overwhelming majority of street-graffitiists are teenage or pre-teen boys, most of them from middle-class families and most not succeeding very well at school or in sport. Some of them come from 'good' homes and 'good' schools. For them graffiti-writing is the only means they have of expressing themselves and making their mark on society. In countries under oppressive political regimes, graffiti serve the legitimate political ends of the disenfranchised. However, it could be argued that Australian children today have greater access to freedom of expression than any other group has had at any other time in the history of the world - so graffiti cannot be justified in the same way here.

Also, inherent in the activity is its underground nature, which is a challenge to maturing boys: not only for inter-personal peer-competition but also for the risk-taking ßinvolved in stealing the cans and perpetrating the act.

IS IT ART?

There is no logical or aesthetic reason why a spray-can or felt-pen cannot be used to make a work of art. Many legitimate artists use them. But art does not flow automatically from any particular medium - far from it!

It is often said that even the artists and the academics cannot agree on what *art* is, but this is often over-stated. It is a clearly-recognisable fact that the general principle that has characterised *art* in the western world for the last century or so (but not, of course, elsewhere and at other times) is the claim by artists to free, creative, individualistic - even idiosyncratic and self-indulgent - self-expression in the pursuit of personal aesthetic ends. This principle may be observed in the work of all the acknowledged modern masters - although not so much in their theoretical statements, or those of the theorists. It is, in fact, the only thing the modern masters have in common, for their styles differ greatly - an expected outcome of their individualistic stance.

Given this fact, there is no way the general run of graffiti can be designated 'art': most graffiti-writings are boringly-repetitive stereotypes and clones of each other - in spite of their perpetrators' declarations of

their individuality. Mostly they reproduce the limited range of motifs that began appearing on the streets of New York fifty or more years ago - but, then, the genuine expression of an oppressed under-class. Neither can graffiti be called particularly 'modern', of course, for the same reason.

If the graffiti on our streets can be said to make any statement that could be described as 'political', it is an unredeemably callow one - as might be expected from developing youth. These statements are such as should be restricted to a discussion between father and son, not trumpeted publicly. Many twenty-year-olds who have been graffitiists when younger are thoroughly ashamed of their former activity and thankful that it was conducted anonymously.

And few - if any - teenage graffitiists graduate to adult artist.

Some apologists for graffiti maintain that, because the world approves of advertising, it should also tolerate graffiti. But there are major conceptual differences between posters and graffiti. Whatever may be our political stance about advertising, posters are commissioned and funded for a particular function - and (usually) placed with the approval of the owners of walls. They are *designed*, in fact. And herein may lie a justification for spray-painted decoration on walls: a true mural is *designed* for particular wall, with consideration being given to its proportions, colours, textures etc, and the location of openings. Graffiti that conform to these strictures may well qualify as 'design', if not art. But, few do.

Here we have a linguistic problem that is common in other aspects of our subject: that is, because the term 'art' is used both to tag a class of human activity (as I am using it here) and as an honorific, to declare that something is 'not art' is to deliver an unintended insult! People commonly call an extremely fine example of design - say, the Sydney Opera House - 'art', *but it isn't*. It is a particularly fine example of *design*, so why not say so. We never, by the way, praise a fine picture or poem as 'design'. We should get this clear.

THE EDUCATIONAL REMEDY

None of the remedies that have been tried has succeeded in eliminating graffiti. This is because they involve either catching offenders after they have offended or treating walls either before or after the offence. A more productive approach would be to intervene in the education of potential offenders before they have a chance to offend. Otherwise society is faced with an unending succession of ever-younger people following the same motivation and course of action as their elders. And art education can play a major role here.

In spite of the above analysis (which, of course, is unknown to them) graffitiists universally claim to be 'doing art'. But - as art educators know - art has many styles, techniques and media. While spray-paint may be one of the media, there must be dozens of others. And there are many other styles and subjects than the stock stereotypes of the graffitiist. These boys are, in a real sense, operating as artists - expressing their individuality in the limited range of ways popular culture has revealed to them. They are forced into this because only rarely - in our culture - does a school show them anything else. If the kids want to do art, why not give it to them - *real art* - in the schools? But, we don't!

If we had a national regime of teaching art in all schools - in particular for the 10- to 15-year-olds who are considering a career in spray-painting - it is highly likely that the creative energy, which is a natural and laudable aspect of these growing children, would be channelled into socially-acceptable forms expression, without repression.

Those who see in graffiti no more than a sign of general rejection of traditions and society, or tom-cats marking their territory, should be reminded that the master innovators of modern art were all aggressively 'male' and of a revolutionary (or, at least, revisionary) bent. They found their legitimate expression in creative art, and the scheme proposed here is no more than a generalisation of that proven principle.

The cost of implementing a *real art* curriculum, particularly for primary students (presented at the time they are contemplating emulating their elders on the streets at night), would be thoroughly justified in the long term - not only through saving money on clean-ups, but also through turning future generations into genuine appreciators of art.



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