

Street Art

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You say tom-ay-to, I say tom-ah-to; you say vandalism, I say art. The elusive, widespread form of artistic expression commonly found on streets, buildings, billboards and back alleys across the world has progressed significantly from its origins in the 1970s. This illicit art form has done more than survive government and police crackdowns, it has spread into global culture and become a somewhat accepted and expected part of living in a major city. City streets and suburban outlets have become a vibrant canvas of personal expression and skilful showcases, vastly different from the territorial 'tagging' that typical graffiti entails. Only in recent years has 'street art' begun to be recognised and appreciated as an expressive and artistic medium, although its worthiness in contemporary society is still disputed between lovers and critics. But as this popular movement continues to grow, proliferating under government clean up offensives, is there nowhere else to turn but acceptance? And how will this affect the fundamental core of 'street art'?

'Street art' is defined as any work developed and exhibited in public areas and, although differentiated from graffiti and 'tagging', the term 'street art' connotes illegality as opposed to government sponsored initiatives. This form of art typically includes graffiti artwork, stencil graffiti, sticker art, wheat pasting, street poster art and street installations. The 'street' is a powerful site for artists to reach a much broader audience than traditional galleries allow, letting disenfranchised artists use urban space as a platform for their artwork. This platform has been utilised by masses of artists with some in particular becoming famous, or infamous if you will, through their public displays and powerful messages.

One of the most significant and recognised contributors to public street art across the world is Banksy, a pseudo-anonymous British graffiti artist. Although there is a substantial amount of uncertainty involving his identity, his satirical commentary on political, social and ethical issues has added fuel to fiery debate of whether his type of work is art or vandalism. He is not the only one however, there are Blek le Rat, considered by many as the godfather of stencil art, Broken Crow, C215, Cartrain, Dolk, Tom Civil, Julian Beever, Dan Witz, Happy, Adam Neate, to name only a few of the significant contributors to street art across the world.

Authorities' response to the ever elusive, yet ever present, existence of 'street art' typically varies internationally. Controversy has erupted over a number of Banksy's pieces scattered across London, with some councils labeling his work vandalism and having them removed. Others have rallied for preservation of his works, as they continue to become increasingly popular amongst the public. This type of reaction to their pieces is common for most street artists, yet despite these setbacks, their public presence is still strong.

Due to growing public acceptance and even appreciation of 'street art', governments are doing more to recognise and support this popular art form. An example of this is a local Australian initiative, the laneway commissions in which Melbourne's Public Art Program encourages artists to contribute to the city's public spaces through the creative expression of their culture and identity. This initiative which has proved incredibly popular has become famous world wide, with Melbourne streets now being renowned for their showcase of unique and remarkable art.

Although street art has its roots in rebellion and its growth through illegality, can the motivation, originality and creative expression of traditional street art be imitated in government initiatives and exhibitions? Isn't the most defining aspect of this popular art form exactly what would be lost in a traditional gallery medium? Commercial

success of street artists, seemingly, comes with compromise or lack of integrity, with some confusing selling work with selling out. Banksy's auctioned pieces have reached as much as £288,000 (*Space Girl and Bird*, 2007), which suggests he is disposed towards benefiting from the consumer culture he continually undermines through his work. Street art began as an offensive against the consumerist notions of art, a resistance to fastidious gallery owners and art collectors. Through the public nature of their creative expression, street artists' work could be neither bought nor sold—art was for everyone. Will street art die through its institutionalisation?

Opinions on the question predictably differ from person to person, with some artists finding they can balance the freedom of their work on the street and the commercial seclusion of their work in galleries. In a roundtable interview published in *The Morning News*, an online magazine, Dan Witz has said,

Street art for me has always meant freedom from the artist's game—galleries, the career machine, all that frustrating, soul-sucking, dissatisfying bullshit. Going out on a street mission is my unsupervised playtime—no responsibility, no expectations, no need to worry about the artwork's life outside that moment. Nothing against the art world—I happen to love art museums and galleries, and that's how I'm lucky enough to make my living—but that kind of art is protected, isolated from real life (which is part of why I like it). I think I use the street-art side of my work to balance myself out, to keep me awake, and exposed, and uncomfortable.

(http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/personalities/roundtable_street_art.php)

Various works produced by artists can be celebrated or reviled, whether they are displayed on the street or a gallery. But street art is definitively art developed and exhibited in public areas to communicate not only with the owner of the piece or viewers of the exhibition, but with anyone and everyone. Street art will not die through increased institutionalisation. However, for the concept of street art and the challenging and remarkable nature of the work to be preserved, there needs to be a differentiation between pieces displayed on the street and those in a gallery. Of course while the work of street artists found in galleries and exhibitions, produced to support themselves, may be just as outstanding as their street art, it cannot be classified under the same term. Their work on the street may be aesthetically transferable to a gallery format, but in that transition the work would lose its most defining and fundamental aspect; the street.