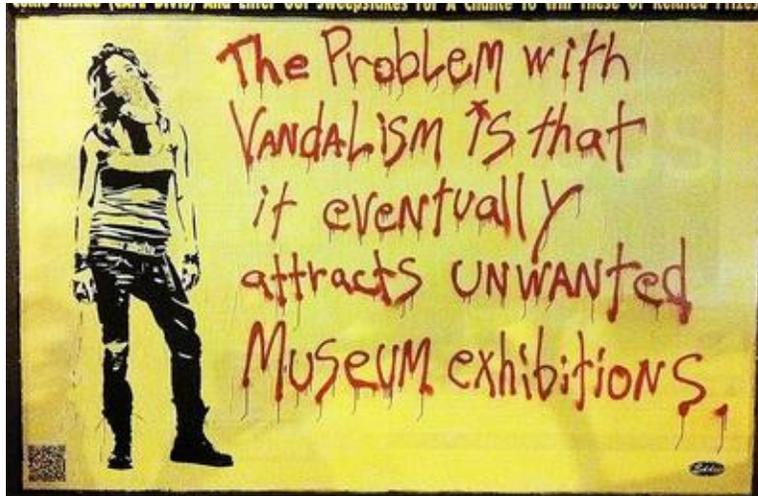


Graffiti as Art



Graffiti as art - vs. graffiti as vandalism - has been debated since the 1960's when tagging was first scratched onto buildings in Philadelphia. (The word "graffiti," Italian in origin, initially referred to wall carvings made with sharp objects in ancient Rome and Greece.)

In spite of numerous taggers' proclamations that graffiti is a new art form, today it often reflects urban blight, vandalism and property damage.

Still, despite its negative connotation, or because of it, graffiti as art has been promoted in the press, books, films and in art galleries on both coasts for decades.

An incarnation of graffiti as art was at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art in 2011. "Art in the Streets," a giant, elaborate, colorful exhibition, gave a historical account of graffiti and street art from the 1970's to the present, focusing on New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London and Sao Paulo, "where a unique visual language or attitude has evolved," the MOCA website said. The show featured paintings, mixed media sculptures and interactive installations by dozens of artists emphasizing Los Angeles' "role in the evolution of graffiti and street art, with special sections dedicated to seminal local movements such as cholo graffiti and Dogtown skateboard culture," the website added.

The show - at MOCA's enormous Geffen Contemporary (a former police vehicle repair barn) in Little Tokyo - had inherent contradictions, several concerned with the "graffiti as art - vs. graffiti as vandalism" conundrum. One frequently asked question about the show was, "What is graffiti created on the street doing in a

museum?" When brought into these hallowed halls, is it still street art or just a shell of its former self?

By glamorizing the underground youth culture that often claims subways, buses, bridges, tunnels and abandoned buildings as its canvasses, MOCA sanctioned the inherent lawlessness of "tagging" or "graffiti writing." While the show aggrandized the graffiti as art qualities of its work, it did little to address its criminal, besmirching aspects. Conversely, if graffiti is a good thing, as MOCA conveyed, why not let visitors add their own signatures, writings and scrawls to the thousands of "art" pieces displayed - in the spirit of the exhibition? This was clearly not allowed with hundreds of poker-faced guards circulating throughout the Geffen.

Graffiti as art is unpredictable and often socially radical. In December 2010, MOCA's director Jeffrey Deitch commissioned the Italian street artist "Blu" to create a mural on the side the Geffen to draw attention to the upcoming "exhibition. Yet after the work's completion, he had it painted over as it faced a Veterans Affairs hospital. Deitch, unaware of the mural's dollar-bill draped "soldiers' coffins" theme (until it was fully installed) was criticized by blogs and the press for his apparent duplicitous behavior, contradicting the "graffiti as art" spirit of the exhibition.

And there was increased vandalism and graffiti writing in L.A. before and just after the opening of "Art in the Streets." Some of that writing was spray painted onto a Geffen wall and nearby dumpsters.

Deitch said that the people behind the unauthorized art are "some of the young taggers who are anarchic.... It's a language of youth culture, and we can't stop it. It goes with the territory." He then pledged to help "stop it." Deitch also said that he hoped "Art in the Streets" would encourage the illegal street artists to set their sights higher. The *Los Angeles Times* quotes him: "We want to put out an inspirational message: 'If you harness your talent you can be in a museum some day, make a contribution and a living from it.'"

In 2011, the *LA Times* ran an article on the graffiti artist "Smear," now a successful gallery artist. After that article appeared, the city attempted to prohibit the sale of artworks signed "Smear," asserting that his street art was a form of illegal advertising for his gallery work. Graffiti as art "to make a living from" apparently has a ways to go.

While the press reported on the negative fallout from "Art in the Streets," LAPD representatives and Little Tokyo business owners were furious at the defamation of their property. Governor Jerry Brown wrote in an *LA Times* blog: "Why are you posting a picture of the illegal graffiti? Now they are rewarded and EVERYONE can see their garbage, which is their whole goal."