



Research Output Journal of Arts and Management 3(1):17-19, 2024

ROJAM Publications

ISSN: 1115-6112

<https://rojournals.org/roj-art-and-management/>

The Evolution of Street ART: From Graffiti to Social Commentary

Ndung'u John Wanjiku

Faculty of Business and Management Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

Street art, often viewed as an unsanctioned form of public art, has evolved significantly from its graffiti roots. Initially perceived as a form of vandalism, graffiti has transformed into a legitimate art movement, known today as street art, encompassing a wide range of visual expressions in public spaces. This paper traces the historical origins of street art, from ancient graffiti to modern urban murals, and examines its transition from subversive street culture to a powerful medium for social commentary. By analyzing the works of influential street artists such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey, this study explores how street art has become a tool for political and social discourse, engaging communities and challenging societal norms. The impact and influence of street art on contemporary society are discussed, highlighting its role in reclaiming public space and fostering community engagement.

Keywords: Street Art, Graffiti, Social Commentary, Urban Art, Public Art.

INTRODUCTION

Street art is an art form that is developed in public spaces, very often without the consent of authorities. It can be categorized as unsanctioned public art. However, street art is more defined by the act rather than the specific work produced. It is a form of visual communication and is generally associated with the post-graffiti movements, and is also often connected with underground culture. It is commonly considered a transgressive art form. Street art is characterized by its subversive or independent discourse and it is not necessarily accomplished with the purpose of being brought into the circuit of the art market. When street art, which has been made with the purpose of being preserved, is taken out of its original context and placed in a gallery or museum, it becomes known by the term 'urban art'. Some of the most renowned and iconic street artists in the world are Banksy, who comes from England, and Shepard Fairey, from the United States [1, 2]. The shortness of the life of a work of street art is often used as an argument by the detractors of the movement. However, street artists ignore the possibility of preservation of their works, corroborating the idea that the legitimacy of their artistic creations is founded on the ephemeral nature of the same. The first origins of street art can be found in the prehistoric representations of animals which can be identified in caves, in petroglyphs, and in the paintings made in the open air, with rock-wall strategies used to apply Rutile red and Ochre yellow. The most important examples of street art today are murals, sporadic paintings (made on walls, fences or means of communication), posters, works done with stencil technique, works done with stickers, and pioneering graffiti. Political discourse is one of the characteristics that differentiates the more recent artistic expressions from those from ancient eras. There are currently critical, social, human, post-modern, shock doctrines, and anti-bourgeois currents which move street art. In its beginnings, however, street art was just an extension of subcultures such as hip-hop and punk, which were politically neutral, adopting street art a clear seditious nature and presenting works with strong political or critical inclinations [3, 4].

GRAFFITI: ORIGINS AND EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

Graffiti, one of the earliest art-related practices of humanity, also constitutes the cornerstone of street art. Beyond being an art form, graffiti also represents a method of expressing social and political opposition and is particularly centered on youth culture. For some, however, graffiti remains a form of vandalism as

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

the law seeks to restrict its presence. Regardless of personal sentiments, contemporary art history books acknowledge graffiti as a pioneering form of expression [5, 6]. It is quite possible to say that graffiti has been present in human history since the first man put a pictogram on a stone. Writing on the walls of the pyramids, New Testament murals, and other forms of graffiti trace back to the ancient world. Although metaphorically, humanity has been putting feathers on a swine since the first pictogram was etched. During World War Two, the trampled population of European cities wrote "Kilroy was here" on the walls, lending the name to the story and the illustrations that followed. The real apex of graffiti, however, came when French student protesters wrote their political demands on structures in 1968, thus making their mark on contemporary history. Shortly thereafter, through the brush of a new genius, graffiti also started conquering the gallery walls. The principal actor of this story, which quickly evolves from protest to art, is the characteristic and troublesome New York child called graffiti [7, 8, 9].

STREET ART MOVEMENT: TRANSITION AND EXPANSION

As socially conscious artists began working on the streets in the 1980s, their pieces became known as "street art" in an effort to distinguish them from the often-hidden, countercultural roots of the graffiti movement. Like the graffiti that inspired it, street art was often meant to challenge society and question cultural norms, and street artists developed their own distinct styles to do so. As urban art gained in consequence and popularity, it evolved from not just being a social movement that critiques society or tackles controversial political issues, but also as a very rich art movement. This expansion saw a change in the places where pieces of urban art were located, as well as a notable increase in the number of young, talented people working as both artists of the street and street artists [10, 11]. The names of the most important street artists from the beginning of the movement, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Swoon, or Shepard Fairey, gradually increased in importance. Among them, graffiti began to adapt to the walls of different parts of cities around the world. They ranged from legal walls such as the West Berlin Wall, where artists were expressing their discontent for decades; Amsterdam's Spuistraat, where Provo members created cultural and social dynamics; and New York's East Village, where the art-as-protest by the Real Estate Show and other street art pieces were discovered in the late 1970s [12, 13].

EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN STREET ART

Social commentary marked a significant turning point in the evolution of street art. Proponents of the emerging style began using the variously controllable mediums available to the modern urban artist to make more overt political and social statements, blurring the line between street art and institutionalized political dissent. Groups such as the Billboard Liberation Front, a San Francisco-based group who made a name for themselves by altering billboards to convey messages they felt were relevant to the community, used the same methods of mass communication as the advertising industry they targeted, but with radically different messages. Over time, this tactic became increasingly popular and represents a whole new way of thinking about street art. These artists don't need public space because they have the power to create the space themselves [14, 15]. The 1990s saw another shift in street art's outward focus, as artists began to broaden their concerns beyond purely social or political issues. Instead of simply questioning the institutions that inspire their discontent or mounting specific critiques of existing policy, they dealt with larger themes concerning social justice. This type of art may contain but is not defined by a strictly political focus. Civil rights, environmental concerns, and other global-scale issues all found outlets. Governments involved in an arms race used buildings and the public's money to communicate their power. With the Cold War ending, street artists who had fought governments in defense of the people began to search for a different mission. The street artists of the 1990s used their power to make private space public and to make public space private. Their impulses came not from particular public issues but from a desire to reclaim the public sphere from both government and corporate interest. The focus of the art changed, but the medium's use of public space continued, with its willingness to break numerous rules remaining. As street artists evolved and took on a more activist stance, their work has come to represent a certain kind of hope: an optimism in the possibility of change, the need for change, and the energy of resistance [16, 17].

IMPACT AND INFLUENCE OF STREET ART ON SOCIETY

The street is not only the artist's canvas but also a common space that everyone can identify with and share. As the observer and the observed, the passer-by is no longer indifferent and passive but active, interested, searching, and critical. At a time when our quality of life is increasingly in difficulty and our society is marked by anonymity or insecurity, street art has proved to be an art form that is able to work and speak for the community, with the help of certain urban reference marks that can become associated with roles, positions, or rights within this society [18, 19]. Street art speaks to the people and for the people. It is the property of the simple passerby; it belongs to everyone, not to galleries. It pierces our

conscience and allows us to reflect on our own existence and the course of our lives. It offers an opportunity to understand, as well as to be understood: the poetic communication of a social dimension in which small and big problems, needs and directions, intuitions and special occasions, opportunities and responsibilities are rationally addressed and from which possible responses are allowed to exist – in a dialectic way. All of this has made street art a popular art form, linked to tradition and history, capable of working for the present and the future [20, 21, 22].

CONCLUSION

The evolution of street art from its graffiti origins to a medium for social commentary reflects the dynamic interplay between art and society. Initially rooted in youth culture and subversive expression, street art has grown into a powerful tool for political and social discourse, challenging societal norms and engaging communities. The works of iconic street artists like Banksy and Shepard Fairey have elevated street art to a globally recognized art form, demonstrating its ability to convey complex messages and inspire social change. As street art continues to evolve, it remains a testament to the resilience and creativity of artists who use public spaces to communicate, provoke, and inspire. The ongoing dialogue between street art and society underscores its enduring relevance and potential to shape public consciousness.

REFERENCES

1. Sennett R, Sendra P. Designing disorder: Experiments and disruptions in the city. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
2. Tripp C. Political thinking performed: popular cultures as arenas of consent and resistance. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. 2021. tandfonline.com
3. Bradley R. A comparative study of rock art in later prehistoric Europe. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
4. Giedion S. *The Eternal Present, Volume I: The Beginnings of Art*. 2023. [\[HTML\]](#)
5. e Paiva MA. Talking Walls: Exploring Graffiti as Activism in Public Spaces. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
6. de Alencar M. Talking Walls: Exploring Graffiti as Activism in Public Spaces. 2020. up.pt
7. Škrabal O, Mascia L, Osthof AL, Ratzke M. Towards a Cross-Cultural Understanding of Graffiti: Terminology, Context, Semiotics, Documentation. *Graffiti Scratched, Scrawled, Sprayed*:1-46. [\[HTML\]](#)
8. Shobe H. Graffiti as communication and language. *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map*. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
9. Ralph J. Graffiti archaeology. *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
10. Türe A, Türe E. The Relationship between Street Art and Contemporary Culture. *International Society for Technology, Education, and Science*. 2021. ed.gov
11. Ross JI, Lennon JF, Kramer R. Moving beyond Banksy and Fairey: Interrogating the co-optation and commodification of modern graffiti and street art. *Visual Inquiry: Learning & Teaching Art*. 2020 Sep 1;9(1-2):5-23. researchgate.net
12. Braziel JE. Caribbean and Latinx Street Art in Miami. 2024. [\[HTML\]](#)
13. Karlander D. Graffiti. In *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Youth Culture 2024* (pp. 277-288). Routledge. [\[HTML\]](#)
14. Boll D. Art and its Market. 2024. [\[HTML\]](#)
15. Sharp J, Pollock V, Paddison R. Just art for a just city: Public art and social inclusion in urban regeneration. *Culture-Led Urban Regeneration*. 2020. researchgate.net
16. Dabène O. Street art and democracy in Latin America. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
17. Cooper J, Sandlin JA. Intra-active pedagogies of publicness: Exploring street art in Melbourne, Australia. *Pedagogy*. academia.edu
18. Chatterji R. Speaking with pictures: Folk art and the narrative tradition in India. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
19. Bright BJ, Bakewell L. Looking high and low: art and cultural identity. 2022. [\[HTML\]](#)
20. Morphy H. Becoming art: exploring cross-cultural categories. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
21. Crehan K. Community art: An anthropological perspective. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)
22. Stallabrass J. Contemporary art: a very short introduction. 2020. [\[HTML\]](#)

CITATION: Ndung'u John Wanjiku. The Evolution of Street ART: From Graffiti to Social Commentary. *Research Output Journal of Arts and Management*. 2024 3(1):17-19