

Nicholas Coulson: The Writing on the Wall: Graffiti in Antiquity and Modernity

The practice of graffiti is as old as writing itself with well preserved examples in ancient sites like the buried Roman city of Pompeii. Helen Tanzer, writing about Pompeian graffiti, draws the following conclusion: “In general, graffiti represent spontaneous emotions or thoughts, or reactions to commonplace elements. Their topics include love, disappointment, malice and joy, and it is for this reason that they seem so familiar to the modern observer.” (Tanzer pg. 103).

Social Critique and Controversy

Graffiti goes hand in hand with controversy due to the fact that often are inscribed on someone else’s property. This illegal stage is then used as a platform to comment on our own society or political views. A graffiti artist interviewed in the Ukrainian video documentary “Enjoy” argues that this opposition to the authorities in power is a crucial element for graffiti: “When graffiti artists begin to cooperate with authority, it’s not graffiti anymore. Graffiti is a form of protest, a language you use to speak up against something. That’s the basis of this art.” (Balayan, “Enjoy,” 11:19-11:28).

Banksy and Street Art

Figures 1 and 2 below are pictures of graffiti installations by street artist Banksy. These graffiti self-reflexively play on their ambiguous place between insurrection and commodification as art. Fig. 1 on the left comments on the nature of art as commodity by ironically referencing the process of framing done by galleries and private collectors to add value to a piece—something patently impossible for a work drawn on a wall. In Fig 2 on the right, Banksy’s graffiti confronts the authorities with a catch 22: his remark implies that if graffiti is permitted, it will not change anything, but that whenever it is branded as illegal, this is a mark of its ability to bring about change. Thus, his work is validated precisely by being outlawed.



Common Culture and Location

Graffiti are usually written on immovable structures, and thus have a strong relation to their location. In Fig. 3 to the right gathered by Sabine Golz from the “Elephant House” in Edinburgh, UK displays graffiti referencing the popular Harry Potter books which were partially written at that location. The graffiti playfully reflects on the fact that it is situated in a “literary” bathroom by referencing both books and the character Moaning Myrtle, a bathroom ghost.

