AH 1000
Intro to Visual Culture

Modern Graffiti (and Street Art)

This week we will be examining two different forms of visual demonstration outside of the gallery and the frame; graffiti and street art.

These two art forms are unique because they are difficult to classify. Some consider graffiti and street art high art, while others view it as low art, or even lower than low, bad and illegal. However, graffiti and street art are not popular art forms. They do have popularity in some groups, yet their creation is usually made in an anti-establishment, highly critical, “f() you” manner.

These art forms are worthy of study because they are reflective of certain socio-economic relations, which will be examined later.

All in all they are the visual expressions of a subcultural mentality that is significant despite it being beneath main stream culture. Think of all the graffiti you may have seen just in Detroit. Its everywhere; on highway overpasses, train cars, side of building, abandoned homes and so on.
First, let’s examine the differences between street art and graffiti:

*Street art* can be defined as art intentionally placed/created in a public space, sometimes legal, sometimes not. It is usually created on a preexisting structure (such as a building) thus it becomes a part of public space. Its essence is public.

“Street art” is a broad term that can be applied to many different forms and mediums. For instance; spray paint, painting, stenciling, murals, “yarn bombs,” and sometimes even video art.

It is distinct from graffiti because it is more image-based, (sometimes) more complex, and gimmicky.

It can often be a sign of the gentrification of an urban community, especially when sanctioned by a business or some sort of bureaucracy.
*Graffiti* is a more narrow term. Graffiti is a stylized slogan, name, or phrase that is marked in some manner (usually spray paint) to represent an individual or a collective group in a public space.

It is always unsanctioned (occurring without authoritative consent or approval); thus, it is often viewed and treated as a criminal act. Its form is more textual than figurative, although aesthetics are often considered.

Although graffiti is anti-establishment it is not anti-social; it is an underground means of communication. It is meant to be read and seen by all.
It should be noted that despite the differences between street art and graffiti, they are similar in the shared concept of reclaiming the urban environment for personal artistic expression. Both developed at the same time as a reaction to the increasing commodification and privatization of public spaces. Think about the proliferation of advertisements on billboards and on subway station walls.
Now let’s briefly examine the roots and development of graffiti.

The term "graffiti" derives from the Greek graphein ("to write"). The act of graffiti dates all the way back to ancient times. For instance, graffiti can be found in the ancient city of Pompeii, Italy.
However, *modern graffiti* has a concrete history and clear origin.

It is also a *style* of art that is based on text, or more specifically an autograph. This is why those who practice graffiti are referred to as *graffiti writers* and not graffiti artists.

Graffiti emerged in New York City during the 1970s during a time of severe economic collapse and urban decay.

It was one part of four emerging cultural elements: Graffiti, DJing, rap, and breakdancing.

All four artistic forms were a reaction against the conditions brought on by the city’s state of economic decline. Consequently, they were then seen as a symbol of the city’s urban decay because they appeared at the same time. People feared graffiti and saw it as clear signs of anarchy and social and economic ruin. Why, would people view graffiti in this manner? This fear may stem form the fact that graffiti (especially the earliest forms) was a means for gangs to mark their territories. This was especially true in the Bronx neighborhood, which suffered by the failing economy.
However, graffiti also became a means of proclaiming the individual, the person doing the writing. There was an impulse to make one’s existence known by marking a public space with a personalized/recognizable signature, or “tag.”

The “tag” then becomes a type of signifier for the signified (the person behind the tag). However, often the tagger is never revealed so the tag becomes the signified, it stands in for the individual. They are almost always only known by their signifier.

Soon tagging became a kind completion among graffiti writers. The goal of the game was to “get one’s name up as much as possible (26).” And there were rules; a writer could not copy or mimic another’s tag and they could not paint over another’s tag. Also, writing on private property (such as someone’s home) and writing obscenities was frowned upon.

An important element of graffiti writing is repetition. The more you get your name up, the more people will see it.
The article we read this week also discusses the phenomenon of graffiti art on subway trains. What better way to proclaim yourself by painting your tag on something that travels across the city? It’s mobile personal advertising.
It is interesting that while some view graffiti as a visual blight on the urban landscape, those who wrote the graffiti and some of those who live with it see it as adding color and visual interest to an economically suffering environment. It is a kind of grassroots urban improvement.

Graffiti also goes hand in hand with the alternative-space art movement: art that is made specifically for a space removed from the gallery or from a frame on a wall. Think land art and site-specific works, such as Richard Serra’s *Titled Arc* outdoor sculpture mentioned in the article (see next page for image).

In some cases graffiti writing and street art merge together. As graffiti developed as an urban art form graffiti writers started to broaden their aesthetic approach.
Photographs of Richard Serra’s, *Titled Arc*, c. 1981, now destroyed
It was a site-specific piece, meaning it was intentionally created for the specific location outside government buildings in the Federal Plaza, NYC.
It was a wall of steel that featured a soft curving line while leaning over gently to one side.
(Although it was aesthetically pleasing, people who worked in the area hated it. It blocked their path, cast a shadow on them when eating lunch, and blocked their view. A judge ordered its removal in 1989.)
The reading for this week argues that the “war against graffiti” arose from the controlling factions of western society’s (such as corporations, government, businesses) fear of the loss of or threat to their control.

The “War on Graffiti” turned misdemeanors, such as vandalism, into felonies and community service into jail time. And most of the offenders were teenagers.

Graffiti was anti-control and its essence is two fold: spontaneity and the potential of danger.

The author of the article, Barnett, proposes that in order to control graffiti and unsanctioned street art, the art establishment began to show “graffiti” art in galleries and put price tags on them. All spontaneity and danger is removed from the work if placed in a gallery; thus, the argument could be made that it is no longer “graffiti.”
Lastly, the article discusses how graffiti is changing from tag/textual to more image based. This change occurred along with the gradual consumption of graffiti by the institutionalized art system. In some cases graffiti is being transformed into a more acceptable/traditional art form.

Also, when graffiti is placed in a gallery it is removed from the community that it was originally intended for. It is quarantined in a space that most people do not have access to. Public art becomes private.

The author also makes an interesting point that when a graffiti writer accepts money for their work then they are submitting to the capital system. Presumably, they can no longer be labeled as graffiti writers.

Lastly, some consider those graffiti writers and street artists who successfully marketed their work as sell outs because they became part of the system which they were critiquing in the first place.

For example, Shepard Fairly, the creator of the “Obey” project and later the Barack Obama “Hope” campaign poster. His work also became mainstream and commercialized. For instance, you can go to his website and purchase Obey Giant stickers and posters.