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# **Graffiti – Street Art – Urban Art; Terminological Problems and Generic Properties**

Ljiljana Radošević

## **Abstract**

In the last ten years, street art has become a very important factor in the international art scene. It has become a precious object to buy and preserve, and yet there is considerable confusion about the generic properties and definition of street art in academic research. As a rightful part of popular culture and urban culture, street art is not pure and independent. It intertwines with different art forms and urban subcultures and nurtures spin-off production. Therefore it is quite hard to trace its borders. Street art is not graffiti. They are different visual expressions and even though they might share the same space, artists and techniques, they still produce visually and conceptually different art works. This confusion produces many layers of problematic issues which put the street artists both on the police wanted lists and in the most important galleries and museums such as the Tate Modern in London, Grand Palais in Paris and MOCA in Los Angeles to name the few. In addition, in some official documents and in auction houses graffiti and street art are referred to as urban art, a term not used or understood by the members of the subculture.

It is not clear what graffiti, street art and urban art are and how they are positioned within the contemporary culture. Therefore it is necessary to deal with the generic terms first and only after this issue has been solved, one can look at all these terms from different perspectives. This paper aims at resolving these problems without offering new definitions but by explaining the terms used both in subcultures and in academic research.

**Key words:** graffiti, street art, urban art, terminology, discourse.

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During the last decade there has been a significant increase in the academic research on graffiti and street art production. Yet terminological confusion still exists because there is no consensus among the academic and non-academic authors on what these terms include. Most of the authors clearly state how they use these terms but different authors use them in different manner. However, in academic articles and in books published on this subject authors usually explain the

term graffiti and all of them, to my knowledge, use the same definition. For example, the definition from the most influential book about graffiti from the 1970s, *The Handwriting on the Wall*, says '[...] graffiti ("little scratchings," from the Italian *graffiare*, "to scratch"; the singular *graffito*) are a form of communication that is both personal and free of the everyday social restraints [...]'<sup>i</sup> Some of them further elaborate the history of graffiti and find the route from cave paintings or the ancient Pompeii, until they arrive at a new form of graffiti – the New York subway graffiti executed with a spraycan.<sup>ii</sup>

In this paper I will try to follow the history of the development of this particular term and how it relates to other terms relevant in this study, such as those of street art and urban art. The usage of these terms will be traced in academic articles, relevant magazine articles and books published on these subjects since the 1970s.

### **1. 1970s: Early Years of Misunderstanding**

Tagging<sup>iii</sup> as a basic activity of spraycan graffiti writing first appeared in Philadelphia at the end of the 1960s. It did not have real success until it moved to New York. Very quickly the writing of one's nickname and the number of the street the person lived in on the inside of a subway trains became a trend. In a couple of years the tags became larger and more elaborate, then moved to the outside of the trains until the light graphic form was no longer sufficient to cover large surfaces. Throw-ups<sup>iv</sup> and pieces<sup>v</sup> which could cover the large surfaces followed and spray paints became irreplaceable for achieving this goal. Authors of this form of graffiti referred to themselves as *writers* and to their activities as *writing*. Their concept did not relate to the traditional graffiti. Nevertheless, one can understand why scholars, and later on the community, were more comfortable in using the term graffiti and graffitiists. At the time of the 1960s and 1970's dominant graffiti discourse was grounded in latrinalia a type of graffiti found in public restrooms. It seems that during that period academics made the distinction between indoor and outdoor graffiti according to their content. Those written outside were usually names and not considered interesting since they were just egocentric expressions of their authors. Those written inside were anonymous but more elaborate and therefore more suitable for analysis. At the time researchers focused on graffiti with political, homosexual and racial content and differences between the male and female graffiti in public restrooms. And even though some authors have concluded that 'graffiti are accurate indicator of the social attitude of a community'<sup>vi</sup> they still called it 'aggressive behavior' based on other studies they had consulted and on the 1939 frustration-aggression hypothesis<sup>vii</sup>.

Since graffiti in the New York subway were only nicknames and since they did not elaborate on their social conditions, they were not considered interesting by the

intellectuals who were at the time focused on other types of graffiti. Moreover, previous studies had marked political, sexual, homosexual and racial latrinalia as aggressive and this definition was applied to spraycan graffiti as well, since they produced a very obvious visual change in the urban surrounding. Most of the authors have failed to recognize the particularities of spraycan graffiti activities, and without conducting a thorough research and analysis they have included this activity to the graffiti family and labeled it as aggressive.<sup>viii</sup> In the previously mentioned study from the 1977, *The Handwriting on the Wall*, there was an effort to analyze spraycan graffiti – the authors called it *urban graffito*. Authors of the book were the first ones to use Freudian methodology in graffiti analysis, and since they were dealing with latrinalia of all types, page after page they apply Freudian theory to human feces, smearing of feces, smelling of feces and being inspired by it. Unconventional and obscene words are seen as symbolical play with ones feces. This groundbreaking study unfortunately attached dirty, smelly, subconscious and deviant meaning to spraycan graffiti by putting it in the same context with latrinalia.

Even those academics and journalists who had an explicitly positive attitude towards spraycan graffiti were disregarding the fact how the authors of these graffiti referred to themselves and to their activity, thus committing a huge ethnographic mistake. And instead of *writers* they become *graffitists*, condemned to a burden of previous academic discussion of what is graffiti. By taking a stand in defense of spraycan graffiti authors like Baudrillard, who wrote about it in the 1976, employed very aggressive language to describe what they thought was worth fighting for. Thus, attaching to spraycan graffiti militant vocabulary which, combined to previously mentioned connotations, produced a very negative public attitude towards this visual expression (refer to the table).

## **2. 1980s: Era of Changes**

It is necessary to mention some historical facts in order to understand certain important changes that took place during the course of the 1980s. Spraycan graffiti had attracted attention of the art world in the first half of the 1970s, but only after severe police actions and chemical cleanings of the subway trains writers started to consider serious art careers. Destruction of writers' corners, places where writers could gather for peer review and acknowledgement, left writers without recognition of their work. Since trains were cleaned on regular basis writers have moved to the walls of the neighborhoods and hand ball courts. Therefore, only the galleries opened in Soho gave the writers from different neighborhoods the opportunity to meet and be appreciated. The end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s marked a new interest of the art world in the spraycan graffiti. It is

important to mention that at the beginning of the 1980s spraycan graffiti were introduced in Europe through galleries and the mass media (Hip-Hop culture, videos and movies). And even though protest art has been very strong in Europe this form of graffiti has been understood first and foremost as art.

Breakthrough academic research about spraycan graffiti was published in 1982. It is an ethnographic study of spraycan graffiti, *Getting Up*, undertaken by Craig Castelman. This serious and thorough academic research recognizes the importance of the fact that graffiti artists called themselves writers, and how this form of graffiti essentially differs from others. The academic circles could finally understand what these graffiti artists were doing and why. On the other hand, two books which are considered to be graffiti Bibles, *Subway Art* and *Spraycan Art*, had a more practical approach. They were full of photo material which, along with the basic information about graffiti activity, served as a text book for future generations of writers. But those books were descriptive, they did not attempt to analyze or define, they were simply reporting the occurrences within the graffiti world. They were doing something that should have been done ten years earlier. Those authors who have dared to characterize spraycan graffiti, like the Italian art historian Francesca Alinovi, continued to use militant language in their descriptions. So spraycan graffiti could not find a new discourse. One major change, though, happened during this era – the term street art appeared. This new term was considered to be a component of spray can graffiti discourse and its integral part. Already in 1985, Allan Schwartzman made a clear distinction between these two visual expressions.

While graffitiists, kids who had no voice, mark up their streets to establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with, these traditionally trained artists who have taken to the streets have chosen to participate in daily life, to claim a voice the art world denied them. [...] Without the burden of history on their shoulders, graffitiists have the freedom to do anything, and graffiti has a direct emotional appeal. The street work of traditionally trained artists is tempered by aesthetic postures. Unlike graffitiists they have chosen to work in functional modes, documentary styles, or “styleless” styles, for direct access [...] <sup>ix</sup>

Back then traditionally trained artists, as Schwartzman conveniently calls them, had integrated with graffiti artists for a couple of years, and this encounter had changed both the spraycan graffiti and future street art (further in the text spraycan graffiti will be referred to as graffiti). This is the time of Basquiat and Keith Haring (and other artists less known today like Kenny Scharf), who were inspired

by graffiti strategies and visual representations but did not produce graffiti. Art world and some academics have put the label on their work and turned them into graffiti artists. And here again we face the widely spread miss-use of the term graffiti. What these artists have been presenting in the streets was done by different means and different strategies. And these have become typical for contemporary street art. Those traditionally trained artists usually used stencils, paste ups, posters, stickers, site specific interventions and so on. Authors who have recognized the difference between these artistic interventions and graffiti have been defining it in a very different manner (refer to the table). One has to admit that these attributes and descriptions sound more artistic and less militant, more acceptable and less threatening.

Another major academic theory to have a huge impact on graffiti appeared in 1982. The so-called broken windows theory by Wilson and Kelling, led to zero tolerance policies around the world. This theory has been very much disputed after the year 2000. Nevertheless, it produced a huge impact on graffiti and street art communities and activities. And yet, it mentions graffiti in only one sentence, calling them 'harmless display [of disorder]<sup>ix</sup>.

### **3. 1990s: World Culture**

If the 1980s marked the spreading of graffiti, the 1990s were the era of their global impact. Around the world graffiti developed as independent culture producing its own discourse through – magazines, documentaries and books. This new culture became self sustainable and self sufficient. Those who wrote articles for graffiti magazines or books introductions employed the language of earlier authors who had discussed graffiti in a positive manner. That is, they adopted the strong, militant, aggressive attitude and language.

Visual expression of graffiti changed immensely during this period. Exciting new styles like Berlin 3D style or Barcelona anti style were introduced. The concept of graffiti stayed pretty much the same but visually they changed beyond recognition. Subway trains, local trains and highways still played a big part of graffiti production but well elaborated murals became a new standard. New styles brought more freedom in artistic expression, and extraordinarily technical skills, once recognized only by peers, were now blossoming in, for example, photo-realistic characters. Focus moved from elaborate nicknames towards narration and figuration, strategies employed by street artists in the mid 1980s. Different techniques of execution were also used, so they could no longer be called spraycan graffiti. During this period they became post-graffiti. Since they became more 'readable' for the general audience, communities started to perceive them once again as art and with new insight.

During this era a very small number of street artists have been active, but scattered around the western world they could not constitute a movement or a community. And by default they were merged with graffiti both in academic writing and in articles from graffiti subculture. And even though works of street art were very distinctive and closer to fine art they were illegally executed which immediately forced them in the same discourse with graffiti. This is of course the main distinction between fine art and art without permission – the legal aspect.

The legal aspect is something that also changed profoundly during this period. Zero tolerance policy was introduced in New York in 1994 and has been considered to be very desirable for most of the cities in the Western world. With such a strict policy the main center of production of styles and innovations has been moved from New York to Europe.<sup>xi</sup> Zero tolerance policy had the strongest support in Scandinavian countries and in 2005 affected most of the European cities. Even though this policy is concerned with the general state of the public spaces, it has particularly affected the graffiti movement through severe financial punishments and jail sentences. Therefore, most of the academic research during the 1990s has been dedicated to the zero tolerance policy. This naturally led to quite unfavorable attitudes and uses of language.

#### **4. 2000s: Internet and Street Art, Auction Houses and Urban Art**

With the creative center in Europe and Latin America, and with the ever stronger zero tolerance policy, graffiti were experiencing another crisis. This crisis did not affect the international graffiti community, but it did affect the strategies employed by graffiti artists in order to keep them doing what they do. And thus street art as we know it was born. It had a different visual expression but was nonetheless illegal and almost as effective in taking over the public space and the internet. Many graffiti artists had been experimenting with street art and some of them retired from graffiti and became street artists. Generations of graffiti artists have had traditional art or design training and they could bring different influences to both the graffiti and the design world. Just like in the mid 1980s, some traditionally trained artists took their art into the streets. This trend was led by graphic designers but all other artists followed. So once again there is an overwhelming mix of graffiti, design, illustration, tattoos, comics and so on. And this time it produced the street art movement which took over the throne in public discourse about art executed without permission. Written documents which were following the graffiti movement naturally appropriated street art because most of the artists producing it were related to the graffiti world.

In the production of street art, artists are using techniques and strategies known to fine art since the conceptual art, that is, the same ones used by traditionally

trained artists in 1980s. Another important remark is that street art is primarily character-based. Street artists were also the first ones to recognize the power of the internet. All these factors make street art more understandable, agreeable and more loved than graffiti. Art history and philosophy offered numerous theoretical backdrops and possibilities which corresponded with the visual dimension of street art and its strategies. And so the art world was finally able to incorporate, theorize and to high extent commodify the independent and illegal art movements. But this time the academic articles and numerous books published on the subject took street art as a dominant discourse through which they could include graffiti as well. During this period books and articles are dealing with both visual expressions and are using both terms to define graffiti and street art as unit.

Another trend appeared during this period – the interest of the art market in street art and graffiti production. Unlike in previous times, this interest lead to exhibitions in major art institutions such as the Tate Modern in London, MOCA in Los Angeles or Fondation Cartier in Paris. Art market also played a huge role in this recognition, especially at the beginning of the 2000s and with the interest in Banksy's work. In this situation the term urban art became very handy because it could be used as umbrella term for graffiti, street art and contemporary production which did not fit under any other definition. Most of the books published during this period and concerning the topic mentioned use this term either as a dominant or as an additional term with an explanatory purpose.

## **5. Conclusion**

Since the 1970s and the proliferation of New York subway graffiti produced with a spraycan, there have been numerous shifts in academic writing in understanding what graffiti and street art are. In order to perceive the full complexity of these terms we can try to understand them as genres, and then put them in different discourses – an academic one and one originating from culture itself. Each genre could be discussed by each discourse and produce a different meaning. Thus at the beginning there was a trend of including new practice of spraycan subway graffiti into already existing academic discourse about historically accepted graffiti. From academic point of view this period established spraycan subway graffiti as a dominant term within the graffiti family, and from that time on it will be very likely that one will think of spraycan subway graffiti when saying graffiti. At the time when graffiti subculture established its own discourse it included street art in it. We can see that graffiti as a genre was dominant in all the discourses until the 2000s, that is when the genre of street art started to take over. Graffiti subculture kept the term graffiti as a dominant genre but academic discourse largely shifted to the use of street art which now included



graffiti as well. Then to top it all, the term urban art came into use. It moved freely through discourses and genres in order to show unity between them. This was not always justifiable.

It is clear that in the future the academic circle will need to find consensus about the use of the terms mentioned. Otherwise it is likely that the meaning of these terms will become even more liquid and therefore leave readers even more confused.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Ernest L. Abel and Barbara E. Buckley, *The Handwriting on the Wall* (Westport London: Greenwood Press, 1977), 3.

<sup>ii</sup> This form of graffiti has quickly evolved and there has been an attempt within the subculture to explain them with different terms during different periods.

Therefore we could also use the terms – writing, spraycan graffiti and post-graffiti.

<sup>iii</sup> Writing a signature with marker or spray paint. Point is to do it as often and as much as possible in order to be appreciated by the peers.

<sup>iv</sup> A quickly executed piece consisting of an outline with or without a thin layer of spray paint for fill-in.

<sup>v</sup> Short for 'masterpiece' an artistic and complex form of writing featuring stylized letters, color, depth, and a variety of designs.

<sup>vi</sup> Terrance L. Stocker, Linda W. Dutcher, Stephen M. Hargrove, Edwin A. Cook, 'Social Analysis of Graffiti', *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 85, No. 338 (Oct. - Dec., 1972), 356-366.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.jyu.fi/stable/539324>,

<sup>vii</sup> They were often referring to the book written by group of authors under title *Frustration and Aggression* published in New Haven in 1939.

<sup>viii</sup> I do not wish to imply that subway graffiti would not be found aggressive if they were examined, but only to point out that they were not given enough thought.

<sup>ix</sup> Allan Schwartzman, *Street Art* (Garden City New York: Dial Press, 1985), 63.

<sup>x</sup> James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling  
, 'Broken Windows', *The Atlantic Online* (March 1982)  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/198203/broken-windows>

<sup>xi</sup> Paris has partially been employing it since the 1995, as a way to keep streets 'clean' for the 1998 World Cup.

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