

Beauty is in the Streets

Laura C.

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As long as people have been ruled, they have expressed their dissent. Throughout the modern era, art has been a powerful tool to voice this political defiance.

With their bold woodcut images of ruling classes and mocking skeletons, art movements like the Taller de Gráfica Popular (“the People’s Graphics”) founded in Mexico City in 1937 served not only as satirical commentary but were inclusive enough to inform illiterate people of current events. Further, the Dadaist’s anti-aesthetic creations and protest activities were fueled by their disgust for bourgeois values and despair over World War I. Their disregard for traditional artistic values still resonates today, especially in punk and avant-garde communities.

Today, graffiti has emerged at the forefront of political art. Within the last four decades, it has been proving itself as an art form highly accessible and visible to the masses. Graffiti took art from the commodified gallery setting and put it into the streets, giving it back to the people. For example, graffiti was enigmatic during the May ’68 revolution in France: “Beneath the pavement, the beach;” and “Be cruel.”

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) inflamed Chiapas during their uprising in 1994 with such slogans as “We are not guerrillas, We are revolutionaries!” and drew a popular mural on the face of town hall emphasizing the Mexican Army leaving the indigenous communities. In the Battle of Seattle, graffiti combined means and message, with protesters scaling buildings to inscribe such messages as “Fuck WTO bitches,” and countless circle A’s decorated corporate storefronts. A few fierce individuals even defaced cop’s cars with the tag “We won!”

From the beginning, graffiti uses have been wide spread—political activists use it to make statements. Hobos used it as a signature on freight trains, and gangs painted to mark out their territory. What started out in some places as “territorial pissing” has evolved into extremely skilled social commentary. Graffiti has always appealed to people as unschooled art with relatively cheap materials and canvases everywhere. The illegal aspect of graffiti creates a modern day rite of passage where respect is earned based on visibility and courage. It is a healthy undertaking for people who see little hope in rising above their economic status; it gives us a sense of pride.

However, graffiti artists aren’t only inner-city dwellers. Nor is their style limited to freehand. Stencil graffiti was used as far back as ancient Egypt and popularized in the early 80’s France. Their easy replication makes them ideal for political slogans and their cookie cutter patterns cut down on time and equipment, making it extremely easy to get your message up all over a town in an evening. The immediate relation to silk-screening and DIY-printmaking helped graffiti catch on very quickly among punks, and it remains a favored form of street art. Stencils’ style can range from whimsical to realistic and photographic.

Graffiti is being used today in Palestine as part of the Intifada. All around the globe, anarchists and anti-capitalists have been taking to the streets, spray can in hand, to inform their communities about globalization, gentrification, and corporate domination. In the hands of anarchists, it becomes an extremely potent tool of critiquing government.

Before Bush’s war against Iraq, people took to the streets in droves expressing anti-war messages, with such bold targets as the Sydney Opera House in Australia, and a piece alongside the house of the mayor of Paris. Countries as far ranging as Malaysia, Poland, Singapore, and Italy all have beautiful bodies of work speaking out about

the atrocities of war and imploring Mr. Bush to curb his bloodlust. Graffiti's innate defiance also makes it extremely appealing to anarchists, pissed off youth, and dissenters of all sorts; to thumb your nose at society through property destruction reclaims what has been ours and shall be again.

It's something we create and give back to the world, but also something taken from the bleak sense of institutionalization that surrounds us. Graffiti takes back public space from advertisers and polluters, opening up the walls that either shut us out or lock us in, resisting fear and false security.

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