

<https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/07/11/when-does-graffiti-become-art/graffiti-is-a-public-good-even-as-it-challenges-the-law>

Graffiti Is a Public Good, Even As It Challenges the Law



Lu Olivero is the director of [Aerosol Carioca](#) and the author of the forthcoming "Cidade Grafitada: A Journey Inside Rio's Graffiti Culture."

UPDATED JULY 11, 2014, 6:15 PM

Vandalism is expression and that is what makes it art. Graffiti, a vandalism sub-genre, is differentiated by its aesthetics, or its message. However, graffiti straddles the line between pure art and pure vandalism. Though graffiti represents a challenge to the law — and sometimes serves as social commentary about the subjectivity of laws — it can simultaneously serve a public good through its nuanced social commentary and its artistry.



Lu Olivero

The arbitrary nature of how graffiti is removed or preserved highlights an interesting dissonance: the social-political oligarchy rejects the artist, and the conditions that create the art, unless the art is somehow accepted on the establishment's terms. Enter Banksy: a British street artist, and self-described vandal, who has become a celebrated figure in the world of elite art. Banksy's work has unintentionally reignited the "art or vandalism" debate: though the British government has been vigilant in removing his trademark

stencil art, labeling it “vandalism,” his original works and knockoffs have [skyrocketed in price](#) over the last decade. His work is often highly satirical of establishment rules and politics. Why is it that Banksy’s work is gobbled up by the same people he is critical of — yet his contemporaries are looked at as “criminals”? Why are they judged so differently?

Thirty years ago hip-hop music was labeled “noise,” and graffiti will follow the same trajectory. Perceptions about street art have already drastically changed.

For example, in Brazil, during late 1990s, it was common for graffiti artists to be harassed or shot at by the police. Today, many of the same officers support graffiti initiatives for city beautification, and as a crime deterrent. They understand that graffiti can be a career opportunity for youth in low-income neighborhoods. The growth of graffiti in Brazil, and its role in challenging the status quo, demonstrates the power of art, and its ability to create dialogue. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, many leading street artists have put graffiti to good use for social development, founding art schools in low-income neighborhoods and partnering with the police to paint murals in run-down areas. They host large events and festivals, which bring in tourists.

It has had such an effect that this year the mayor of Rio announced the [legalization of graffiti](#) on city property that is not historical.

The truth is that despite the acceptance of graffiti, it needs the law so that it can function outside of it. This is where innovation is born, and this is what pushes the art to evolve. Had graffiti artists in Brazil painted inside the lines of the law, many internationally acclaimed artists would never have existed.

Some people may not like the message, or how it is manifested, but that doesn’t mean the message – and the medium – don’t have value.

MELE MURALS