

The Writing on the Wall: Graffiti, Street Art, and a New Organic Urban Architecture

Name: Isabella Siegel

Faculty Adviser: Professor Laura McGrane

In the past half a century, graffiti and street art have grown from roots in Philadelphia to become a worldwide phenomenon. Graffiti is a method of self-expression and defiance that has mutated into new art forms that breach the status quo and gesture toward insurrection. Street art has evolved from such work, as a thriving tradition that works to articulate fears and hopes of a city's inhabitants on the very buildings they live in. Street art, and graffiti as well, is a complex art form, especially when detangling issues of legality in the U.S. The language of "Organic Architecture" describes the way that the inhabitants of a built space work to determine what fills the empty spaces that remain. Graffiti and street art often constitute the materials with which these inhabitants build. Both genres are methods of expression of a personality, a frustration, or a window into the urban subconscious.

These issues speak to Fine Arts and Art History majors, but also to those who study Political Science, History, Economics, Sociology, and Anthropology, and the Growth and Form of Cities. Art history is often used as a bridge into all of these topics, and the study of un-commissioned wall-art is no exception. The insurrectionist political nature of many pieces of street art, and much of graffiti as well, can be studied through the unique lens of someone with a background in political science. Economics majors will have a special perspective into issues of gallery uptake of street artists and writers as well as the commercialization of street calligraphy style. Sociology and anthropology majors would bring much to the discussion when talking about representation and identity issues, and Cities majors will be especially adept at discussing the growth of organic architecture in areas dense with street art. Beyond these majors, those across the Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences will have much to bring to a seminar that addresses urban spaces and those who live and create in--and on--them.

The history of uncommissioned wall art begins with graffiti, but has its genealogy in a deeper history of wall painting, from frescoes to ancient cave paintings. The methods of making graffiti and street art are action-based, and invite the viewer to imagine the risky lengths to which the artist went to create these works. The history of American graffiti is difficult to trace, but follows some clear and interesting trajectories in its movements from Philadelphia to cities all around the world. Questions of legality change from one location to the next: who has the right to determine what goes on the walls? The politics of street art and graffiti are another issue that has become even more pressing, especially in comparing responses to such work in cities around the globe. In Sao Paolo, for example, some artists are commissioned by their government while others are sought by the police; in Cairo, street artists broke new ground in the protests of 2011 with strictly illegal and highly effective messages for the public. The growth of these creative phenomena is grounded in theoretical questions - is graffiti writing art? Can it be put in the same category as street art? How does it originate, and how do the other inhabitants of a space respond to it?

After beginning my study of graffiti and street art, I felt a similar feeling to what my dad described when he began an intense phase of bird-watching last year: there was a whole universe that I had never paid attention to, to which I was now a witness. Graffiti and street art are everywhere - they blend into the background until you begin to really look. Neighborhoods all around Philadelphia become public galleries, strangely and magically effervescent, only present to those who watch for them, interpret them, and care for them.

Possible Texts

- Books
 - *A History of American Graffiti* by Caleb Neelon and Robert Gastman
 - *Trespass: A History of Uncommissioned Street Art* by Carlo McCormick
 - *Blade: King of Graffiti* by Chris Blade
 - *Street Art Today: The 50 Most Influential Street Artists Today* by Elise Luong
- Films
 - *Style Wars* directed by Tony Silver and Henry Chalfont
 - *Art of Conflict* directed by Valerie Vaughn
- Articles
 - “The Ugly Truth: Street Art, Graffiti, and the Creative City” by Rafael Schacter
 - “I’ve Got Better Things to Worry About”: Police Perceptions of Graffiti and Street Art in a Large Mid-Atlantic City” by Jeffery Ian Ross and Benjamin S Wright
 - “Monuments, Memorials, Graffiti, and Street Art: Memory Creation in an Apocalyptic Landscape” (chapter of book *More or Less Dead* by Alice Driver)

Seminar Syllabus

Week 1 - The Secluded Legacy of Graffiti

This week we would discuss ***A History of American Graffiti***. We would talk about the origins of graffiti, and larger themes of “wall writing” that stretch backward in art history. We would discuss the rise of a new era in calligraphy, one that gives new meaning to the art form by focusing on the method of the craft itself. We would talk about the insurrectionist nature of graffiti and its intrinsic illegality, and the potential of political expression and influence.

Week 2 - The History of Contemporary Street Art

This week we would discuss ***Trespass - A History of Uncommissioned Street Art***. We would talk about the ways that graffiti led to street art, and the lines of legality that surround street artists. That is, when is an artist convicted, versus when are they commissioned by a major corporation or even a government? We would talk about particular styles, motifs, and themes of street art, and the ways that it is integrated with the architecture of the city. We could talk about the meteoric rise of street art celebrities, such as Banksy, Sheppard Ferry, and JR, and what separates them from less celebrated, still undercover artists, that either do not get commissioned, or what their reasons may be for not wanting to.

Week 3 - Graffiti/Street Art: A Commercial?

This week, we would talk about the commercialization and possible censorship of the street artists and street writers. We would discuss how galleries may take up artists, and how their art may be changed or modified, and the possible implications of those changes. We would discuss the commercial use of the graffiti style on clothing and album covers, and the implications of labeling it as an “outsider art.” What is fundamental about this art that makes it a kind of advertisement to begin with? Are artists being exploited, and are the fundamental groundwork of their art compromised? Or do artists appreciate the spread of their name and respect for their art form? We would use the text ***Blade - King of Graffiti*** as a case study of a writer whose rise into fame may be explanatory, and is an interesting cross section of street art and graffiti.

Week 4 - If Walls could Talk - Representation on the Walls

This week we would discuss ***Street Art / Today***, and talk about the trends of street art, especially from a political stance, around the globe. We could talk about anything from the pixacao tradition in Sao Paolo, to

the insurrectionist art that motivated uprisings in Cairo. I would like to bring in a speaker this week, such as RJ Rushmore. We would talk about the inevitable invisibility of the artist and the underground nature of the movement, and potential to effect social change. We would discuss feelings of people of color and non-cis-male gender identities in the graffiti and street art world, and if the invisibility of the artist changes anything in that discussion. Conversely, are those of oppressed backgrounds more likely to write on the walls, which can increase the audience for their voice around a city?

Week 5 - The Organic Architecture of the City and the City as Museum

This week would comprise of a walking tour of one or two neighborhoods in Philadelphia, where we would explore the influence of graffiti and street art on the psyche of the neighborhood and the evolution of the expression of Philadelphia street artists. We would discuss the interactions between writers, street artists, and mural artists for programs such as the Mural Arts Program. We will talk about the film **Style Wars** to talk about writing culture specifically, and such interactions with the wider public. We would talk about **Art of Conflict** to discuss the role that murals and larger street art in political conversation and the reflection of the feelings of a community. We would talk about representation of the city in film and media, and how such camera shots include images of graffiti to construct a certain image of “urban” areas. We would examine a neighborhood of the city as a gallery, considering the arrangement of space and determination of location and for of street art. We could take an artist-directed or a self-curated walking tour, to discuss these ideas and the issues from the past weeks surrounded by the material itself.

Potential Speakers

RJ Rushmore is the digital manager of Creative Time and an expert on graffiti and street art. The author of two books on the subject, as well as his blog Vandalog, he curated the All Big Letters show at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery.

SWOON is an installation artist and street artist that works directly in community outreach through art. She has worked with organizations such as the Mural Arts Program in art therapy, and works with residents low-resource areas to provide art classes. Her works are socially engaged and aim to reflect the needs of the community they're in.

James Powderly is an artist based in New York and the founder of the Graffiti Research Lab. He works with the interactions between artists and the city to promote social change with revolutionary technology.