[1,925 WORDS W/O BIB]

STREET ART AND GRAFFITI

Street art and graffiti are among the most prevalent forms of art in the public arena. They are also among the most popular, having witnessed a surge of growth and innovation in the last few decades. It might be surprising, then, that philosophers of art have said almost nothing about them. In this short article, I will survey various sources of interest in street art and graffiti, briefly discuss some of the philosophically interesting questions they raise, and make several suggestions for further inquiry.

SOURCES OF INTEREST. Popular interest in street art and graffiti has varied in the last fifty years. The historically most prevalent attitude toward these arts is somewhere between dismissal and disdain. As a symptom of this, a topic that regularly ignites the passion of the general public is the question of whether street art and graffiti are crime or art. This is a puzzling topic of recurring interest, since it seems obvious that a single thing can be both illegal and art. That said, the general public's negative view of street art and graffiti seems to have weakened in the last two decades. This is evident in part from the astonishingly numerous recent books, films, news articles, photography projects, websites, and museum and gallery exhibitions devoted to street art and graffiti (see the bibliography for some references).

General academic interest in street art and graffiti has been relatively small but sustained and has tended to focus on broadly sociological and cultural issues (for example, see Lachmann 1988 and Irvine 2012). Sociological interest has focused largely on the socio-economic pressures on, and

psychological character of, individuals who participate in street art and graffiti culture. Cultural interest has focused on street art's concentrated, unique, and flexible use of contemporary forms of cultural engagement, including the ingenious use of the Internet, site-specificity, appropriation, remixing, and collaboration. To many enthusiasts, street art seems to be an exciting new form of artistic production.

Street art and graffiti have also been regular interests of literary writers and artworld artists. For example, the French photographer Brassaï beautifully documented Parisian graffiti throughout his career (the photographs are collected in his 1960 book *Graffiti*). Other photographers have devoted large portions of their careers documenting street art and graffiti (*e.g.,* Martha Cooper). Norman Mailer's essay *The Faith of Graffiti* explores the origins of street art and graffiti in the culture of 1970s New York City. And numerous important artists have been heavily influenced by, and even produced, street art and graffiti, including Picasso, Keith Haring, Basquiat, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Krzystof Wodiczko, and Jenny Holzer, to name just a few.

Almost none of this interest has had an effect on the philosophical literature. This is true in spite of the fact that at least some influential philosophers of art have seemed to admire street art and graffiti (*e.g.*, Arthur Danto's 1987). This is also true, more glaringly, in spite of the fact that street art and graffiti raise numerous engaging philosophical questions, to which I now turn.

PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES. The most natural philosophical question that street art and graffiti raise is simply *What are they?* Street art and graffiti are similar but also interestingly different. In the case of street art, it is difficult to say what it is in a way that distinguishes it from other forms

of art in the public arena (e.g., graffiti, public sculpture, and performance). Furthermore, different people are disposed to use the term "street art" in different ways, applying it to graffiti, murals, public sculpture, street installation, and many other artforms. This raises the question as to whether there is a conception of street art according to which it is a distinct and compelling form of art-production.

The broadest notion of street art is just that of art-in-the-streets. But simple reflection shows this to be a non-starter. A painting that is just placed on the street is not thereby street art. I have argued that street art is art whose meaning depends on its use of the street (Riggle 2010). More specifically, street art is art that uses the street either as a material resource or as an artistic context in such a way that interpretation of the work must refer to that material or contextual use.

Such a view has several attractions. For one thing, it rules out the example of a painting simply placed in the street. It also supports the intuitive view that street art cannot be removed from the street without threatening its meaning and status as street art. The view also adequately distinguishes between street art, graffiti, and public art. Insofar as graffiti does not depend on the use of the street for its meaning, graffiti is not street art. But some graffiti pieces might depend on their use of the street, so some graffiti might be street art. The question of the nature of graffiti is interesting in its own right. One suggestion is that it should be understood in terms of its formal features and the socio-historical culture in which it is produced. In this way graffiti is similar to certain forms of calligraphy.

A theory of street art should also be able to distinguish between street art and public art. The view that street art is art whose meaning depends on its use of the street can do this on the grounds that public artworks remove the street-status of the spaces they inhabit. Such works are normally very expensive to make, install, and maintain, and cannot be removed or altered by members of the public. As a result, they transform parts of the street into public parts of the artworld. They therefore do not "use the street" in the sense that a work must use the street to be street art. Such a view draws on the intuitive contrast between a work being *by-and-for-the-public* and a work being *imposed on* the public, where street art largely belongs in the former and public art in the latter. (Much public and intellectual discussion of this issue occurred in the late 1980s when Richard Serra installed his sculpture *Tilted Arc* in Federal Plaza in New York City; see the bibliography for suggested reading.)

Another source of philosophical interest in street art worth emphasizing concerns the fact that street art and graffiti seem not only to operate largely outside of the traditional artworld, many practitioners intend their work to be rather antithetical to, or openly against it. This is interesting especially given attempts to define "artwork" in terms of artworld function. If street art and graffiti are designed to resist incorporation into the artworld, then it is worth considering whether they constitute a source of pressure against institutional theories of art.

This bears on an intersesting question about where we should place street art in an art-historical matrix. Arthur Danto famously argued that post-modern art should be seen as a response to Modernism's extreme separation of art and life. Post-modern art, Danto thinks, is an artistic way of collapsing this distinction. Artworks like Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* effectively collapse the

distinction between art and life by brining objects from everyday life into the artworld, thereby "transfiguring the commonplace". One thought is that that street art should be understood as the *other* response to Modernism's separation of art and life. Instead of bringing everyday life into the artworld, street art brings art out of the artworld and into everyday life, thereby "transfiguring the common places". Within Danto's art-historical scheme, then, we should think of street art as neither Modern, postmodern, nor post-postmodern: it's the other response to Modernism. (For development of this thought see Riggle 2010; see also Martin 2012.)

FURTHER WORK. There are many interesting philosophical questions that have yet to be fully addressed in the literature. Perhaps most glaringly are questions about the nature of street art. What are some plausible alternatives to the view that street art should be understood primarily in terms of the way it uses the street? Consider the fact that this view entails that street art and graffiti are not *essentially* illegal or aconsentual (though any given work may turn out to be). Is that right? Many people feel that illegality or lack of consent is an central feature of street art. Perhaps, as an alternative, we should think of *street art* as a "cluster concept". If so, what are the important elements of the cluster?

A related question concerns an issue that bears on social and political philosophy: what is the nature of "the street". Presumably city sidewalks and alleyways are the street, but what about subway tunnels, public bathrooms, and city buses? Surely the street is some kind of socially constructed object. Understanding what the street is bears on a range of interesting questions. Do public artworks often change the street into a public artspace? How exactly? Is something's being a public artspace largely incompatible with its being "the street". If so, what is the source

of this tension? A proper answer to these questions requires a proper account of the nature of the street.

The question about the nature of the street bears on another interesting question about the nature of street artistic collaboration. Street art often collects in a single space. Numerous stencils, wheat pastes, tags, and sculptural works collect on the same door, wall, alley, or façade. Is the collection of these works itself a *collaborative* street artwork? If so, how does this bear on the nature of artistic collaboration? What is the content of the collaborative intention and how might it differ from more familiar forms of artistic collaboration (say, in film or comedic improv)?

Another issue concerns street art's proper audience. Many artworks are addressed to a specific audience. For example, certain TV shows, pop songs, performances, and films are addressed to a certain demographic. Furthermore, street artists make heavy use of the Internet to document and disseminate their otherwise ephemeral and difficult-to-access works. Does street art have a proper audience? If so, what is it? If not, does this make street art special in some way, perhaps more democratic?

This barely touches on the range of interesting questions raised by street art and graffiti. Clearly there is much of philosophical interest to explore in these growing and fascinating art practices.

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