

Graffiti
is
'folk art'



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The fact that graffiti, any kind of graffiti, is 'folk art', should be obvious. All non-official public inscriptions from all eras are folk art, and the contemporary culture of graffiti is no exception. What other kind of art would they be? Whether we want to consider graffiti a form of art or not is a whole different discussion, one that leads nowhere by the way. Let's call it something else then. A habit, a culture, a tradition. Those fit better actually. But anyway, let's talk about graffiti.

Graffiti is a timeless habit. It has been part of the daily life of people of all classes in all recorded eras. The stigmatisation of graffiti, self-evident as it may seem to our eyes, is a recent introduction.

Not so long ago, a respected intellectual would discover a centuries-old fresco underground, he would write his name across it, and no-one would bat an eye about it. Subsequent visitors would routinely leave their marks as well. And we are not talking about anyone here. Think of RAPHAEL and MICHELANGELO at the Domus Aurea.

If you need more examples, more recent too, there are plenty in the little-known field of historic graffiti research.

In particular times and places graffiti becomes more prevalent, and this seems to happen for different reasons—level of literacy and cultural sophistication, population density, and others. And in some cases a culture is established around the act of name writing. The habit of graffiti saw a widespread escalation in the industrial era, and went overboard after people were corralled into large, modern cities. The xxth century can be considered the heyday of the practice, with several fully-fledged graffiti cultures emerging independently in Europe and America.

One of these cultures developed in the subways of New York, and went on to become so ubiquitous worldwide as to monopolise the idea of 'graffiti' in most conversations. But other, equally interesting contemporary graffiti traditions, all of them largely local, exist and have existed across the world. Each of them can be considered a form of folk art.

But why should any artistic tradition be termed that way? Here are quotes from a past text about this topic:

The term 'art' is applied to very different things. In a broad sense it refers to any activity with a creative aspect. For example, cooking is form of art, or fencing is a form of art. But, more specifically, it often refers to what we could call 'Art'. The tradition of Western art that starts in Greece and goes all the way to postmodernism. The one taught in art universities and exhibited in most galleries and museums. Graffiti can be understood as a form of art, but it has nothing to do with this 'Art'.

Unfortunately, historians have persistently tried to understand the contemporary culture of graffiti as part of the history of 'Art'. This happens because we are all educated in a paradigm where 'Art' is somehow the 'real' artistic tradition. The authentic, pure, sublime one. The one that is fundamentally superior to anything graphic, and therefore

has the keys to understanding it. But this idea becomes laughable once you manage to overcome the brainwash and acquire sufficient distance.

Of course, contemporary graffiti involves painting and calligraphy, and trying to judge and appreciate it in those terms can be tempting. But the actual art of graffiti is not to be found in the writing itself, but rather in where the writing appears, how, when and why. Graffiti is, above all, a competitive game of urban exploration, in which graphic skills are not more important than strategic or athletic abilities. A graffiti writer can be a mediocre painter or calligrapher and still get fame and respect. But he would never succeed out there night after night for years or decades without a good measure of relentlessness, resourcefulness, ingenuity and aplomb.

Concluding that graffiti is not 'Art' does not involve any judgement about the value of either. The contemporary culture of graffiti is just as worthy of appreciation as 'Art' is.

With a history of only fifty years, it is much younger. But it is a direct heir of the historic practice of graffiti, which has to be as old as writing itself. Furthermore, graffiti's overall impact on humanity is much larger than that of 'Art', and it is practiced and appreciated by way more people. It is arguably the most widespread artistic tradition to have existed.

Graffiti is a culture of its own, and it can only be understood in its own terms. If we have to frame graffiti from the prism of 'Art', we should refer to it as a form of 'folk art'. A term from the slang of 'Art' used to refer to most other forms of art. The term has connotations such as utilitarian, rural or tribal that do not apply in this case, but other than that the term suits the subject well.

For ten years I taught about graffiti in a faculty of fine arts. Of course we approached it as a foreign culture, as we could have studied, for example, tattoo, or perhaps as blues or flamenco could have been studied in a classical music school. But the key idea here is that this hierarchical difference between

'Art' and 'folk art' is illusory, it is delusional. It has been manufactured.

'Art' is just one more in a long list of cultures, of artistic traditions. All of them parallel, equivalent and equally valuable. The list includes graffiti, tattoo or blues, french cuisine, chinese calligraphy or fencing. Each of these cultures has its own history, its own values system, its own public, its characteristic tools and methodologies, its formal approaches, its environments for creation and consumption, its ethics, dogmas and myths. Each one of them is as rich as the viewer would want to delve into it. You can always go deeper into the fractal.

✋ "Graffiti is not 'Art'",
2020

The academic field of historic graffiti is as interesting as it is kind of funny. A few months ago a prominent specialist expressed great rage about

two new spraypainted tags on the wall of an old church. I dared to politely ask how he managed the cognitive dissonance of devotedly protecting any old inscription but publicly tearing his hair out at this other piece of graffiti. Where is that dramatically essential difference to be found? I did not get a clear answer.

There is of course a huge difference between a historic idea of graffiti, in which the writing is generally small and inconspicuous, and the graffiti we see in most cities today. But it is precisely the environment of the Western late capitalist megalopolis what created the hypertrophy that contemporary graffiti is. The urge for that kind of blatant display is rarely found among people who are able to live away from urbanism and outdoor advertising. Contemporary graffiti and the capitalist city are one and the same.

In any case, when looking at a single inscription, be it an old signature or a recently spraypainted tag, what we see is an individual naturally leaving a mark.

Both marks are humble and will fade away soon enough, particularly when compared to a building—one that someone took great liberties to put there in the first place. There is no need to get so upset. Buildings will comfortably outlive any inscriptions on them. And, anyway, even when they are presented as obviously much more significant than the inscriptions, they are not necessarily so. ‘Art’ is just another form of art.

When is graffiti old enough, then, to qualify as a treasure to be preserved and not a nuisance anymore? That is one ridiculous question. It can only be entertained in today’s insane world of money and speculation. As we know, not long ago people had a more natural relation with physical matter. Artworks from Classical times are full of graffiti from the Renaissance, and Renaissance artworks are covered with marks from later centuries. Things used to be there to be enjoyed, and sensual relations with objects old and new made a natural part of that.

The question above is, again, a product of wanting to understand graffiti from the mindset of ‘Art’.

We have been told by the high priests of 'Art' that some objects deserve devotion and should be permanently frozen in time. This wholly unnatural mindset can work relatively well with canvases or sculptures, but not with graffiti. A piece of graffiti is too intimately linked with its context in both space and time, and can only be understood as a living, evolving entity.

Stepping out of this apparent problem is fairly simple. It requires only to step down from the idea of the secular artwork as fetish detached from life and its processes. A sad and awkward notion that calls for a whole army of professionals to try and make somewhat real—specialists in trying to fight the very nature of existence.

'Art' can want to be eternal, but that is only its problem, and the problem of those who use it to speculate and to build narratives. Graffiti is naturally ephemeral, just as humans are, and both tend to waste little time worrying about that essential nature.

A framed piece of graffiti is not dissimilar to a botox face.



Why the urgent need for any piece of art to transcend its time anyway? A surviving piece is fatally de-contestualised in every sense, and therefore what remains of it is a vague resemblance of what it was and meant. Graffiti writers, as do practitioners of other forms of 'folk art', instinctively know that the only realistic and appreciative form of preservation is interpretation. Taking what you inherit and making it new. An explicit and loving act of re-contextualisation.

The myth of the genius artist magically creating unique objects from scratch in his studio—one leg of the 'Art' deception—has nothing to do with any actual process of creation, and everything to do with copyright and lawyers. A piece of communication is by definition part of a shared language, and is therefore an interpretation.

Only then can it build upon and answer to what was said before in that language. What kind of sense could it make otherwise to anyone?

Graffiti and other forms of folk art are free from this recently made-up myth, and their practitioners go on creating the way humans have always done. Creation is always interpretation and involves re-contextualisation. That is what art is only about. Few people would find a problem with bluesmen pursuing a lifelong career around what could be called a single song. Flamenco is similarly narrow and equally rich. As is graffiti.

In any form of folk art there is little separation between creation and preservation, and the whole beauty of the culture lays precisely on that. But all this is self-evident to its practitioners. Only the hopelessly artificial world of 'Art' finds it difficult to accommodate this essential quality of human behaviour.



The idea that 'Art' is just another cultural tradition came naturally to me early on. This happened because I was educated as a graffiti writer first, and took the time to think about my practice. By the time I accessed art school I was aware of what a cultural tradition was, and it did not take me long to see through the vacuous self-importance of 'Art'. This would not prevent me from getting to learn and understand that tradition. Once you take it as seriously as it deserves it becomes simply another enjoyable form of culture.

'Art' can decree that most other forms of art should be called 'folk art', but that bears no importance to those other forms, or to their practitioners. They don't suffer from that superiority complex because they are busy living a real tradition. One that simply exists, without the need for any structure of validation. Let alone the grotesque, humongous monster of corruption and manipulation that shores up 'Art' and, in particular, its capital A.

I live in a small village in the mountains of Northern Spain, and every old wooden door here is full of beautifully carved signatures, left by

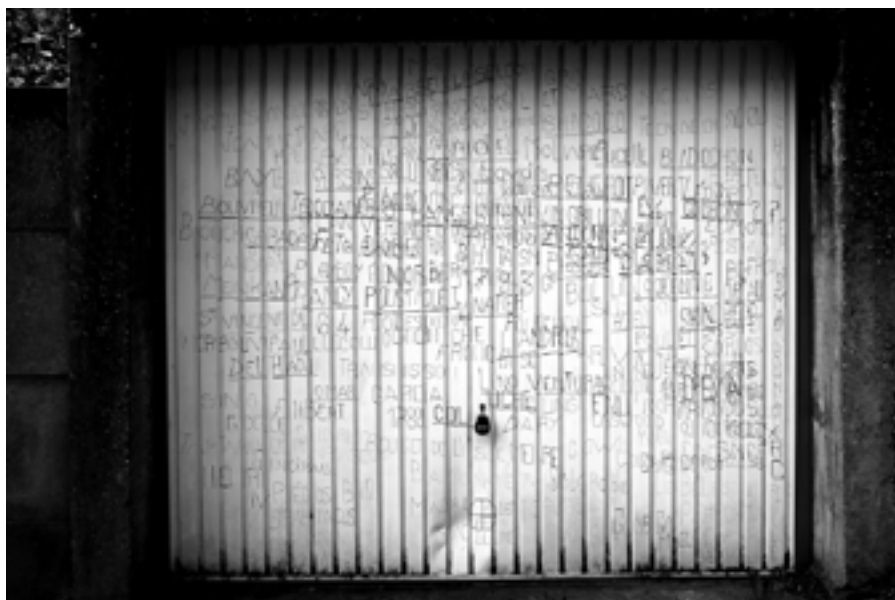
neighbours in the XIXth and XXth centuries. Even marks made with roof tile on walls over a hundred years ago can be easily found. You feel drenched in history here. Old women talk about how they used to climb the paved path to the higher pastures, passing the time by reading the continuous stream of names and anecdotes carved by themselves and by neighbours—alive or not—on the slabs that flanked the path.

These women do not write anymore, but they tend flowerpots by their doorways and pluck weeds from walls. They build beautiful firewood piles. They take some sheep from one nearby field to another, then back again, to feast on the constantly growing grass. They take care of chickens, vegetable gardens, dogs and cats that wander around. The bells of their cows can be heard constantly, even in the night, but after some days the cows and the sound move, and sometimes there is silence. *Sometimes you hear the tolling of a death knell from the church.* Or you can hear children playing. Not so long ago, everyone from the area came together and paved the shared path to the mountain. Then they regularly repaired it.

People are spiritually designed to interact sensually with their immediate environment, in ways that leave marks for themselves and other people to read. Marks made by a group of people can stay there for a long time, like a paved path. Most marks are left by individuals though, and those are as ephemeral as the persons themselves. Even as ephemeral as a sound or the glimpse of a passing cat. But they are fundamental to the way we humans coexist. Graffiti is one of them, as are all forms of ‘folk art’.

Graffiti is simply part of human nature. To dwellers of modern cities, the behaviour of someone like Rouen’s street calligrapher Alain RAULT may seem outlandish, but he is only being a human. I can tell you that as I look through my window at an old, beautifully carved door. Carving doors is so much more normal, human and healthy than not carving doors. The historic evidence by itself is overwhelming enough. But any psychological reading of human nature should agree as well, at least those not fatally distorted by the logics of money and object-based speculation.

Javier ABARCA, 09.2021



Couverture et dos : Alain RAULT. s. t. s. d. Rue Maladerie, Rouen (FR). Photographie : PAATRICE.



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