

The Relevance of Graffiti Art Practice in a Postmodern Environment

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Abstract

Graffiti, seen by some people as mere vandalism and defacement of orderly environment, has emerged as a complex cultural phenomenon that intersects with art, politics, identity, and urban space. Postmodern environments are characterised by pluralism, fragmentation, and the blurring of high and low cultured boundaries, graffiti art practice plays a critical role in shaping public discourse and negotiating contested spaces. This essay explores the historical development of graffiti, its role in representing marginalised voices, and its entanglement with commodification and digital circulation. Drawing on scholarship from cultural studies, urban geography, art history and studio experience, this study situates graffiti within broader debates about postmodern urbanism, visibility, and creative expression. Findings indicate that, the relevance of graffiti, continues to lie in its capacity to both challenge and adapt to, the structures of contemporary urban life.

Keywords: Graffiti, Postmodernity, Urban Art, Street Culture, Commodification

Introduction

Graffiti occupies a complex position in contemporary urban landscape, embodying both acts of creative expression and contested interventions in public spaces. Some people see it as an act of disorder and property defacement; to others, it represents a democratisation of art, where creative voices bypass institutional authorities. Postmodern environments are defined by overlapped boundaries, between cultural categories and a proliferation of competing narratives, graffiti remains a “visual disruption” that cannot be ignored.

The relevance of graffiti in a postmodern context, stems from its capacity to both reflect and resist dominant urban aesthetics and political structures. As McAuliffe (2016) observes, graffiti’s moral geographies, are deeply entangled with questions of commodification, cultural capital, and creative city branding. Graffiti is not merely a symptom of urban change; it is also an active agent in reshaping the way cities are seen, navigated, and remembered.

This essay examines the multifaceted role of graffiti through theoretical analysis, historical tracing and studio exploration. It contends that in a postmodern world of aesthetic plurality, graffiti functions as an indispensable site of cultural negotiation.

Origin of Graffiti

Stockstad (2008) states that, “The idea that human beings have an inherent desire to decorate themselves and their surroundings-that an aesthetic sense is somehow innate to human species.” It is that desire that has led to the creation of forms, of expressions, driven by emotions and complexities called graffiti. Bates (2014) on his part states that: Prehistoric etchings and cave

paintings are indicative of humankind's efforts to communicate, using symbols, to represent landmarks or tribal boundaries. These petroglyphs are found worldwide, dating as far back as 40,000 years. It is interesting to note that the etymology of graffiti is from the Italian "graffiare," meaning "to scratch."

Waclawek (2008) asserts that the history of modern graffiti is traced back to the days of alteration, of urban settlements, due to depleting white population, deindustrialization and the civil rights movement of the 1950s, which greatly led to the rise of gang violence and drug prevalence in Philadelphia and New York. These communities did not create many opportunities for their youths to thrive; gangs used graffiti to mark territories instilling fear amongst its citizens. Zolner (2007) states that, "Darryl McCray, a teenager attending a reform school in 1965, is credited as being the first graffiti writer. Nicknamed "Cornbread" for requesting comfort food in his school cafeteria, Cornbread began writing his name alongside those of the North Philadelphia gangs." Graffiti refers to unsanctioned range of visual inscriptions which includes tags, throw-ups, wild style pieces, stencils, paste-ups, and murals created in public spaces without formal authorisation. It evolved alongside hip-hop culture, adopting distinctive lettering styles, colour palettes, and iconography.

According to Conklin (2012), "Many different directions and subcultures come together to form what we think of as street art and graffiti today. Street art can include: spray graffiti (tags, throws, burners, and masterpieces), stencilling, stickers, wheat pastes, laser projections, flash mobbing, guerrilla gardening, yarn bombing, street installations, and a host of other forms." New York City is said to be the birth place of modern graffiti, but graffiti art can be found in virtually every major city in the world. Some people see it as vandalism and defacement of clean and orderly environment, while others see it as an avenue for expressing their grievances. Graffiti is commonly associated with illicit marking and also encompasses politically motivated slogans, community murals, and site-specific interventions. Scholars like Schacter (2014) emphasise that a category of "graffiti" is socially constructed which means that what is celebrated as "street art" in one context may be criminalised in another.

However, the 1980s witnessed the spread of graffiti internationally, carried by music videos, hip-hop culture, and traveling artists. Many cities developed their own styles, but adapting U.S. techniques. For example, Pereira (2016) states that, "In Latin America, graffiti blended with traditions of political muralism, as in the case of Sao Paulo's pixacao lettering style, which conveyed social protest in a visually aggressive form. According to Peteet (1996) "Graffiti intersected with anti-apartheid activism in South Africa, while in the Middle East, it emerged as a form of resistance during periods of political unrest." In parts of Lagos, Nigeria, graffiti appears as an attempt to reclaim public spaces. Today, graffiti practice is a reflection of postmodernism which promotes multiplicity of ideas.

Postmodernity and Graffiti

Postmodernity is a socio-cultural condition, according to Jameson (1991), it is characterised by skepticism toward universal truths, the collapse of high and low cultural boundaries, aesthetic pluralism, and an embrace of hybridity. In visual culture, postmodernism manifests as appropriation, pastiche, and intertextuality. These characteristics are qualities that are central to

graffiti practice. Jameson (1991) frames postmodern culture as “one of depthlessness and commodification, where cultural products circulate, detached from their original contexts.” Graffiti resonates strongly with this condition: an image of graffiti photographed in Lagos Nigeria, may be stripped of its site-specific meaning yet gaining new digital audiences online. The ephemeral nature of graffiti and its intertextual references, and resistance to fixed meanings align with postmodern aesthetics. Its ability to transform urban walls into canvases reflects postmodernism.

In a postmodern environment, the boundaries between public and private spaces are blurred and highly politicised, graffiti becomes a practice that reflects and reshapes urban experience. Its production, placement, and reception are tied to contested notions of ownership, access, and the public sphere. Thus, Postmodernism has profoundly reshaped the conceptual landscape within which graffiti is understood. Lyotard (1984), opines that contrast to modernist ideals of coherence, originality, and universal narratives, postmodernity embraces pluralism, intertextuality, and the coexistence of competing truths. Graffiti, as both practice and aesthetic, aligns closely with these postmodern sensibilities.

Graffiti Activism

Graffiti often serves as a medium for political activism, it often serves as a media channel for ordinary people. In contexts, where mainstream media is inaccessible or censored, graffiti communicates dissenting ideas directly in the public realm. Examples include anti-apartheid graffiti in South Africa, during the 1980s (Hansen, 2009), pro-democracy slogans during the Arab Spring (Abaza, 2013), and feminist street art movements, addressing gender violence in Latin America (Méndez, 2018).

Commodification, Branding and the Art Market

In the postmodern environment, graffiti has undergone a transformation from illicit subculture to a highly marketable aesthetic. Hebdige (1979) states that “The commodification of graffiti is part of a long process, whereby, countercultural forms are absorbed into mainstream capitalist markets.” Iconic graffiti artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Banksy have bridged the divide between illicit street practice and the formal art world. This transition allows graffiti to reach new audiences, which reflects postmodernism.

Commercial branding increasingly used graffiti aesthetics to sell products, from T-shirts, sneakers to beverages. Austin (2001) asserts that “this recontextualisation strips graffiti of its site-specific meaning, transforming it into a decorative motif divorced from its political or spatial origins.” According to Dickens (2008) “The place of graffiti in institutional spaces like galleries and museums, reflects a shift in its cultural legitimacy.” Exhibitions such as Art in the Streets at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, have presented graffiti alongside other recognised art forms, framing it as a key component of contemporary visual culture.

Digital Technology, Social Media and Global Networks

Castells (2010) states that “the postmodern environment is defined by rapid technological advancement, global interconnectivity, and the proliferation of digital media. Graffiti, traditionally tied to physical space, has adapted to these changes, by expanding into digital platforms, social networks, and online archives.” This shift has transformed the way graffiti is produced, consumed, and circulated.

Digital photography and sophistication in production of smart phones has radically altered documentation and distribution of graffiti. Earlier graffiti existed primarily as a physical site-specific phenomenon, but digital images can now be instantly uploaded and shared globally. This digital permanence contrasts with the ephemeral nature of street-based graffiti, allowing works to survive long after they have been painted over or removed.

Emerging technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) have introduced new possibilities for graffiti. Digital graffiti applications allow artists to paint in virtual spaces, accessible through smartphones or AR glasses. Baudrillard (1994), asserts that such works challenge notions of legality, permanence, and spatiality. In postmodern theory, these hybrid forms, exemplify the collapse of the distinction between “real” and “simulated” environments.

Projection as Temporary Graffiti

According to Tomitsch et al. (2018) “Projection mapping enables large-scale, temporary graffiti installations without permanently altering surfaces. Artists like UrbanScreen in Germany have used light-based graffiti to animate historical buildings, blending street art’s disruptive visual language with architectural heritage preservation.” Projection aligns with postmodernist multiplicity, toward fixed meanings, because it is ephemeral, conceptual, performative and experiential. Schacter (2016) points that walls become palimpsests layers of overlapping inscriptions that bear witness to changing social moods, political struggles, and aesthetic trends. This underscores the ephemeral face of graffiti that reflects the temporality of postmodern culture, where permanence is often replaced by constant reinvention. The growth of blockchain markets has encouraged graffiti artists to sell their works as Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), which is a new form of ownership of their ephemeral creations. Arguably, it also sparks debates over the commodification of street culture, in a postmodern capitalist context.

Graffiti in Urban Regeneration, Cultural Tourism and Creative Economy

The overlapping significance of graffiti in the postmodern urban landscape cannot be overemphasised; graffiti has emerged as a tool for urban regeneration, neighbourhood revitalisation, and cultural tourism. Cities increasingly leverage street art, to transform neglected spaces into destinations that attract visitors, stimulate local economies, foster cultural pride and community development.

Landry (2012) consents that “Urban regeneration strategies, often incorporate graffiti as part of a broader creative city agenda.” According to Schacter (2014) “Areas such as Shoreditch in London and Wynwood in Miami, have been transformed into cultural districts, largely through curated street art projects.” These interventions can improve public safety perceptions, stimulate local businesses, and encourage public engagement with art (Miles, 2017). International graffiti and



Fig.1. First Republic, Zinbe Sabo Gushi, Enamel on Corrugated Metal Sheet Wall, 317x603cm, 2021

street art festivals such as Upfest in Bristol, attracts thousands of tourists annually. These festivals showcase local and international artists and also serve as platforms for cultural exchange and city branding.

According to Gravari-Barbas & Guinand (2017), Cities like Berlin, Melbourne, and Lisbon have developed thriving graffiti tourism sectors, including guided street art tours, workshops, and merchandise sales. The economic impact of such activities extends beyond the art scene, benefiting hospitality, retail, and transportation sectors. Graffiti is being recognised as a contributor, to the creative economy and urban culture in a postmodernist environment. It now plays a significant role in tourism, branding, and the commodification of urban culture.

However, Smith (1996), asserts that, “While graffiti-led regeneration can benefit communities economically, it can also accelerate gentrification, displacing the very populations that inspired the art.” The values of property may rise and will attract affluent residents; graffiti may become urban branding tool for separation than forming community expression.

Case Studies:

First Republic (Zaria), was executed outdoor, on a corrugated metal sheet wall of an old warehouse at the Annex of the Fine Art Department at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, as an example of how graffiti can be used for environmental enhancement and reclamation of public space. The painting draws its authority from the images of some Nigerian first republic politicians from left to right: Ahmadu Bello, Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Obafemi Awolowo. The iconographic images are all placed against block of shades, of green and white colours, that defined the map of Nigeria and the national colour, while the other parts of the background have touches of yellow tints. The painting is a reminder of the struggles, of the founding fathers of Nigeria, who fought the colonialists for independence. The throw up at the right top corner of the composition, is quoted from the national anthem “Heroes Past” seated on a Northern motif. The inscription “1st Republic” is superimposed and incorporated into the composition, using a modified block style, which is painted multi coloured and adorned with different colours of poker dots. The graffiti gives the composition its authority and boldness, as those represented in it.



Fig.2. Eko Tag by Osa Seven Okunkpolor from www.bzlcrew.com January 12, 2021

Eko Tag (Lagos), is a graffiti mural done at the law school bus stop, Ozumba Mbadiwe road, Victoria Island, Lagos. The dominant feature of this work is the representation of the National Theatre in the right corner of the painting. There is also a noticeable installation of a tricycle (Keke) that appears illusionistic, breaking out of the wall in a typically post-graffiti conceptual style. The Keke is suspended about 6-7ft from the ground. The painting is adorned with stylised letterings that are not easily readable typical of signature graffiti style. The colours consists of grey, which is dominant on the image of the National theatre, streaked with white, which suggests the columns, while red, yellow, orange, blue hues project the letters, shapes and patterns of the graffiti. Since the involvement of the Lagos state government in the commissioning of street art, graffiti is gradually becoming acceptable. The works have become exceptional landmarks and



Fig.3. Graffiti Image of Mu'ammarr Gadaffi.
Source:www.pinterest.co.uk January 12, 2021

Gadaffi (Libya), in contexts of political unrest, such as the Arab Spring, graffiti documented revolutionary sentiment in real time, creating an uncensored record that state-controlled media could not erase. The image of Mu'ammar Gadaffi, which appears as an example of a spontaneous execution of graffiti, using spray-can. The image is a caricature portrait of Gadaffi, probably painted during the Arab Spring, which led to the fall of his regime. It depicts his characteristics paraphernalia like the cap on his head, eye glasses, and muffler. His head identifies like the coiled hair and the moustache are also given prominence. It is a simple black and white drawing on a wall, but a powerful indication of resistance against oppression and dictatorship.



Fig.4. Artist: Greta McLain, Xena Goldman & CadexHarrera, Niko Alexander, Pablo Hernandez
April 20, 2021 from: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=302391531255888&id

George Floyd (Chicago), Graffiti plays a significant role in shaping collective memory, by preserving local histories and marginalised voices in public space. Artists were quick to respond with murals commemorating historical events such as the Black Lives Matter. For example, in the wake of George Floyd's death, at the hands of Minneapolis police officer, such works seek to memorialise, to provoke and, or to heal.

Greta McLain, Xena Goldman and Cadex Harrera are artists in Minneapolis, who painted a wall graffiti depicting the portrait of George Floyd, on a wall of a store, on 38th street and Chicago Avenue South, where Floyd was arrested and eventually killed by a police. These artists are all known for their activism, especially when it concerns human rights and racial issues.

In the above painting, the image of George Floyd is flanked by the inscription "George Floyd" flanked from left to right, painted with tints of yellow and orange as well as, some iconography that depicts people protesting in the letters, which overlapped a large flaming sun flower that circled the image, over various tints and shades of blue background. The middle of the sunflower has names of other victims of police brutality written as simple tags.

The painting was made on the wall of Cup Foods, with permission of the shop owner. The spot attracted flowers, signs and balloons by sympathisers. According to the artists, "art is a therapy that expresses what word cannot say, and it brings the community together, to reflect, to grieve, for strength and for support." The memory of these works continues, even if removed, through

photographs, oral histories, and digital archiving, illustrating the resilience of cultural memory in postmodern societies.

Future of Graffiti Practice in a Postmodern Environment

Graffiti art, in the postmodern era will continue to be dynamic, in response to technological innovation, shifting urban policies, and changing cultural values. While its origins are rooted in subcultural resistance, emerging trends reveal both the diversification and hybridisation of the practice. These developments suggest that, the future of graffiti will be increasingly transnational, technological, and conceptually expansive.

Graffiti will likely continue to maintain its postmodern posture of multifaceted dimension, between illegality and institutional recognition, physicality and digitally, as well as, local specificity and global circulation. Collaborative projects between graffiti artists, architects, and urban planners could result in more integrated forms of public art. In addition, blockchain technology and NFTs may offer new means of authorship verification and monetisation for street artists without removing works from their urban contexts.

Conclusion

Graffiti functions as a dynamic form of cultural and political engagement. It allows individuals and communities to inscribe their narratives, onto the built environment, challenging dominant representations and offering alternative visions of urban life. Its ability to navigate between the local and the global, the sanctioned and the unsanctioned, underscores its relevance in a postmodern environment, characterised by hybridity, contradictions, and multiplicity.

Graffiti practice in the postmodern environment is a combination of multiple avenues of expressions that evolved from unsanctioned street practice to a recognised art form exhibited in galleries. Its adaptability to shifting cultural, political, and technological landscapes cannot be overemphasised. The case studies of Zaria, Lagos, Libya, and Chicago illustrate that, graffiti has transformed from an often-criminalised activity to a legitimate medium of urban development, cultural exchange, place-making, socio-political discourse and a tool for economic development.

Paul (2015) states that “In a postmodern environment characterised by fragmentation, hybridity, and pluralism, graffiti art’s relevance, lies in its capacity to operate simultaneously, in physical and digital realms, engage in dialogue with global and local contexts, and challenge hegemonic narratives through visual disruption.” However, Stahl (2014) observes that “Its increasing incorporation into urban branding and cultural economies raises complex questions about authenticity, commodification, and gentrification.”

Therefore, the future of graffiti practice demands nuanced policy approaches that recognise its cultural value while safeguarding creative freedoms and minimising exploitative appropriation.

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