

Michael DeNotto

# Street art and graffiti

## Resources for online study

**G**raffiti and street art are inextricably linked. The word *graffiti* comes from the Italian *graffiare* meaning to scratch, as in on a surface. Yet, today the term graffiti means any sort of unsanctioned application of a substance, whether it is spray paint, pencil markings, or even stickers.

From the graffiti scrawled on the walls of the ancient city of Pompeii, socio-political murals in Northern Ireland from groups like the IRA and Sinn Féin, to communal projects like The Great Wall of Los Angeles, scholars have begun to recognize the importance of and value of these communications and political statements. Graffiti is now recognized as a legitimate source of academic study, and it is being studied as a reaction to injustice and disenfranchisement, a cry for revolution, a way to create awareness of socio-political issues, an expression of hope for the future, an effort to reclaim public spaces, or an attempt to beautify the urban environment, among others. In fact, some scholars have even studied graffiti specific to libraries, as Quinn Dombrowski did for her *Crescat Graffiti, Vita Excolatur* project wherein she documented graffiti found in the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago from 2007 to 2011.

The present-day graffiti style began in the late 1970s in New York City, and the seminal documentary *Style Wars* (1983), does an excellent job of documenting graffiti's proliferation in conjunction with the birth of

hip hop. Graffiti also has deep connections to the Beat generation, as well as Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, in that graffiti rejects established standards, encourages experimentation, and draws from popular culture and advertising. Furthermore, Andy Warhol was instrumental in the rise of Jean-Michael Basquiat's career, who alongside artists like Keith Haring, Futura 2000, Cornbread, and TAKI-183, among others, is recognized as being an influential pioneer in the graffiti world. Like many subcultures rooted in resistance, graffiti has a rich history in independently published media like the zines *IGTimes*, *Can Control*, and *12ozProphet*.

The differences between graffiti and street art can be found in authorial intent, intended audience, and form. The most common form of graffiti is a tag. A tag is a graffiti artist's signature. Tags are text based and largely indecipherable by those outside the graffiti community. The intention behind a tag is the rebellious proliferation of the artist's signature, akin to brand name advertising. Street art is a sub-genre of graffiti. While graffiti operates within a closed community, street art is an open invitation for anyone to interact, consider, and discuss. Furthermore,

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street art is drawn with a pictorial focus rather than textual, and it is rebellious but not purposefully destructive as there is intent to beautify the urban environment.

The most recognized contemporary street artists include the likes of Banksy and Shepard Fairey. Banksy, who uses stencils in his street art, recently took the media by storm during his self-proclaimed month-long artist's residency in New York City, where his works and social experiments drew hordes of fans, the ire of politicians, and intense media scrutiny regarding issues surrounding the nature of graffiti.

This, in turn, sparked national dialogue concerning larger structural questions, such as what constitutes art, what is public and what is private, and a variety of other sociopolitical issues. Banksy's unique vision, self-referential style, and examination of the hypocritical capital "A" Arts scene, can be viewed in the award-winning documentary *Exit Through The Gift Shop* (2010).

Fairey is best known for his Obama Hope poster, as well as his sticker art involving the image of former professional wrestler Andre the Giant alongside the phrase "Obey," though Fairey has now focused more on fashion and the established gallery scene than his street art roots.

Street art's immersion into the mainstream is not unique for a subculture. Graffiti has long been appropriated by advertising enterprises due to graffiti's popular appeal. Street art-related pieces have increasingly garnered institutional affirmation through gallery exhibits, which has caused prices of works to skyrocket when sold at auction. Street art and graffiti artists have become so popular that even renowned hip hop mogul Jay-Z rapped about his love of Jean-Michel Basquiat, as well as references to Shepard Fairey, in his most recent album *Magna Carta Holy Grail*.

Street art is ephemeral. Authorities often eradicate street art because it is perceived as

vandalism. Additionally, street art often asks questions that the authorities would prefer not be asked. Another aspect of street art's ephemeral nature is that it exists in the public for the public, thus it is exposed to not only the elements, but potential vandalism, as well. Street art's emphasis on communal engagement, value to scholarship, and its temporal and fragile nature demonstrate the importance of street art curation and distribution in both online and print collections and archives.

### Crowdsourced archives

- **Art Crimes.** This collection began in 1994 and was one of the few websites to even exist at that point in time. Art Crimes is unique in that its longevity has resulted in an unmatched historical collection of street art and graffiti-related images. Additionally, an impressive collection of research, essays, and interviews with graffiti artists, street artists, and scholars are available. Also included is an expansive directory of links to websites



of graffiti artists, street artists, and websites that focus on the related topics. *Access:* <http://www.graffiti.org>.

- **Fat Cap.** This resource started as a basic image gallery in 1998. Then, in 2001, it became a portal that allowed artists to have their own individual pages. Since then, this resource's coverage of street art-related materials has expanded globally, while featuring street art-related news, articles,



and events. Fat Cap is actively seeking article submissions related to street art to publish on their website. Users can browse street art images by type like sketch or tag, by support like walls or trains, or by style like wildstyle or realistic. *Access:* <http://www.fatcap.com/>.

• **Global Street Art.** The operators of Global Street Art, started in 2012 and based in London, express their desire to create a digital, as well as physical, museum for street art to highlight the work of international street artists. Images are organized by the



artist's profile and a location, character, and technique-based tagging system. Aside from the plethora of street art images in the collection, the resource's strongest asset is the multitude

of interviews with street artists contained within. Additionally, Global Street Art is well known for its Walls Project, which works on locating walls for potential mural and street art projects while garnering appropriate permissions beforehand. Access: <http://globalstreetart.com/>.

• **International Graffiti Archive.** This archive is solely focused on illegal graffiti with the goal being to collect, preserve, and provide accessible and continuing evidence of the existence of illegal graffiti, which the curators feel is often underappreciated. With more than 25,000 photos from 13 countries and 146 different cities, this is a strong archive that evolved from the *IGTimes* zine. Access: <http://intergraff.com/>.

• **Street Art Utopia.** This very popular resource is similar to other crowdsourced websites in that it allows users to submit images of street art to be included on the site or posted on one of many social media platforms. However, Street Art Utopia is notable for its immense global popularity and because it focuses solely on street art from across the world, including paintings, stenciling, stickers, and even yarn bombing. Access: <http://www.streetartutopia.com/>.

• **Street Museum of Art.** This museum's inaugural exhibition was held on the streets of Brooklyn in the fall of 2012. The museum has sponsored guerrilla-style exhibitions curating street art, by renowned street artists

like Sweet Toof, in London, New York City, and most recently Montreal. The exhibitions are accompanied by interactive online maps showing potential viewers where to locate the pieces being exhibited. Access: <http://streetmuseumofart.org/>.



• **Wooster Collective.** Founded in 2001 and online since 2003, this collective based in New York City has been very influential in the city's Art scene. The couple behind the Wooster Collective, Marc and Sarah Schiller organized the 11 Spring Street Project in 2006, where they temporarily turned a local building into an art gallery featuring works of renowned street artists like Shepard Fairey and Swoon, among others. Representatives of the Wooster Collective have been involved in lectures relating to street art at the Tate Modern, Haverford College, and the School of Visual Arts. The Wooster Collective aggregates works of street art from across the globe, interviews with street artists, exhibitions and gallery events, as well as videos highlighting street art related projects like Art Connect Liverpool which helped promote self-awareness in youths and the differently abled. The Wooster Collective also has a directory of links to websites of artists. Access: <http://www.woostercollective.com/>.

### Institutional archive

• **The Cornell Hip Hop Collection.** Some of this collection's highlights include the complete collection of the influential graffiti zine *IGTimes* (1983-1994), many drawings and photographs detailing infamous subway train paintings from the artist Richie "SEEN" Mirando, and tons of original material from director and artist Charlie Ahearn's film *Wildstyle* (1983) including audio, video, testimonials, flyers, posters, and photographs. The Cornell Hip Hop Collection is the best library collection of street

art, graffiti, and hip hop-related physical material. *Access:* <http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/hiphop/>.

## Blogs

- **Graffitiurism.** The strength of this resource that began in 2010 is its blog, which does an excellent job of keeping up with street art-related news, trends, and gallery events around the globe. Additionally, exclusive interviews with artists are included as transcriptions and video. *Access:* <http://graffiturism.com/>.

- **Vandalog.** Begun in 2008, this is a well-maintained blog that not only displays high-quality, street art-related images, but provides insightful commentary providing context and information about the artists' styles, history, and methods. Vandalog's founder RJ Rushmore is a recognized authority on street art and has twice presented at Living Walls, The City Speaks, the pre-eminent street art conference. *Access:* <http://blog.vandalog.com/>.



## Nonprofit organizations

- **City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.** Originally part of an effort to rid the city of Philadelphia of graffiti, this program began in 1984 as a way to get graffiti artists to work on communal art projects as opposed to vandalism. For 30 years, they have been beautifying the city's neighborhoods with murals while providing the inhabitants with a voice, fostering a sense of community, and providing a positive creative outlet for artists and youths. The program has helped create more than 3,000 murals, and it serves as an excellent example of how street art programs can have a positive impact on people and their surroundings. *Access:* <http://muralarts.org/>.

- **Living Walls.** This Atlanta based nonprofit organization was founded in 2009. Its annual conference Living Walls, The

City Speaks was first held in 2010. Every year the conference is held in Atlanta. The 2012 conference was unique in that only female street artists were invited to exhibit. The conference includes film screenings, lectures, and exhibitions. With a goal of creating a dialogue about public art, Living Walls doesn't just showcase art, but provides a platform for open and healthy conversation regarding issues and problems that many cities are facing. *Access:* <http://livingwallsatl.com/>.

## Mobile app

- **1AM.** This mobile app, that is currently only available for use with iOS, allows users to upload and tag images of street art, while also providing users with the locations of, and directions to, street art nearby. The mobile app was created by the San Francisco organization 1AM, which began in 2008. 1AM stands for the first amendment and signifies the organization's goals of teaching, exhibiting, creating, and curating street art as a form of free artistic expression. *Access:* <http://1amsf.com/mobile/about-mobile/>. *72*



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